The Girls from Benin City

The New Slave Trade:

from Nigeria to the Streets of Italy

PART ONE

1.

A week had gone by and Judith said: you can't stay here with no money and no job. You've got to pay for your food, pay some rent. You've got to work. And for anybody without papers, there's only one kind of work.

What's that? I said.

You'll see when the time comes, she said.

And one evening she took me to my workplace.

She said to the other girls staying in the house: Give her some work clothes, something you don't use anymore. And they did. It was only a pair of knickers. That's what you wear for work, said Judith.

It was December 26, 2000. How can I ever forget that day? It was snowing in Turin, the first snow I'd ever seen. It's so beautiful, I said. Everything white and still and magical. Is it always as beautiful as this here in Italy? But it was cold. Very cold. So I said, I'm not wearing these stupid knickers, and I kept my jeans on.

On the footpath it was freezing. Judith said to the others: this is Izogìe, she'll be working here from now on. When you finish, bring her back to the house. They were all in knickers, and heavy stockings, two or three pairs. And little shawls that didn't even cover their shoulders. And ridiculous shoes with incredibly high heels.

You're crazy, I said.

Out in this cold with nothing on but a pair of knickers.

Oh it was cold. So cold. I stood there watching the girls in their knickers, nearly dying of cold. I didn't leave the fire for a second. My hands were warm but my feet were like ice. I watched the others in their knickers, thinking: it can't be true, this isn't happening, it isn't possible.

It was all too possible.

The cars began arriving and inside the cars, the men. Alone. The girls would say something, get into the cars and go off with them. I stayed right there by the fire. I couldn't feel my feet at all.

A guy stopped: he wants you.

No way in the world, I said, tell him to try his sister.

And a moment later the police arrived.

In that fraction of a second all the girls fled into the bushes and left me there, alone, by the fire. They hadn't even told me where to run to, or how or why. So I stayed by the fire, and I watched them vanish like something happening in a dream.

A cop came over to me.

Are you okay?

I didn't know a word of Italian. So they called over a woman cop who spoke English.

And she started out with: You can't stay here.

Today's the first day they've brought me here, I explained.

But what are you doing here?

I'm working.

But you can't work here. This isn't a workplace. Get going.

I don't know where to go.

Where do you live?

I don't know the name of the street.

Who brought you here?

They've all run away.

Come on, get out of here.

I have to wait for them to come back, I don't know where to go.

After a while she got sick of it: Pleeease, go away, you can't stay here.

But in the end she was the one who left. I stayed right there by the fire. And half an hour later the others came back. One at a time, very very frightened. Judith turned up, too. Why didn't you run away? The police were here.

I know, I replied. I talked to them.

And what did they say to you?

That I can't stay here. That this is no place to work.

2.

No one made me leave.

No-one forced me into it.

I fell into the trap all by myself, by my own free choice.

But this wasn't what I expected when I left.

This situation.

And no way out of it.

3.

When we got home Judith explained the whole thing to me, in detail. This is the trade, this is what you do, this is the situation, this is the system. And when the cops show up you've got to run for it, otherwise they'll take you down to the station and they'll send you back where you came from. She put the terror of the police into me, not just on the job, but always always always. Even when you go out to do the shopping, when you go for a walk. Don't ever go out, don't ever speak to anybody. Etcetera.

The terror of the police is so great that when they come cruising by the girls make the sign of the cross, they say *I'm covered by the*

blood of Jesus, *He'll protect me*. And when you see them so frightened, you get frightened too.

Then you see the way the cops do the round-ups, the fury in them as they race towards the girls, who run this way and that way, screaming, all of them, and crying - they look like mice trying to escape from cats. They scream and they cry and they race into the bushes, race off into the night and the mud, and when they get home they look like they've been clawed by a tiger. And then they spend hours pulling out the thorns.

How could you not be infected by their fear?

4.

I didn't want to.

I said: No way.

This isn't what I was promised.

Then Judith said: we'll find something else. And she brought a guy around. Be sweet to him, she said, he can give you a job. Be nice. Very, very nice.

What does be nice mean.

I didn't understand. Or maybe I didn't want to.

He was white. He had long dirty nails, but he took me to dinner at an elegant place. You're very beautiful, he said. A girl like you should be a model. Fashion parades. Shows. That sort of thing.

I was barely listening to him because I'd ordered pasta but I didn't know how to eat it. Whether you were supposed to use a knife or not. I was dying of embarrassment.

Meanwhile, he kept on talking and talking.

He said: Obviously they don't do fashion shows every night. You have to be adaptable, do other things as well. Evening work in clubs, for example. Nice places. You dance, you talk to people, it isn't hard. And then what happens after you leave the club is your business, your private life is nobody's affair but your own.

He said: You don't have to go to bed with anyone, the club only wants you to get them to buy you drinks. For you to be nice to the clients.

That's how it works in Europe.

If you're not too squeamish you make a lot of money; and then you do what the other girls did.

So I asked him: What did the other girls do?

It was one of the few things I actually said to him all evening.

He started laughing. They make money, he said. They buy a girl and they bring her to Europe and she works and earns for them instead of them having to do it. Wake up, little girl. That's the business we're in.

Then he took me to see a club.

There were low lights and velvet and music and the girls were well-dressed, but the situation was even uglier than on the street. Albanian girls, Russian girls, Romanian girls. I went into a dressing room, I managed to speak with two or three of them. They asked me who I worked for. A guy brought me here, I said. It's my first time.

They said get out of here. Run for it.

They told me they'd been sold.

Two of them were older than me; one was only seventeen. They didn't have the faintest hope of escaping. If they stepped outside for a breath of fresh air a hard-faced Albanian guy would instantly appear: what are you doing here, get back inside, straightaway.

Inside.

They said: you're better off going on the street, you're freer there. Don't come back, don't ever set foot in a night club again. Because now you can still escape, but once you've signed the contract there's no way out. And even if they say you don't have to go to bed with the clients, after you've signed you can't refuse to do anything.

But that means I have to go on the street then, I said.

And they said: But what do you think we do here?

They took me to some tiny rooms where there were women on their knees, giving the clients blowjobs.

But this is what's waiting for me? I asked.

Yes. It's better on the street, one of them said. If I could only get out of here I'd be on the street like a shot.

5.

I said to the guy: No way.

It didn't faze him at all

He said: there's another club where they're looking for coloured girls. Only you'll have to say you're Cuban, because there's not a lot of demand for Nigerian girls.

I get there and it's the same story, a whole lot of South American and Brazilian girls. We sat down, we watched the girls parade past. They didn't have the little rooms there, the girls went with the clients to a hotel, but first they had to say where they were going, how long for, who with. There was a special secretary whose job was to take phone calls from the girls and the clients. Everything much more refined. But the story was exactly the same.

Do you like this place? Look how rich that guy is, and that one… when they see a new arrival they all line up like a bunch of sheep.

But I didn't like it at all.

I went home and I said: I'm not going back.

He got angry then, with Judith. You still haven't explained to the girl how things stand, he said. Next time we will.

6.

This was the way things stood.

I had no papers.

I had no money.

I had nowhere to escape to.

I was terrified of the police and the only thing I knew how to say in Italian was 'Go fuck yourself.' *

In addition I had the debt to pay off. Thiry thousand euros.

And everyone knows what happens to the girls who don't pay.

Or who don't want to work.

7.

But it took me a long time to understand all this.

Or maybe I understood it straightaway, even though something in my head kept repeating it can't be true, this isn't possible. It isn't possible that this is really happening to me. There must be a mistake somewhere. It's only a bad dream. In a little while I'll wake up and the world will have gone back to normal.

8.

I began to have my first doubts in London. Not when I left Benin City with my old school backpack, not when I arrived at Heathrow with false papers, not when they took us out of the airport through a service exit so we wouldn't have to go through passport control. No. On the contrary. When I saw the guy who opened the door for us, laughing as he let the group of girls through, and when amid all the laughter and the backslapping he took an envelope from the people accompanying us, I thought: this is just so well-organised. I sure put myself in the hands of the right people here.

I kept on thinking this as they loaded us into a minibus and took us to an apartment in the African quarter. It was a nice apartment. A nice neighbourhood. There were six of us and we felt like we'd arrived in paradise. Paradise was London, and a house in London, and a job in London right there just waiting for us. For us, who'd come from Benin City.

Only: we weren't allowed to make any noise.

Only: we could only go out at night, one at a time, and absolutely nobody was to see us.

Only: day after day went by and the job never came.

So then we started listening in on their phone calls. Our minders would call somebody and say: she's arrived, and say: send the money. They were calling Paris, Amsterdam, Turin. They'd say: we're keeping her until the money arrives. They said: if you don't send the money, we'll sell her to somebody else.

And that's when we started to be afraid.

9.

The days went by and the fear was driving us crazy. We hardly dared look each other in the face. We'd ask each other: have you been sold? And me? Have I been sold? But who can they have sold us to? And what for?

The not knowing was terrifying.

Meanwhile they continued to take us out for our walks, never letting us out of their sight in case we tried to escape.

Until one day I asked: what about the job?

The agreement with the people in Benin City was that they would find me a job. They'd asked me: what do you do?

And I'd said: I sell fruit and vegetables at the market, with my mother.

Ah, in Europe they sell that stuff in the supermarkets, they make stacks of money.

And so they gave me the idea that there were lots of opportunities.

Okay, I said to the London people. What about my job?

Ah, we're still getting organised.

And they took me to a shop that sold African material, manufactured in Holland. So beautiful. And there were two African girls working there as shop assistants. So happy.

They said: would you like a job like this?

Would I ?!

Well, this kind of work… there are thousands of jobs like this in Italy. Here in London there aren't that many opportunities at the moment, but in Italy… ah, in Italy! There are lots of women with lots of shops like this one. And they need a whole lot of shop assistants.

When do we leave for Italy? was all I asked.

10

I made the journey by bus. London to Paris. Then Paris to Turin.

They told me: get out at the last stop, it's called Porta Nuova, wait outside on the corner near the entrance to the station; someone will come and get you.

But nobody came.

11.

I stood there all day. I waited and I waited. I was hungry and thirsty and needed to pee. I waited. I was tired and my feet hurt and I didn't have a shred of ID. I didn't have a cent. I didn't know where to go.

I waited and waited and I looked at every African who went by hoping he was the one. But it never was.

It started to get dark and I was getting more and more hungry and thirsty and cold.

It got dark.

I was still standing there.

And maybe it was there, near the entrance to Porta Nuova, during those endless hours of hunger and cold, anguish and anger, there, right there, as I waited for who knows who and who knows what, that I realised I'd been done. That they'd tricked me. That I was trapped.

But there was nothing I could do except wait.

So I waited.

12.

When I talk with the other girls, they all say: they came and got me straight away.

So why was it different for me?

In time, I realised it was a tactic they use sometimes to make it easier to con the girls. Because when somebody finally does come and get you, you're so tired and frightened and confused the only thing you feel is relief. And gratitude. And something very similar to happiness.

13.

While I was there waiting and waiting, a woman from my village came by. I recognised her straightaway because of the tribal marks on her face. Around forty, forty-five. Fairly stout. She was puffing. She passed me and said hello and went away.

She came by again. She stopped. She smiled at me. She said: you're still here?

But they'd told me not to trust anybody.

I'm waiting for someone, was all I said.

Ah.

She went away, she came back, she went away again, she came back again, all day long she kept coming by, as if by accident. One time she had a shopping bag. Another time she was carrying a parcel.

I kept on waiting.

But where are you from? What are you doing here? In the end she'd stopped to ask me questions. But have you eaten at least? Have you had something to drink? And talking talking talking we discovered that we came from the same neighbourhood in Benin City, that she actually knew my parents. Or so she said.

In short, she was so nice and reassuring and I was so tired and so lost that when she said, I've just got one more thing to do then I'll come back and if you're still here, don't worry, I'll take you home to my place; when she said that I started waiting for her.

For her.

Completely forgetting I was supposed to be waiting for somebody else.

14.

Judith. My dear friend Judith. It took me a long time, months, years, to realise that she was my *maman*. My sister, my momma, my madam and pimp and boss. The woman who had ordered me from the *Italos*, who had bought and paid for me; and who now expected that I would repay her what she had spent.

At the time she was just a kind countrywoman who said: I'll take you home to my place. And who offered me her sister's bed: this is her room, she's not here at the moment. You can stay here for a few days. Then we'll see.

I later learned the room had belonged to a girl who'd worked for three whole years to pay off her debt.

But in that moment it was simply a room all to myself. And a roof over my head, food, a bed, shelter. I thought: maybe things haven't gone too badly after all.

And in that moment I forgot all my anguish; maybe I was mistaken, I thought; and I fell asleep happy.

15.

Some girls end up on the street the same night they arrive. And they are beaten and raped and half-killed if they only dare to say no.

That wasn't my case.

And in the end I don't know which is worse.

I was left to agonise in uncertainty for days. With Judith who was so nice, so kind, and who had me watching videos of Nigerian soap operas with her. Who said: give me your parents' phone number, I'll call them and tell them you're here. But don't you go out, be careful, there are police everywhere.

Then she'd come home and say: the number's wrong. Try and remember it exactly. I'll have another go tomorrow.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Tomorrow.

The days went by and the number was never right. I felt like I was going mad. Always shut in the house for fear of the police. And what was I doing? What could I do?

Then Judith would console me. She was so kind! She said, write a letter to your father, and tomorrow I'll post it for you.

The reply never came.

And now I know the letter was never sent.

16.

In the end I found an African call centre and I phoned my father. A man of the utmost integrity, as they say. A clerk of the courts in Benin City. Honest. Respectable. But I'd left without even telling him I was going, I was so angry with him. You see, he left my mother for another woman; he'd almost forgotten that my mother had given him eight children and he did practically nothing to support them, which is normal enough in Africa. But I had suffered too much because of it.

It was really hard for me to call him.

Where are you. What are you doing.

He had reported my disappearance to the police.

He suspected my uncle of having sold me to the traffickers.

A bunch of men had turned up at my home and starting making threats, and who knows what they would have done to my mother and brothers and sisters if my twin brother hadn't been there to defend them. He'd fought with them and thrown them out.

They say you stole money, said my father. A lot of money. And that you have to pay it back or else we're all in trouble

I said: it's not true. I said: they tricked me. I said: they want me to repay ten thousand times double what the journey cost. I said: help me.

But I didn't have the courage to tell him the details.

I found out later that, in a way, he did try to help me. He started investigating to find out who the people were I had to pay the debt to. He investigated and investigated and he got so far with his investigations that in the end he felt impotent. There were people too high up, too far out of reach. He had to give it away. He simply gave up.

But all this I found out later.

I was in Turin then and I was still hoping that he'd be able to save me.

I waited and I hoped and in the meantime Judith brought me news from the people in London. They said: the girl didn't wait long enough, we refuse to assume any further responsibility for her. It's her fault the contract fell through. As far as we're concerned she's a missing person. The house we promised her is gone, the job is gone. The only thing left is the debt she has to pay.

How she pays it is her business.

But she's got to pay it.

17

So Judith started saying: I'm sorry, but I can't keep you here much longer. Don't be offended. I get by on very little, I can't cope with another mouth to feed. Sorry. You're going to have to find a job.

What sort of job.

Mmm, we'll see.

She introduced to me a girl, then to another. We exchanged little confidences. I always asked: but how do you get by? what kind of

work have you found? And then Idiahì, the one who called herself Ellen, started to boast: well, I found myself three white boyfriends. I spent hours listening to her stories about men, her adventures, the money that passed through her hands. She seemed happy enough. And after a while I realised the correct term for those men wasn't boyfriends; it was clients.

What I didn't realise was that I'd begun my apprenticeship as a prostitute.

After a while Judith moved me to another house where three girls were already living. She said: stay with them for a while, see how they get by. Ekeme and Susan and Itohan. They'd spend all night on the street looking for clients. Then they'd come home, rest for a while. And straightaway it would start all over again, the coming and going of the men who'd turn up looking for them. Into the bedroom they'd go, these guys, with dull washed-out faces; a few minutes later out they'd come smiling, old guys looking rejuvenated, sad young guys suddenly full of bounce. It was almost funny.

Itohan was plump, with an impressive behind. We always made fun of her because of that big backside and she'd laugh. When I'm on the street, she said, the white guys come over all amazed and ask, can I feel it? Sure you can, you just have to pay. So they'd pay and they'd feel it.

Susan, though, was always reading the Bible. The doorbell would ring, she'd plonk down the Bible, take the client into her room, come back out, say goodbye, and pick up her Bible again. Always the same. Whereas Ekeme had a philosophy all her own, she called it the I piss, I shit, I fuck philosophy. She'd say: it's all the same to me. Those are just the things I have to do to survive, my life is everything else. I don't like what I have to do with the men, but too bad. They're the ones with the problems, not me.

And then came the evening when Judith took me onto the street, too.

18.

I said no for days and days.

For weeks and weeks.

I lost count of all the no's I said.

But at a certain point something inside me cracked.

And I too ended up saying my yes.

19.

It was the day I finally managed to talk to my mother. For the first time since I'd left. I had this huge lump in my throat. What could I possibly say to her? I'm fine. I've started work. You know I'm a good nurse, and that I used to do really well at school. I'm doing okay. For the time being they've got me looking after old men, it's hard work, but I'm doing okay. Don't worry. As soon as I can I'll send you some money, to help you and the brothers and sisters.

And that was all I managed to say to her.

The money for the phone call was given to me by a client of Susan's. He had come round to the house when she wasn't there. He'd sat down to wait for her. After a while he asked me something I didn't understand. I was tidying up the kitchen. I had to get changed to go out. Using sign language he asked if he could watch while I got dressed.

Go fuck yourself, I said.

He put some money down on the table. He tried to put his arms around me, all red in the face. I started yelling and he went away, all dejected and slumped over, saying I still don't know what. But I was harsh and hard and told him: No. I said no. No. Sorry.

To cut a long story short, I threw him out, but the money stayed where it was.

My phone call. A gelato. My life for a few days.

I took it.

I started doing a few sums. I put some of it into the right-hand pocket of my jeans, to send to my mother. Some into the left to pay off the debt.

And that's when I realised I needed a third pocket. One for money to live on, and pay for food and rent.

I suddenly wanted to call my mother back, to say to her again: don't worry, I'm in paradise and I've already put some money aside for you. You mustn't tire yourself out. I'll do my bit.

Inside me her voice replied: thank you.

It said: you really are a good daughter.

20.

I wasn't going to let anyone go and threaten her because I hadn't paid my debt.

Or tear her house apart.

Or beat her up, even, and yell at her: your daughter in Italy is working as a whore.

I'd gotten into the trap all by myself.

I had to get out of it on my own.

And so I went to look for Susan, to get her to explain to me how you work on the street.

Susan was at home and she was crying. Ekeme was sitting there with a fixed stare on her face that was frightening. With them was an African man I'd never seen before.

He was insulting her.

He started insulting me, too.

He was talking about money that Susan hadn't given him.

He said I had to stop playing the tourist.

He said I hope you've learnt your lesson.

And then I saw that Ekeme's right eye was all swollen.

The man said: tomorrow it's your turn.

But I haven't done anything wrong, I said. Why are you threatening me?

He punched me so hard I didn't even think about trying to hit him back.

Then afterwards.

After the man had gone Ekeme broke into a terrifying wail. She howled and she moaned and the wailing chilled the blood in your veins.

Itohan, she said.

They'd beaten Itohan to death.

Itohan didn't want to be a prostitute anymore.

She'd said she wasn't paying off her debt and she never would.

She was twenty years old.

They found her body months later on the outskirts of Turin, in the abandoned warehouse of a factory that had been closed for years. A pensioner's dog found it during their evening walk. It had been there a long time. Putrefied. All eaten by rats.

Later I told myself it was because of Itohan that I stopped saying no. Because I was afraid. Because I wanted to stay alive. Because I absolutely did not want to come to the same end. But to be perfectly honest, ruthlessly honest, I have to say that no, I'd already decided to do what had to be done. Because I'd heard my mother's voice. And I'd decided that from the bottom of that trap I could at least do something good for her, help her, and take the place of the husband who had abandoned her. Who had abandoned us all. I would become my father.

At the cost of saying yes.

21.

So Susan spent the evening with me, teaching me how to work on the street. What you say. How much you ask. How to bargain and what words and phrases to use. She explained how to recognise the dangerous ones, how to defend myself. How to escape from the police.

And she also had to tell me what you do with the clients.

She laughed as she did.

What, she said. You mean you don't know this. You don't know that. Just as well we're having this talk, otherwise you'd have no idea what happens to you.

What happens, Susan.

What happens is that what you don't know how to do with a client or want to do, they teach you and they force you to do it. Two or three big guys of our own arrive, real bastards, and they rape you till you've understood or till you've learnt your lesson.

That's what she explained to me.

And she also said: I'll give you some advice. Never ever defy them. And I'll tell you this only once, as a friend: never trust anybody, not even me, just like I don't trust anyone, not even you. Here you've got to survive. And if I have to betray you to survive,

I'll betray you; if I have to rob you, I'll rob you; if I have to hurt you, I'll do it. Do you understand?

Yes.

Then she said: end of the free advice. Get it into your head that here you have to pay for everything. That nobody gives you something for nothing.

22.

Next morning I went looking for Judith. She wasn't there. So I went for a bit of a walk and ended up in front of the station at Porta Nuova. On the same corner where I'd waited there was a young girl, practically a child; she was from my own village. She had the same marks on her face that I have, the ones my grandfather put there when I was very small, that mark you as belonging to our tribe.

She had only just arrived.

She was waiting for somebody.

Our eyes met for an moment, and maybe she thought that I was the person she'd been waiting for, all those hours, in all that anxiety and all that anguish.

It was very cold.

I lowered my eyes and walked on past.

Part 2

1.

Time has passed and I'm still here. I'm alive. And that in itself is a major miracle, if you think of what happened to Itohan. And to Izogìe. And to so many others who like me set out for Europe from Benin City.

Time has passed and I am no longer on the street. I have a residence permit to work as a domestic carer. I'm getting married in March. I'm thinking of having a child.

I'm still alive.

Out.

But if you ask me: how do you feel inside? Well, frankly, I don't know.

I thought I was through with the street. I said to myself: okay, it's over, now put the pieces back together again, start over. Forget. But even though I try and try, and honestly I really do try, some things you just cannot forget. There's no way you can just turn your back and walk away. Say to the others: sort it out for yourselves.

I'm through with the street, but Obahì and Gladys and Akua are still there. Every night they go to work not knowing whether they'll get home alive. How can I forget them. There's Ibiè crying because she was raped by who knows how many men and who knows what with, they ruptured her uterus, she has a fever and is very ill, but she's terrified of going to hospital because she has no papers. And there's Bless, who arrived a week ago, beautiful, a virgin, not yet twenty years old, whose sister is trying to sell her for twenty thousand euros to a seventy year-old peasant farmer. There's Efe who can't stand it any longer. There's Patience who doesn't want to pay off her debt anymore. There's Obulu who's ill, Kami who's frightened they'll take her kids away from her, Otakhò who wants to get married but doesn't know what to do about the papers. There are a thousand stories and a thousand forms of desperation, but no-one ever listens to them.

So what can you do, I say to myself. You can't just close the door like everyone else.

I haven't closed it.

And my place is becoming *La Casa di Isoke* - Isoke's Place, a kind of refuge for the girls from Benin City. I offer shelter, I offer a way of escape; when necessary I take the girls who are ill to hospital. But above all I listen to their stories, I act as a sister and a mother. Don't worry, I say. I'm here. You're not alone. I understand.

On the outside I'm calm and composed and strong and I try to make everything alright.

Inside nothing is alright, not even for me.

Inside, well, I'm full of anger.

And shame.

And guilt.

Because I am here and I'm alive.

Itohan and Izogìe and a thousand others are not.

Because I was lucky, and it doesn't matter if I sought that luck out and was quick enough to grab it and hang on tight. I'm no better than the others who are dead. Survival, in itself, is not an absolute value.

I look at the other girls who like me survived the slavery, the cold, the beatings, the desperation. I see they're still alive, on the outside, but inside them something has died. Listen: the girls from Benin City pay an incredibly high price to survive, a higher price than the street and the beatings, the humiliation and the solitude and the sense of shame: they are alive because they have accepted the unacceptable. When they were told to shut up, they kept silent, when they had to lie, they lied. They watched their girlfriends bleed to death and they didn't go to the police, out of fear or out of cowardice. They thought only of themselves, every last one of them; and to save themselves they stole and they cheated and betrayed and did things they never, ever would have thought themselves capable of.

It's at our own expense, first of all, that we're still alive, you see.

At the expense of the girls we were before.

And of the girls who died in our place, by pure chance, because one evening they were on the kerb a moment before or after we were.

They say concentration camp victims felt what I feel now. I don't know history. It's possible.

I am one survivor out of a thousand who have gone under.

Yes, of that I am totally aware.

And that is why the time has come for me to tell the stories.

Listen.

2.

The only problem is where to begin.

From Osas, then. From Osas and her journey.

Our stories always begin there, with the journey, because it was the journey that changed our lives and left us with no possibility of return. We don't know this, when we close our suitcases and say see

you soon, I'll be in touch, take care. But in Benin City that's what they call us: the girls who go on a journey.

And you only understand what going on a journey means when you hear a story like Osas's.

Osas left with a woman from her own village, a friend of Abu, her mother. This woman's daughter was already in Italy operating as a *maman*, and she'd said to her mother: find me a girl I can trust, someone easy to handle. Someone whose family I can take it out on if she tries to run away.

So she went to Osas's family.

Osas's father had gone off with another woman after having six or seven kids with Osas's mother. I'm off, he said, and that was the lasy anybody saw of him. He left and they survived thanks to the grandmothers, the aunts and the neighbours, because in Nigeria when a couple separates it's the mother who stays with the children, and the problem of how to support them is hers alone. The father rarely ever shows up again, sometimes never. So Osas's family was one of those.

Even when her father was with them life was hard, because wages aren't high in Nigeria; and for a family with seven, eight, nine children it's a struggle to make it through from one payday to the next. Sometimes there just isn't anything to eat. And as soon as they're able, the kids are sent out to work. The girls help at home with the other children, the boys help their father in the fields or else go to the city to do odd jobs, they work as carpenters or brickie's labourers, carrying the cement, making the bricks and setting them out to dry in the sun. It's not much of a life, but at least they can pay for their food and help out at home.

You say: what about school?

Which means you haven't understood a thing. Because going to school costs money, you have to pay for your textbooks, your notebooks, your chair. If you can't afford to pay for a chair you have to bring one from home. And then you have to pay for the uniform, and bring chalk for the blackboard, and a broom made out of palm leaves, and a whip. Yes. Because if you don't behave the teacher whips you. That's the way it works there.

So this woman turns up at Osas's place, she's known her mother since they were only that high. She drops in for a chat. She says: my daughter has a good life in Europe, look how much money she's sent me, why don't you send your daughter there too, so you can have some help as well?

Not that she explained what Osas would have to do, of course.

She only said: your daughter is a beautiful girl, in Europe she can make her fortune and yours.

And so Osas set off.

She was eighteen or nineteen years old when she left. The journey took two years. Two interminable years in the desert and the forests. One of the worst and longest journeys of all the stories I've heard the girls tell.

This is how it went. The mother of the *maman* paid a man to take the girls to Italy. Thirty of them left by ship from Lagos. They arrived in Morocco. There the guides stuck them in an apartment to wait for another ship that would take them to Italy.

Says Osas: there were more than sixty of us living in that tiny little place.

Most of them were Nigerian, three or four boys were from Camerun, one or two from Ghana. The girls were only from Nigeria.

Says Osas: we hardly ever slept, there were shifts for lying down on the beds, an hour's sleep then it was back on your feet so that somebody who was standing could lie down and sleep for an hour. This went on all day long.

There was only one bathroom.

There was always a queue.

There were Arabs in charge of the situation who asked the guides for money, a lot of money, otherwise, they said, we'll hurt the girls. Some of the women were beaten and some were raped.

And Osas?

She says she wasn't.

But she was frightened and anxious and in the end, one day, the police arrived. A boy threw himself out of a window, trying to escape, and was killed. Osas and her girlfriends did okay, their guide managed to take them a long way away, into the forest.

They lived in the forest for months. Six months, Osas says; but she lost an exact sense of time almost straightaway. There were thirty of them left, more or less. The men built huts with anything they could find - leaves, branches, but when it rained they would all collapse. And there was nothing to eat. They spent the days looking

for food - bananas, a bit of fruit, a few roots. Sometimes they managed to catch an animal.

But it was never enough. Never.

So a lot of them fell ill because of the bad food, the lack of hygiene, the privations. Osas cut her hair off to get rid of the parasites, all of it, she shaved her head, because African hair is impossible to manage if you don't comb and iron it every day; out of the question in that place, in the forest.

Osas shaved off her long hair but she got sick anyway. She survived only because she found a herb she knew from her village days and she made a decoction from it and recovered.

But they were all in a bad way.

When it rained they'd shelter by holding a sheet of plastic over their heads, standing with their arms above their heads, and sometimes they'd spend the whole night with their arms up; the whole night, with the rain coming down around them. One morning one of the girls in the middle was dead. Her arms were still up. She'd died standing next to Osas and she hadn't fallen to the ground because everyone was squashed together so tight trying to keep the rain off.

No-one had noticed.

Even today Osas still shudders just thinking about it.

Then one day they left the forest and headed towards the desert. We crossed the desert on foot, says Osas. We had Arab guides and we followed behind them.

Sometimes the guides got hold of a truck to carry them part of the way.

But there were always fights and arguments because often the deal was for one figure and then the drivers would demand double. So the journey became impossible.

The trucks were always full to bursting point. Osas says that one time there were more than sixty people in the back, another time when there was no more space they simply threw the extras over the side and left them there in the middle of the desert, with no water, with nothing. If someone came by - fine, if not - too bad. And you leave them behind and head off along this road through the desert and you see the white, white bones of people along the sides of the track. You see bodies dried out by the sun.

Osas says: the only thought in your head is: I've got to keep going, I've got to endure.

It took them two days to cross the last bit of desert and they had no water, nothing, because the bosses had fought among themselves over money. When they arrived they were more dead than alive. They were taken to wash, given clean clothes. At the port Osas looked around her, out of her group of thirty there were only ten or so left.

At the port they were packed into a little boat, twelve crammed in where five could fit, there was a guy who worked the engine, and in that old crate they were supposed to reach a bigger boat anchored off shore. They tried and tried but the waves were too high and they had to give up.

Next to Osas was a Nigerian woman with her husband and their baby who'd been born during the journey, she'd given birth who knows where. She held the little boy tight as tight to shield him from the waves.

When they got to the wharf everyone got out except her. She was still sitting there with the baby in her arms and she didn't move.

She was dead.

Her husband buried her, took the baby and set out again the next day.

You tell me: what else could he possibly have done?

I'm telling you Osas's story exactly the way she told it to me, not adding a single adjective, nothing; it is hard and smooth as a stone and as hard as stone to stomach. But if you don't understand the anger and the fear and the anguish of the journey you can't understand what it means to arrive. And if you don't understand that, then you can't understand what the lives of us girls who set out from Benin City are like, either.

When she finally arrived in Spain, Osas no longer wanted to go anywhere. She could scarcely believe she had made it that far alive. When they said to her, come on, time to set off again, you have to go to Italy, she was overcome by terror. She didn't know that in Spain there weren't any deserts or forests like the ones she'd been through, she only knew she'd seen too many deaths.

And that she was lucky to be alive.

They had to trick her to get her to Italy, they took her to the station: look how beautiful it is, look at that beautiful train. Let's go for a ride. Would you like to?

The train really was beautiful, says Osas.

She spent the whole trip looking out the window, entranced.

And at the station in Turin her *maman* was waiting for her. Ah, so you're the little one who's had me so worried, she said.

She took her home, to a tiny room near the Porta Susa station where three girls were already living. That evening Osas saw them being beaten to get them onto the street. And that they went.

The maman said: pull yourself together, you've already lost two years because of the journey, tonight you start work.

And that's how life in Italy began for Osas.

3.

This is an African story and so inside the story of Osas there are other stories and inside those stories there are still more stories. Inside the story of her journey, first of all, there's injustice within the injustice, because for that inhuman journey, the *maman* said: you have to pay me sixty thousand euros.

All the other girls who travel by plane pay thirty thousand or forty thousand.

And those who make the long journey, in such terrible conditions, are never required to pay the whole sum. They can say: I'm not paying. They can say: I'll only pay for the ship to Spain and the train ticket from Spain to here.

It's an unwritten law, but in Europe everybody knows it.

Only Osas didn't.

So she said: okay.

And she started work.

Anyone who cares about the girls, even if only the way you care about merchandise you plan to make money out of, never makes them undergo such a terrible journey. They want you to arrive safe and sound and in good condition. Good meaning good enough to work. Immediately.

The journey through the desert is made by boys who couldn't find an organisation, or girls who really want to get away but don't have the money to pay and are prepared to die trying.

But a *maman* who does this to her girls, well: she's the worst thing you can encounter, when you arrive in Europe.

Like Carol in Brescia.

Ask around. Everybody knows her.

Carol made a horrible journey, years and years and years ago. She was one of the first women to leave Nigeria, with the first groups, when there wasn't a lot of organisation. You set off and that was it. Sometimes you arrived, sometimes you didn't.

Only when it became apparent that the girls were a profitable business did the whole mafia thing begin, the meticulous organisation, the journeys planned very carefully so the merchandise arrives in the best possible condition. That was when they began to involve the families in the contracts, so they could exercise control at the point of origin.

But that's another story, and I'll tell it to you later.

For now, I'll tell you that Carol made a terrifying journey. Across the desert. I don't know the details, only that whoever ordered her was one of the ones who couldn't care less, like Osas's *maman*. At a certain point during the journey, Carol's fingers froze. She says: it was the left hand, to be precise. And of course they didn't take her to hospital. They chopped them off then and there, with some sort of machete.

When she arrived in Italy they sent her onto the street.

She said no, no, I don't want to, I can't. She showed them her stump: look at my hand, she said. Look, she said, I'm in no condition to work.

You don't need hands to do the work you have to do.

Just like that. That's what they said to her.

And the Carol of those days hadn't yet become the Carol of today; she was just a girl like all the others, who couldn't stand up for herself, who went to work and kept working until she paid off her debt. When she'd finished paying she said: I want to make money too. I can't do any other work with this hand.

So she too ordered herself a girl and now she has more than ten working for her, and she made the first girls do the whole long journey, exactly the way she had had to.

For revenge, you say.

Could be.

Today, as a *maman* she is merciless.

When a girl rebels she says: take a good look at these hands. I can cut yours off too in a flash.

Her girls say she beats them and beats them and beats them. The tiniest thing and she beats you. She has a Nigerian husband who goes to keep tabs on the girls on the street, and then reports back to her. Especially in winter. When it's snowing or frozen over and you have to stay out all night with the temperature below zero. When all the girls on the street light fires, and it's normal because if you can't warm up a bit you end up frozen. Well, she never lets her girls go near the fire.

If one of them takes a break from work to warm herself up, and earns just one euro less than she's supposed to, she' s beaten within an inch of her life.

Carol beats her.

She says: I'll warm you up.

She says: look at my hands and get moving.

When I say that you die inside, you have to believe me.

There are moments when it's all so terrifying and obscene and intollerable you can't stay lucid and survive.

At least not without going mad.

Some girls do go mad.

Others fill themselves full of alcohol, or heroin, or medicines like antihistamines that numb your brain so you can no longer think about anything at all.

And others just shatter inside.

They become totally insensitive.

And when they finally make it out of all the turmoil, the only thing they can say is: I want to make money too, and who gives a bugger about the others. I had to do it, now it's their turn.

That's the way the world works, they say.

And maybe it's their way of coming to terms with what they went through. Of making sense out of it.

4.

At any rate, Osas was finally able to get in touch with her family. She called her mum, to tell her what had happened.

Thank goodness, said her mother. You're alive, I'm so glad.

For two years she'd had no idea what had become of her daughter.

Osas said: I'm alive, but look what they're making me do.

But neither her father nor her mother went to protest to the *maman*'s mother. They only said, it's alright, the important thing is that you're alive.

Osas said: but you don't know the life I lead. And how cold it gets.

> And her mother: Now don't exagerate, in Italy they work indoors where it's warm.

Mum, you have to sell yourself.

But her mother never made any trouble. I think she knew how things stood right from the beginning.

And from that point on, Osas never again rebelled against anybody. After all she'd been through in the forest and the desert, there she was, with no papers and no money, and her mother saying, it's alright, it doesn't matter, just do your job. She had nowhere to escape to. At home they didn't want her back. What else could she do but bow her head and say: alright.

And start life in Italy, like the others.

Now I, Isoke, am going to say something you'll find hard to understand. That in a certain sense Osas was lucky. Because after that journey and what they did to her when she arrived, things were very clear to her right from the beginning. And Akua in Milan was

also lucky, when they put her on the street the same night she arrived from Paris. She says: they gave me these repulsive clothes and said off you go, you're going to hawk your ass too.

But at least it's clear that you've got no way out and no choice. You're the victim. End of story.

Osas was at least spared the anguish that seizes the girls who arrive from Benin City by plane. Who leave from Lagos and go to London, or Paris, and often to Spain, too. And a lot go through Holland. Sure, the journeys are very well-organised, they give you real passports and residency permits made out to another girl who may even look like you, you just have to memorise the name.

It's the only thing you have to do.

But then you find yourself a prisoner in an apartment in Amsterdam or London or who knows where, and until delivery has been organised that's where you stay. You're shut inside for a month, two months, three, and the only thing you can do is think. What's going to happen to me? What are they going to do to me? You can't make sense of anything anymore.

And so you try and escape.

Escape is practically impossible, they watch you all the time. But if they've taken you out for a bit of fresh air and you've seen something of the city, then you have a go. You go the station, you go to a park, you look for an African who will help you - no-one ever helps you - or else you have the phone number of a girlfriend of a girlfriend who's living in Italy.

You call her.

Sometimes she just doesn't want to know, sometimes she says come over.

She goes guarantee for you (??), she lets you come and stay. She thinks: this one here'll pay for my food and rent. Then she calls the organisation and they come to an agreement and in the end you have to go to work for them just the same.

Meanwhile the organisation goes to raise hell at your parents' place. They know that sooner or later the girls are going to call home. So they watch your family, to see if they receive any letters or phone calls. And then they walk right into the house and they say: the girl must keep her side of the bargain or else you're in very deep trouble, all of you.

It's a threat that always works, especially when it was the parents themselves who took the girls to the *Italos*, as in the last two or three years. Little girls, thirteen and fourteen years old. The organisation seeks out girls that young because they're easier to manage, and because it's a long time before they understand what's going on. Before they start to really become women, adults, and realise what they've been made to do and what has been done to them.

So there's always somebody at the village festivals and the weddings and the funerals filming girls, and then the mamans watch the films: that one's too short, that one's too flat, that one's too old, that one, yeah, just right. That little one there. She's the one I want.

And when the choice has been made, the sponsor goes to the family, takes them gifts, and says: in Europe they need beautiful girls to work as models, hairdressers, dressmakers. Why don't you think about it?

And the family almost always says yes. In fact, it's the mothers and the fathers who take the initiative now, who take their daughters to these people. They know that in that house over there live the parents of a woman who takes girls to Europe, they've seen the family buy themselves a car, buy themselves a house. So they say: me too.

I think they know exactly what's going on.

These days, oh yes, they know.

But the country offers them nothing. And they think, okay, we'll send this daughter off to lead a difficult life, but at least that way we'll have some help, the younger kids can go to school, we can buy food, clothes, a house.

And then the parents don't actually know the details, they don't know their daughter will end up on the street, in the cold, that she'll risk being robbed and killed. They think that here in Italy you work in the clubs. You dance. That sort of stuff. It's when you try and open their eyes that you realise they just don't want to know.

A few days ago, Efe, beautiful Efe, had someone take photos of her on the street and sent them home. She says: I called my mother to tell her about my life, to ask for help. But her mother and her brothers didn't want to hear a thing. They thought she was just making up these stories so she wouldn't have to work. Come on, they said, dancing on top of a cube isn't all that terrible.

So she had herself photographed on the street. With her knickers in full view.

Her brother said: those shoes are really beautiful.

He said: I've never seen such beautiful shoes.

And he keeps on asking her for money.

Efe, I say. Don't ring them any more, don't answer the phone.

But then I put myself in her place. How can you accept that your family is like that? Your mother. Your father. Your brother. It isn't possible, you say. But it's all too possible, and that's the thing that maybe hurts you the most.

5.

At a certain point you just have to resign yourself. You say: if I refuse, they'll kill me, who knows what'll happen to me. And then you start doing the sums. How much is the debt, how long will it take me to pay it off, how can I pay it off as fast as possible? The debt is usually somewhere between thirty and sixty thousand euros.

And if only it were just the debt, say I.

The fact is they exploit you in every possible way. Whichever way you turn you have to pay something to somebody, so the debt keeps growing, and you never see the end to it.

For that dump of a house they put you in, you pay. Even if you share the room and the bed with another girl, you pay. No discounts. If the rent is five hundred euros a month, all the girls pay five hundred. The maman is the only one who has read the contract, and she says: that's the way they do it in Italy. You say: okay.

You pay to eat.

You pay for the revolting clothes you have to wear on the street.

You pay for heating separately, when it exists.

You pay for the electricity.

You pay rent on your piece of the pavement.

They practically make you pay for the air you breathe.

In the beginning you don't even realise what the money is worth. Naira, euros, dollars – they all get totally mixed-up. In Nigeria you use the naira, here it's the euro, the journey they make you pay in dollars. Many of the girls are illiterate, when they leave their village

they can't even add two plus two. Imagine what that means for doing calculations in three different currencies.

My father's salary in Nigeria was around seventy-five euros a month, a good salary by local standards. A teacher earns a lot less, almost half, let's say forty to fifty. A family of ten can live on seventy euros.

Just to give you an idea.

When the *Italos* contact you they say ah, in a year you'll earn a hundred million naira. A crazy figure. They say: in a year or even in six months, if you're quick, you can pay off the debt, then what you earn is for you and your family. Right there before your eyes is the example of the families who already have a girl in Europe. Not that they actually live in luxury. But all the same. Maybe they build a little house, the kids go to a private school where at least the teachers don't go on strike for weeks on end because their salaries haven't been paid, everybody has enough to eat, they have clothes and shoes. The material changes are there, you can see them and you can touch them. The TV, the fridge, maybe even a car. Everybody's dream is to own a Mercedes, the white one with the long bonnet, that here in Europe you never see anymore. When money arrives for the family it's the first thing they buy, if possible with airconditioning and fake leopard-skin seats, and when they drive through the villages, little barefooted kids run after them.

A hundred million naira in one year.

How much is that in dollars, how much is that in euros?

How many clients.

So you spend that first period doing sum after sum, trying to work out how long it's going to take you to regain your freedom. The end of the first month arrives and the maman draws up your budget: so much for rent, so much for food, so much for the debt. And you are left with nothing. For at least a year you don't have a penny left over to send to your family. On the contrary, the rule is: for at least six months, even a year, you don't send anything home. For a long time it's actually forbidden even to phone home. They decide when you can call. Depending on whether you've been a good girl or not.

It's all organised for you, you just have to be a good girl. Everything is set up for you. You've got a house, and food too, if you behave yourself in three months time you can even call your mother. The only thing you have to do is always say yes, and work.

So Ekeme, and Osas, and I, Isoke, and all the other girls from Benin City at a certain point find ourselves doing our sums. Twenty-five euros a client, which is the standard rate in the north. Ten, twelve hours work a day. How many clients you can do. How much that means you'll earn.

In the beginning they take your money every day, because they don't trust you yet. Then they come round once a week or every ten days. It depends whether you're a *rapidò* or not. I'll explain to you later what a *rapidò* is. So they're coming round every week or ten days and you have to give them five hundred euros. That's in winter. In summer there are more clients, so you have to give them a thousand.

Summer is calculated from April to September, then it's winter. Those are the only two seasons the girls from Benin City know.

Calculate 180 days of summer work. That's eighteen times you have to give them a thousand euros, for a total of eighteen thousand, if you're a normal girl. The *rapidòs* actually have to pay twenty-five thousand. Then calculate the 180 days of winter, during which they ask only half, nine thousand euros. Add summer and winter. That's a minimum twenty-seven thousand euros you have to hand over, otherwise there'll be strife. And the *rapidòs* give them a lot more, around thirty-seven, thirty-eight thousand.

In theory, if you work hard you can think about paying your debt off in a year and a half. Or two. Some girls even manage to pay it off in a year, if they find a sucker, a client they can persuade to give them the money. But all this, I repeat, is only theory.

In practice, there's everything else as well. Five hundred euros rent a month, and sometimes heating and electricity are included, sometimes they're not. Food is calculated separately, if the girls live with the maman they have to give her a fixed fifty euros a week, even if the maman and her favourite are the only ones who eat well.

In the early days they even make you pay for the phone, because it's the maman who keeps in touch with your family, so you end up paying for her phonecalls to Nigeria too.

And then there's the *joint*, the piece of kerb you work on. You have to pay for that, too. Sometimes you pay your own maman, sometimes somebody she has an alliance with, someone who leaps up out of nowhere and says: this street is mine. Pay up. How much you pay depends on the street. Whether they're the rich clients' streets, or the roads where the peasant farmers go, or the ones the commuters take on their way to work in Milan. There are streets where you get twenty-five euros and there are streets where you're worth ten. There are the Albanians' streets, the Romanians', the

Africans'. Even on the same street: the footpath up to here belongs to the Romanian girls, from here to there it's the Africans'.

And anyone who oversteps the line is in big trouble.

If it's a street that brings a lot of work, you can pay as much as 250-300 euros a month. If it's worth less you pay less, 150-200. So every week you have to find the money for the joint as well as for rent, food and the debt.

Sometimes the maman has worked there and taken over the place, so she has the right to put her girls there. Other times you have to take control of the street yourself. When the clients take you for a ride in their car, you don't look at the countryside, you look at the places, you look at the footpath. And when you find a place that looks good, the next night you try and go there. Sometimes it's already controlled by someone else, a girl comes up and says: go away. Then you either come to an agreement and you pay, or else the stronger one drives the other girl away. If she has a protector it means trouble. He turns up and beats the living daylights out of you.

But sometimes it goes okay. And then you say to a girlfriend: come with me, because you don't want to be there all alone. When you're alone, you're always afraid.

Some of the clients are bastards who'll do anything to you.

In short, it doesn't take you long to realise you need to find an absolute minimum of 40-45 thousand euros a year, if you want to stay alive. Let's call them the fixed costs. Then there's the money to send home. The money for yourself. For your work clothes. Because if you don't spend a lot on them the maman will scream at you. You've got to dress better, she says. But I haven't got enough money, you say. So then she buys you the clothes, and for jeans that cost 20 euros she makes you pay 40. So your debt grows. And grows. And keeps on growing.

But it's never a good idea to protest, because you learn straightaway that you've got to keep the maman happy.

You even have to give her presents to make her like you, that way she'll treat you better.

You have to go with her when she goes shopping, you have to buy her those skin-lightening creams that come from Canada or America. And the lotions to make your body glossy. And maybe a couple of bottles of gin, so she'll say: I pray for you every morning.

And when you've finally finished paying everything off, you have to keep working to earn the money for the maman's party. The

thanksgiving party. And that's at least another 2,500 euro. At 25 euros a client that's 100 clients you have to fuck just for the party she organises to let everyone know that you've finished paying, that you appreciate everything she's done for you and everything she made you do. There may not be a lot of people at the party but you have to give her that money anyway.

It's a sort of ritual expression of gratitude.

That's the only thing the party is for, to make you say thank you ten times over for what she has done to you, and make you say it in public, in front of witnesses. Thank you, ma'am, you say. You've been good to me, you've done a lot for me.

And it's more than a humiliation, I think.

It's a way of publicly making you her accomplice.

6.

But you still have to discover all this.

In the beginning you're bewildered, you're devastated, you're worn-out from the sheer physical grind of it. You work from 8 in the morning till 10 at night, if you do the day shift, or from 10 in the evening till 5 in the morning, if you work nights. Then you go home and they hardly ever let you sleep. The latest arrival has to work constantly, on the street and at home. Never let her stop, never never never, because if she stops she'll start thinking and that'd be the end. She might even rebel.

So she does the shopping. She cooks. She cleans. She irons. Never a moment when she can lie down and close her eyes long enough to sleep off all the exhaustion.

And the others, who've already been through all this, finally get some rest.

Aiose lives in the house of the woman who exploits her, and this woman has a child. So not only does she clean and wash and iron, she says, she also has to act as babysitter. As well as go out and fuck for money. Just think, the name her mother gave her, Aoise, in Edo means happiness each and every day; but each and every day, she says, I never have a minute to myself. So much for happiness.

But that's the rule. And until a new girl arrives in the house that's how it goes, sometimes for months. If the new arrival is a *rapidò*, however, and earns more than the girls who've been there longer, then the one who earns the least has to go back to doing all the

housework. But you earn nothing, says the maman. Why do want to tire her out when she's earning all that money?

It's a way of punishing her, you can see that yourself.

I say it's also to make the girls enemies.

Don't think the girls are friends, just because they're all in the same boatful of misery. Forget it. The maman doesn't want any friendships developing in the house, because that's the beginning of dangerous solidarity. Of a potential rebellion. In the house you can never talk, because she has ears everywhere. You can never trust anybody, not even your roommate, because she may be deliberately inviting confidences so she can go and inform on you to the maman. That way she gets better treatment.

And even on the street there are spies who watch to see if by chance the girls are chatting together. The new ones especially are strictly monitored. The ones who still have doubts, who are ashamed, who don't know what to do. They're the ones who are really closely watched, and the maman always come to know everything.

You wasted time talking!

You spent two hours with that man, how much money did he give you!

In short, you can never relax, never lower your guard. Never. Not for a moment. You can't even sit down to watch television, because the television is reserved for the maman. Only when you're close to paying off your debt are you allowed to watch it too. Sometimes she says: come and sit here next to me, as a reward for girls who behave. They watch the Nigerian videos, the soap operas shot in Lagos, which are stories a bit like *The Bold and the Beautiful*, shot in Nigeria but American-style. The characters are all rich and all beautiful. They even came to Italy, I heard, to shoot a film.

I, Isoke, never saw it though.

These soap operas are really easy to find in Italy, too, because there's this huge import-export trade. Cassettes. Music. Medicines. Groceries. All thanks to the girls, and the business that's grown up around them. Because the girls from Benin City never eat Italian things, for example, no-one ever teaches them how to, and they're not going to go to a restaurant or a pizzeria by themselves, that's for sure. So as not to spend the money, you see, but also out of fear of not knowing how to behave, or that someone will discover they're illegals and call the cops and then they'll be sent back home.

So in their little Italian rooms, when they get back from work they continue to eat exactly the same way they would if they were in Nigeria. They eat rice with chicken and vegetables, fish, meat and tomato stew, white rice boiled with salt, bran/semolina, peanut butter/sauce. All cooked exactly the way they're cooked in Africa. And so there's a market which brings these things into Italy, a market run by the Chinese, who bring the products in via London. Of course they charge incredibly high prices.

The maman says: don't go into the Italian shops, it's dangerous, the police'll be there.

She says: ah, Italian food, it's all revolting.

It's another way of keeping us locked up forever, prisoners of our habits as well as everything else. The girls go and buy frozen fish in the Chinese shops the maman sends them to, and she probably takes a percentage; they go to the African shops and buy fish that could have been caught a hundred years ago. It doesn't even cross their minds that they could go to the market and buy fresh fish or tomatoes or fruit and spend a bit less. They see that in the supermarket there are only whites. They feel intimidated. They just let their lives slide away, they let the maman do their thinking for them, organise everything for them. They've given up. They never go off the rails.

In short, they live in a world apart.

They're living in Europe but it's as if they were still in Africa.

They call the maman by name, or else Sister. Momi. Mamma.

She is the absolute boss of this little closed community, that has no contact with the outside world. And woe betide anyone who gets out of line. There are the brutal ones, like Carol, and those like Judith who play the friendship game. There are even mamans who go on the street side by side with their girls. But even then you can't trust them. Never.

There are some mamans who whack the girls on the hands when they don't earn enough. They say: your hands are for getting money togther. A lot of money. Got it? Others don't beat their girls, but they use insults, and blackmail, and threaten them with voodoo.

This voodoo business only works with the really naive girls, though. The most gullible, like Otivbò, the ones from the country. Before they leave they're taken to the witchdoctor to make a pledge, he takes something, hair, knickers, fingernails, or pubic hairs or underarm hairs; and then they perform a rite. Otivbò says you swear

to keep your pledge, otherwise something awful will happen. To you or to your family.

A lot of girls believe this stuff.

And when they arrive in Italy some of the mamans pile it on.

She'll say: I don't trust the rite they did back home. She kills the hens, gets the red oil, makes them give her the hair, the knickers, the pubic hair. And then the girls are bound by this thing too.

Sometimes they're desperate, they want to get out of the whole scene.

I say: come on, enough is enough, you've made your decision, just leave.

But Otivbò says: how can I leave, these people will hurt me. I don't want to die. I'm staying.

The ones who don't believe in voodoo maybe go to church. Not the Catholic church, though. In Nigeria there are stacks of Christian churches, Pentecostalian, Evangelical; the Adventist church run by an American preacher is also starting to catch on. And in Italy the girls go to these churches organised especially for Africans. It's their only distraction from the terrible life they lead. They meet two or three times a week, Wednesday, Friday and then on Sunday, when there's a service that lasts practically all day. They dance, they eat, on feast days a hundred, even two hundred people may turn up, sometimes even more.

The pastor is hardly ever a real pastor. To be a pastor in Africa all you need is a Bible; if you decide you're a man of God who's going to stop you?

And Europe is full of pastors like that.

Obviously the pastor is always in league with the maman. The girls go to him to ask for advice, if they're ill he'll do the laying on of hands, and if they go to ask for help, he says: what can you do, it's the Will of God. Prostitution is an ugly busness, he says, but not keeping your promises is very bad too. Let us pray together. Repent. And remember that Our Father also says: you must pay your debts.

So the girls pay the debt and they pay the church.

Each Sunday the pastor asks the girls to offer money to God. He says: everything will be returned to you multiplied a thousandfold. Rosemary in Genoa actually gives ten percent of what she earns to

the church, she literally goes without food. But she doesn't complain. She says: it's for the good of my soul.

And what can I say to that?

I'll explain what the pastors are really for with Fuynkè's story. They had sent her to Turin to work as a whore, but one day she said that's it, I've had enough, I'm not going back on the street again. The maman had two guys beat her up, to change her mind. She got even braver and went and filed charges.

The trial took place.

The pastor went and testified in favour of the two thugs, he said they were good people. He said: they let this girl stay at their place for a while and then, because they couldn't afford to put her up any longer, she decided she'd lie to get her revenge. She's a very bad girl, Your Honour.

The judge believed the pastor and not her.

And so you can see just how far the network of control extends. It's not just the maman, it's a thousand people and a thousand things.

Though in the beginning you don't see this or you don't understand it.

You have eyes for only two things: the maman and the street.

7.

The first time you go on the street to work, you panic.

I remember the street.

I remember the footpath.

I remember how ashamed I was at being there, in those absurd clothes.

And the waiting.

I remember waiting for someone to arrive and make signs to me from the rolled-down window, saying come here, saying how much.

I can still remember the voices of the first men who called me over, and my voice replying no, no, no.

I remember the tone in which Susan said to me one day: listen sweetheart, you can't go on like this. No-one's going to believe you if you say you haven't worked before. If you keep going like this you're just going to get into trouble.

So in the end I, too, had to make up my mind and get into the car of a guy I'd never met or even seen before, for the very first time. He spoke a bit of English. All we did was talk. He was young and goodlooking and he paid me just to chat for a while. Strange as it may seem, when I think back I realise that maybe, all in all, he had more problems than I did.

That evening he was my only client.

None of us willingly tells the story of our first time.

When you still don't understand Italian, you don't understand the clients, you don't really understand what you have to do or how to protect yourself. Those are the most terrible and the most humiliating moments. The most dangerous. It may go for you the way it went with Oba, who at fourteen years old found herself sent out to be fucked for money on a footpath in Rome, and her first client on her first evening raped her and beat her up and left her on the ground more dead than alive.

Or like what happened to Osas, who in the beginning didn't understand when the client said: yours or mine? She'd only been told: when they ask you where you want to go, you say: quiet. Because it's important to take clients to your quiet place, the place where other girls from your street go too, so you know that every five or ten minutes a car will turn up and the girl in it will keep some kind of an eye on you. You know that if you have trouble she'll intervene. She'll yell. And it doesn't matter what nationality the girls are, whether they're African or Romanian or Albanian, in those moments we're all women and we give each other a hand.

It's happened to me, too. I've had to intervene to help other girls. There are violent clients, men who aren't satisfied, who think just because they've paid they're entitled to do whatever they want to you. When you see a thing like that, your only hope is that the man is not armed, that he doesn't knife you in the belly or the back. And then you go for it, you leap in. You help.

Anyway, Osas hadn't yet understood how things worked. Yours or mine? She just said: Quiet. And so he took her to his quiet place, a half derelict farmhouse, who knows where. He beat her, he raped her, the whole time he held a knife to her throat. She cried out. Help! Help! And from the inhabited half of the farmhouse a voice yelled back: Pack it in, both of you! Shut up! Only when the man had run off and she was left there alone, howling, distraught, did a boy work

up the courage to come and see what had happened. He had a dog and the dog snarled at her. He said: What do you want?

But all she could do was cry.

His family came out, they said something, then he loaded her into a car and took her back to the street where she worked, and from there she managed to get home. For the whole trip, the boy kept saying: but couldn't you see that guy was crazy?

Know what, says Osas today, he was one of the nicest men I've met in Italy.

But that's exactly the way it goes.

For the girls who've just arrived, the impact with the street is always hard. They may not yet be convinced that they have to go to work. Or else they go, but they're frightened to get into a car. Or else they get in, but they don't want to do anything with the client and he gets angry and takes them back two minutes later.

It's a strategy too, when it comes down to it.

The girl says: it's not my fault, nobody wants me.

Then the maman gets tired of it and sends in the boys. Two, three, four of them turn up and they rape her until she's understood she has no choice.

Sometimes girls arrive who are still virgins.

Then the maman starts tearing her hair and says: what am I going to do with you?

I have to worry about finding someone to deflower you, too?

The girls who are virgins are a problem for the maman, because she's convinced they ruin the market. They know nothing about anything. They're scared stiff, they say how do you do it, I don't like it, I don't want to. And then the maman moans and groans: and now on top of everything else I have to find a male to do this little job for me.

She finds some boys and says: teach her a real lesson so she learns what she has to do, once and for all.

And sometimes it turns out the girl wasn't a virgin at all, she was just looking for an excuse not to go out and fuck for money. But at that point nobody's going to let her off the lesson.

It’s not something that happens often. But the stories do the rounds anyway, because the girls talk, the girls tell their stories. Sometimes the other girls feel sorry for them and say: be brave, off you go, the first time is painful but if you refuse it will be worse. Much, much more painful and much more horrible.

When the girls who are virgins hear these stories they get even more frightened and prefer to go on the street and have a client explain the whole thing to them. That becomes their first experience. And sometimes the client is understanding, and feels bad when he discovers it’s her first time, and sometimes a relationship between them can even grow out of it. I know some who even got engaged to the girl.

Take Atagà, for example. She’s twenty-three and she has just married a young guy of twenty-five. She arrived in Italy when she was only nineteen. And she was a virgin. They sent her onto the street but there wasn’t a lot of work, she was shy and couldn’t hook onto clients, and when she did manage it the clients would bring her back all angry, because when the moment came to fuck she’d be overcome with fear and say no. Well, give me back the money then. Every night the same story.

After a week the girl she worked with said: look, the maman will wait a couple of weeks maximum, if you don’t get it together you’ll end up being taught a lesson. Go with a client and get it over and done with. At least you’ll suffer less.

So then Atagà met this Marco, and when he heard the story he got her into the car and took her home, to his parents. They knew what she was doing on the street but they were fantastically open-minded: if you like this can be your home, they said, if you like you can be our daughter.

It’s one of the most incredible stories I’ve heard, because usually the parents say to the boy: you’re crazy, you can get that idea out of your head, don’t even think about it.

Instead they simply said: welcome.

The found her a job and now they’re helping her set up a house. The two of them got married a week ago, first in a civil ceremony, then in church. They drew up a wedding list, the relatives gave them a dinner service, glasses, all the things you need.

Atagà never paid her debt, she just ran away and the maman doesn’t have the faintest idea where she went to. And she intends to say to her parents in Nigeria: if they come looking for me, tell them I only have to pay for the plane ticket to Italy. I don’t want to know about all the rest.

So now the mamans are getting organised to avoid that sort of disaster, and when they see a beautiful girl in the videos who could be right for the job, before getting her to come to Europe they ask a lot of questions. Does she have a boyfriend or doesn't she, is she a virgin, what's her story. If they discover she's never been to bed with anybody, the organisation takes steps to remedy that. There actually are guys in Nigeria who are paid to do precisely that, to check that the girls are not still virgins. And then, if necessary, to get cracking and deflower them.

Believe me, I'm not making anything up.

8.

The girls in Verona just called me.

They said: Prudence has disappeared. She hasn't been home for two days. We've looked for her in all the police stations and all the hospitals. We can't find her. We can't find her anywhere.

Prudence arrived from Nigeria less than a week ago.

Twenty years old. She ended up on the street practically straightaway, without knowing a word of Italian.

And all of us were frightened, because the last girl who disappeared like that was Enor in Vicenza. They found her dead a few days later. Knifed and just left there. In a ditch.

You wouldn't know it, but so many girls have died. Too many.

I counted them, from the newspaper reports: more than two hundred only since I arrived here. They were beaten to death, stabbed, strangled, shot, run over by a car or injected with poison. And who knows how many ended up in a rubbish dump or a river, where no-one has ever found them.

Ask yourself that question.

I'm dead too. I died in April.

I died in Sicily, stabbed by an ex-security guard completely off his head. A guy who hated black women and one evening disemboweled me with a knife as long as that.

I'm not joking.

When I read about it in the paper, I nearly threw up.

The girl was called Izogìe Omoregbe.

On the passport they gave me when I set off for Italy was that very same name, the name I used in Turin for years, the name everybody knew me by. Izogìe. Izo.

I know there's an Izogìe who ended up in trouble in Spain, another I think is somewhere in Italy, moving around. And there's me. And Izo in Catania. That was the name on the forged papers they gave us to leave with and we all used that name for our life on the street, while our real names we kept just for ourselves.

It's something all the girls do, and if you want to know the reason I'll tell you. Later, though.

Right now I want to tell you the story of Izo, who one evening went off to sell her body with two girlfriends. The outskirts of Catania. Hideously degraded. This guy with psychiatric problems turned up, all the girls in Catania knew him, because he'd already come before to beat up the girls and cause trouble. Keep away from him, said the grapevine. Keep well away from that one.

One evening he arrived with a big knife.

The girls fled in terror, running one this way, one the other.

He chased one of them, caught her, and stabbed her in the heart. And as she was dying he kept on striking and striking and striking and he twisted the knife, worse than if he'd been butchering an animal.

Only it wasn't an animal, it was Izogìe.

The other girls got away, they weren't hurt, but they were too frightened to go to the police and give the alarm.

So he finished what he'd come to do, and when he saw she was dead, he threw her into an overgrown field.

Then he went home, all covered in blood. A neighbour saw him, but he didn't say anything either. Only two days later, when he heard on TV that they'd found the body of a girl who'd been stabbed to death, did he finally decide to go to the police. They arrested the guy. He practically boasted about the murder, one less dirty nigger bitch on the streets. That's how he saw it, you see.

This is a very ugly story, but it has an ending which redeems it in a way.

They were organising Izo's funeral when her sister arrived from Brescia. She was married, with regular papers, so she had come to Catania to bury Izogìe and the women from UDI (the Italian

Women's Union*) said: we'll help you. They also filed a civil suit against him. It was the first time that anything like that has happened in Italy.

Then a man, the boyfriend of a Nigerian girl who works on the street, thought: this funeral shouldn't be held in secret. He started going round the African shops, talking with the girls, he said: we must all go to this funeral.

The day of the funeral there was nobody in the church, only the sister, two journalists, the local priest, this man and a few others. But then, little by little, the girls started to arrive: one, three, five, ten, twenty… One of them suddenly felt ill and fainted, she was one of the two girls who'd been with Izogìe the day of the murder. She wanted to stay anyway, right up till the end. And the ceremony was beautiful and full of singing. A real African funeral.

Izogìe was a wonderful singer, too, said her sister. She was very religious. Always praying.

When the function finished the girls vanished, in silence, just as they had arrived.

And they went back to their places of work.

There are dozens of girls like Izogìe, everywhere.

They die and nobody knows who killed them or even what their real names were. They end up at the cemetery under their false names. Their families never know what happened to them.

It's a very sad thing. Incredibly sad.

Anyway, Prudence came back.

She came back after two days and she could hardly stand up.

A client had loaded her into his car and taken her miles and miles away, then raped her and raped her again and beaten her up. He took her handbag, her money, her mobile phone. He abandoned her in a wood twenty kilometers from home.

She stayed in the wood all that night, all the next day. Without eating or drinking. Bleeding all over. Then she somehow managed to drag herself along, she heard voices, she found a camping ground. There were people there on holiday. They helped her and took her to Verona and there she finally managed to get her bearings and go back home. But she is very ill. She can't stop crying.

What happened, I asked.

They ripped a hole in my uterus, they ripped a hole in my uterus.

That's the only thing she can manage to say. And she won't go to hospital for fear the police will find out about her and load her onto a plane and send her home.

They ripped a hole in my uterus.

And it makes me, Isoke, just want to cry.

You see, every night the girls go to work and in their heads there are only two thoughts. The first is: maybe tonight's the night I'll meet somebody who will help me. The other is: let's hope tonight nothing happens to me.

But to one or another something is going to happen. Always.

If you're lucky it'll be thugs who drive by and throw eggs at you, yell at you, throw water over you. And think what that means in winter when you're already freezing to death and suddenly you're soaked from head to foot. Think what it means when the cars stop and out get these people who for a joke start yelling Police! Police! The girls all race away into the fields, ten minutes, fifteen, in the mud, into the corn, all the mosquitos, and when they come back they're filthy, shocked, worn-out and that's the end of the night's work.

That's violence, too. Stupid. Gratuitous.

Joy tells the story of how one time a guy came by in a car, she went over thinking he was a client and he let loose such a mighty punch that for a week she couldn't hear at all. And even now that ear still hurts when it's cold, she says; I have to always cover it with a scarf, but I can't hear too well out of it any more.

Then there are the ones who rob you and bash you.

And apart from the blows and the terror, there's trouble with the maman who thinks you're trying to make a fool of her, and if you don't bring enough money home she gets angry, she starts rummaging through your things. Where are you hiding the money? She says. And she beats you.

But it's not as if there are all that many hiding places. Sometimes you put a few euros in the wardrobe, among your clothes, but there's always the risk that one of your housemates will steal it. So sometimes you hide it where you work, even a thousand euros at a time, in a hole in the ground, for example. You must never keep a lot of money on you because there are so many thugs around who will rob you, but you can't have too little on you either, because if they

don’t find enough they’ll beat you to make you tell where you’ve hidden it. There are guys who turn up and grab all the girls’ handbags, their money, their phones.

Every night it’s like that.

The ones with the scooters turn up and they steal the bags, the Moroccans arrive and they go and find the place where the girls get changed and they take everything. You finish work and go to change your clothes and everything’s gone. You’re left there in your knickers, with a ridiculous wig on your head, in shoes with incredibly high heels, the ones you couldn’t walk two metres in.

So then what do you do? You tell me.

Sometimes to get home you have to take a train, or a bus, and the driver won’t even let you on. Signorina, he says, please…

So you have to hitch a ride.

A guy stops: what’ll you give me in exchange?

And then when you arrive home without any money it’s always a drama.

However, that’s not the worst that happens. When they steal your money and your bag but you still manage to get home in one piece, or almost.

Osas, for example, tells a story about a violent client who was roaming around her way. The girls said: watch out for the guy with the bicycle on his car, never get in, because he’s really violent. He’d pull out a pistol, threaten the girl, force her to strip, and force her do whatever he wanted. He never paid, and he’d always steal their money.

Don’t get in, don’t get in.

Then one day he took the bicycle off the car and so Osas didn’t recognise him. He did what he wanted to her, then he threw her out of the speeding car. Miles and miles away from where he’d picked her up.

She had no idea where she was.

She took off the ridiculous shoes and started walking, she was bleeding, the cars hooted their horns, one guy offered her a lift but she was too frightened and didn’t want to know about it. She walked until she arrived at a bus stop, and there she finally stopped.

Sooner or later a bus will arrive, she thought, and I can ask the driver where I've ended up.

And so at least she managed to get home.

But this Osas is really unlucky, you say.

Not particularly.

If only everybody knew what happens every night of every day of the year.

If only the girls could press charges without having an expulsion order shoved instantly into their hands.

If they could be certain they'd get medical treatment, and assistance, and could go to hospital without the police getting to know about it and dragging them straight down to the police station.

If only they had a minimum of protection.

You know how many stories like Osas's you'd get to hear about then?

On the street rape is the norm.

And you know what I think? Me, Isoke? That every African woman raped is an Italian woman saved. Think about it.

Then there are the pay-for-rapists, as the girls call them. The ones who think that just because they've paid their twenty-five euros, the standard price, they have the right to demand anything at all. They say: what the fuck are you complaining about, bitch. You've taken the money. Suck it. Turn around. Give me that arse. And it's a bashing if you say no. They're obsessed with arse, the Italians who go looking for girls on the street.

They say: I want to do what I never do with my wife.

And they bash you.

Scenes from porn films, from horror films - violent films, at any rate.

Who knows what they watch and what they dream about, these men, while their wives sleep peacefully by their sides.

Efe, for example, can hardly walk anymore. A client ruptured her anus. He was like a wild animal, says Efe. He raped her once, twice,

at a certain point she says she felt something give way deep inside her. That laceration has never healed.

She never went to hospital, obviously.

She drags herself with difficulty along the pavement, every night. She limps now. And there's no way even to get her to a doctor to stitch it back up. She says: if the police come to hear about it, I'm finished.

It's the rule.

Sometimes the girls who are really badly hurt end up at the emergency room. But they have to be really, really in a bad way. Unconscious or in a coma.

And it's not as if they get the velvet glove treatment at the emergency room.

Their privacy is supposed to be respected, but whoever said that the law also applies to black, illegal immigrant whores? Sometimes the doctors and nurses are nasty, sometimes they're deliberately offensive.

They call the police.

The police take down your statement as if they had better things to do, then the first thing they do is give you an expulsion order.

You are the victim of rape and you are the one who pays for it.

So, as soon as they can, the girls get well away from the hospitals and the police. They go home more dead than alive. The maman says: oh, that happened to me stacks of times. It's no big deal. And sometimes she'll give you time to get over it, but more often she couldn't care less and she sends you back to work even if you have a black eye. She says: either you go straight to work or I'll close the other eye for you.

Sometimes the clients refuse to go with a girl who's in such a bad way she can't stand up. Some of them feel sorry for you. They give you money and say: go home and get better. Then the maman says: okay, you see you can earn money anyway. What are you complaining about. You're so dumb.

The fact is that if a girl stays home to get better for a week, or two or three, she'll have plenty of time to think and then maybe she won't want to go back on the street at all. And even if she does go back she will never trust anybody again.

Now, if a girl is frightened, the clients aren't happy.

Because she's tense, she's afraid, she keeps looking around and saying hurry up, hurry up.

She's not as profitable as before.

And that's exactly what the maman is worried about.

9.

Sometimes the men say things, while they're raping you.

Filthy nigger bitch, for example.

What the fuck did you come to this country for, you dirty whore.

Go back where you came from, you and your bloody knickers.

Go back to the jungle with the monkeys.

That's what they say.

And they also say: I'll show you.

They say: I'm going to fix you.

And when they've finished, before they go, they say: that'll teach you.

What you have to learn is that there are guys cruising the streets who think they are avengers. They hate you because you're a woman. And black. And a whore. And weak.

What you learn is that the most violent of them, the biggest and the strongest, always take it on the thinnest, most fragile of the girls. The ones who are so slight and slender they look like leaves of corn.

If a kid tries to rape you, a sixteen, seventeen, eighteen year old, well, you punch him in the face hard enough to knock him senseless and you run for it. The most dangerous are those twenty-five and older. Thirty. Forty. Eighty or ninety kilos. The ones who at first sight you'd never think were violent. Who have nothing in the way they dress to alarm you, nothing in their approach to put you on your guard.

They're the ones who then say: I've paid, now you do what I tell you. Who have AIDS or other diseases but don't want to use a condom and maybe even make you pregnant. Who say shitty nigger bitch, who pull out a knife or a gun. And burn you with cigarettes, bash you, use their belts on you, rip your hair out. Who go off with your bag and your money and leave you naked miles from home, in the dark and the snow.

And these are only some of the things I could tell you.

As for gang rapes. They happen. Often.

Three or four at a time.

They arrive, they force you into their car.

You're lucky if you get out alive.

I can tell you this: the first rape is the hardest to get over.

But you console yourself by saying: I thought I was going to die, but I'm still alive.

The second time you're raped you say: it happens.

The third time you say: it's normal.

After the fourth you stop counting.

In fact Felicia says: it's an occupational hazard.

And when the girls go home bashed and raped, when they say I don't want to do it any more, then Felicia sits down with them and she tells her story. As if it were a fairytale, if you know what I mean. One of the ones you tell children to put them to sleep.

Look at my teeth, is how Felicia starts her story. You see, there are worse things than what happened to you. Much, much worse.

This Felicia has been in Italy for many years, she's forty now, one of the first generation to come from Africa.

In other words: she arrived when the system of the mamans and the debts did not yet exist, when the girls still came on their own, on do-it-yourself journeys across the desert. Like Carol. Yes. Exactly.

Felicia tells how one evening two carabinieri went with her and a friend of hers but they weren't satisfied, they yelled things at them, and even though she didn't understand Italian too well, she knew they were insulting her and saying you don't understand a thing.

They went away, but a short while later they were back, only this time there were six or more of them.

She had ended up alone on the footpath, her friend had gone off with a client.

She says: they forced me into the car and took me away, they bashed me and beat me until there wasn't a single unbroken tooth left in my mouth.

Then they left her, fainted away on the ground.

It started to snow and when she reopened her eyes she was covered by it, like lying under a thick white bedspread. She was all stiff, she couldn't even walk. She dragged herself to the footpath. A police car arrived. What happened to you?

She pressed charges, but she was dazed and couldn't remember the details properly.

Nothing came of the charges.

But I survived, she says. You can survive even horrific stories like mine, and then make money just the same and send it to Africa and build yourself a beautiful house.

In fact she now has a three-storey house in Nigeria. After that bashing she worked for another year, then she got better organised, and now she has five or six girls working for her. She's not one of the mamans who beats up. She never uses violence. She only has to open her mouth and say look at my teeth. The girls go back to work without any protests.

But Prudence's co-workers, up there in Verona, at least tried to protest. They saw Prudence so messed up, all covered in cigarette burns, crying and crying about her torn uterus.

They started to talk.

Rachida said: it happened to me, too. She showed them the scars. They grabbed me and raped me and tortured me with cigarettes, she said.

May too. And Osome. They all had their awful stories to tell.

Why don't you decide to get out, I say then.

But it's not that easy, they say.

Not far from Verona, a girl who didn't want to work on the street any longer was forced to drink hydrochloric acid as punishment. Tessie. She ended up in the emergency room. They only just managed to save her life and now she is handicapped and disfigured and almost mute. A simple little African village girl. Ignorant. Illiterate. What kind of future she can hope to find in Italy, for godsake, I really do not know.

Anyway the girls in Verona went on strike for a week and didn't go to work in protest. It was a strike against the clients. A way of saying: stop it. It's not fair. It's inhuman. Do something.

But nobody did anything and no-one talked about the strike at all.

So after seven days they went back to work; and Prudence after ten.

As far as I know, they're still there.

10.

Getting used to that kind of life is impossible.

And yet you get used to it.

You start having a little money, you buy yourself a pair of shoes or a phone card for the mobile. A dress. A gelato. And when the maman sees that you're starting to get a taste for money she knows the worst is over, at least for her. She looks at the first pair of shoes, the first dress. She says: Good girl.

And meanwhile she's thinking: it's done.

The families are pleased, too.

And they spend the first money that arrives from Italy straightaway, so they can show people they've turned the corner. They buy a car. A fridge. A television. They buy clothes and shoes and go around so dolled up you wouldn't even recognise them.

The money from Europe disappears in a flash, as if they'd burnt it.

Nobody puts any money aside.

The girls send the money and they might say to their brother or their father: put it in a bank account, for when I come back. But when one of them goes home and says: let me see the bank statement, the relatives make up a thousand stories, endless tales that go nowhere.

In other words, the money has vanished.

Maybe they said to the girl on the phone: send some money, we're going to build a house. She sends money for the bricks, for the roof, the windows, then she comes back and finds nothing. Only the land. And sometimes not even that.

There are brothers who say: send us some money so we can start a business. Everybody wants to start a business, in Nigeria. They all want to buy a car so they can be taxidrivers, those big cars with six or eight seats, or else scooters they can rent out.

Osas' s brother, for example, bought two motorbikes. And he keeps asking her for money to repair them. But why? says Osas, why can't you repair them with the money you're earning? Of course he can't. He uses the bikes to go to parties, go round town, show off to his friends. Look what my sister in Europe gave me.

Then come the fights.

The girls say, that's it, I'm not sending any more money.

And so they start to phone saying your father is ill, your brother has a hernia, you sister has cancer. Your mother's in hospital and needs an operation. Your son is dying. Send money.

Each time you panic and you no longer know what's true and what's false. For example, Osas suspects the story abour her mother being ill is not true, but what can she do from Italy? She sends the money for medicines, money for the doctor. Then her aunt calls and says to her: your mother is dying, the medicines we bought her were past their expiry date, send some more money so we can take her to hospital…

It's all like that.

But meanwhile the girls themselves have got used to 'easy' money. They've got used to having nice clothes, a mobile phone, they'd never be able to adapt to living in a village again, in a village house. When they go back they always do it in high style, they arrive with masses of presents for everybody, they bring kilos and kilos of pasta, they even bring stock cubes… Kirù went home with a hundred kilos of stock cubes to cook with, because the ones they sell in Africa, she says, are not good enough… and then suitcases full of shoes, of clothes, for the sisters and the nieces and the nephews. Says Kirù: when I go back, I want everyone to know that I've come from Italy. And that I'm rich.

Omoyè actually sent two cars and two big airconditioners, I can't even imagine what the freight charges cost her. And who's ever

heard of air conditioning down there? In Benin City the power goes off every day, several times a day. Air conditioning – what a laugh.

But that's how it is when you go back: all the neighbours turn up to see how you're doing, to ask for money, to ask for this thing, then that thing, they might even ask you to take their daughter back to Europe with you, to make her fortune. And so, even if you've managed to put some money aside, you spend it all in a flash, or your family spends it, or your brothers and sisters.

> And in the end the girls return to Europe and start working again. What else can they do?

In Benin no-one ever asks you: but how did you make all this money.

The important thing is that you keep the family, buy the car, give them the money for a house. That's all fine. Envious neighbours might say: ah, your daughter goes with dogs to earn that sort of money. And the family gets angry, the family always defends you. But if that same girl who was everybody's little shining star comes home forcibly repatriated, then the family says: what have you done. You've brought shame on us. What are we going to do with you.

And they immediately start looking for another journey to send her back to Europe.

Now I'm going to tell you about my friend Lisa, who's been repatriated twice but each time the maman made her return to Italy because she still had a lot of her debt to pay off and also because she was a beautiful girl, she wears a size 40 bra, in other words, she earned a lot and made a lot of money for the maman.

The first time they repatriated her the family said: it's best you go back to Italy, things aren't too good here. They contacted the maman and she said, okay, she can come back. Lisa paid for the trip and off she went. The same thing the second time. The third time the police picked her up her debt was almost paid off, she phoned the maman from the police station to ask her to send the lawyer but the bitch turned the phone off.

So they took her back to Benin City exactly the way they'd picked her up on the street. In her knickers. And in her knickers she was put in jail.

I can't tell you the details, I only know that Italy had protested to Nigeria about the girls, they'd said do something, and what Nigeria did was to pass a law that says: when a girl is repatriated as a prostitute her parents must pay a fine of 50 thousand naira otherwise she goes to prison. And so, you see, some of these parents are so

ashamed they don't even go to pay their daughter's fine. With money that she has earned, mind you. And she ends up in one of those ghastly prisons they have there, where you get beaten up by your cellmates, who rape you with bottles and laugh and say: so which is bigger then? this one or the one you went off to Italy for?

And that is only one of the things I'll tell you.

Lisa spent four weeks in that hell, and just as well she'd hidden some money and a guard changed it for her and paid the fine. When she got out she rang home: are you back in Italy? they asked. No, I'm in Lagos. And they hung up.

So she worked for a while in the hotels of Lagos, to earn the money to go back to Italy. She said: I know the way by now. In the evenings she went to the hotels to look for clients, the managers on business trips. She was competing with a stack of university students, she said, they went with foreigners just so they could buy themselves fashionable clothes.

Then she met a Spanish man and left Nigeria with him.

I don't think she went back to the trade, I think they're still together.

Good for her, say I.

Anyway, that's the way it goes.

Nobody ever defends the girls who are repatriated. They're a disgrace, for the country and for the family, to be hidden from everybody. And the money they've sent over? Ah, who ever remembers the money. Cinthya went to Benin City this summer and says that in the centre there's no free land left, there are houses everywhere, beautiful houses, sometimes even designed by architects. And it's all due to the girls who make the journey, but nobody ever thanks those girls.

The whole economy of the city is based on money from Europe, all the businesses, the taxis, the hire scooters, the construction, the schools, everything is based on money sent through Western Union. But when the King of Benin makes his speech every year to Nigerians overseas, he never ever mentions the girls. He says to his countrymen: whatever you go off to do around the world, may you kill a white man and bring the boat back home. That's the literal translation, but it's a way of saying good luck.

To everybody, but not to us.

There's a very famous song in Nigeria that says: you never say where the money came from.

You don't say and you don't ask.

The important thing is to make the money.

In fact, the families never ask any questions as long as it's all going okay; but they are the first to distance themselves when things go wrong. They just want the repatriated girls to leave, fast, and eliminate the embarrassment of their presence. Then when the girls are making money again, they call and try and make peace.

And the requests for money start all over again.

So many girls have told me this story. And they all say: as soon as I've made a lot of money I'm going to go home and then I'll show them. They say: they've got to realise how much they hurt me. The ones who laughed at me, the ones who made fun of me, I want to see their faces when one fine day I'll go back filthy rich.

Instead of thinking about making a life for themselves, a home, a family of their own, all they think about is how they can make money so they can go home and flaunt it.

You see, the ones who go back of their own free will, the ones who've made money, they're the black madonnas.

Nobody can touch them.

They might even find themselves a boy, at thirty or forty they go looking for a boy of twenty, they practically buy him. And they get married.

But it doesn't last long.

She has the money, the husband doesn't work, she has to take care of everything. She supports her family and his family. Then she's used to life in Italy, the clothes, the mobile phone, the eating a lot of food. The money runs out fast. And when the money runs out, the first to give her a kick in the backside is the husband.

I don't know of a single homecoming that's ended well.

I think that when you leave you don't realise it, but the journey you're about to make is a one-way trip. Not just because of the money. It's that you learn another way of life, you see women who have a different role, relationships with men that are different. In Africa, women have to take care of everything, while here men and women each do their bit. African men do nothing, but they play the

boss, they come and go as they please, they want to lay down the law about everything. Here there's more collaboration between men and women, there's more respect.

Even from that scrap of pavement you work on, you see enough to realise that everything operates differently. And so, many of the girls dream that once they've finished paying off the debt they won't go home but will stay here; find a job in a factory, maybe; and their biggest dream is to find an Italian husband.

Sometimes it happens.

11.

This is the story of how Ekeme and Luigi got married.

A story with a happy ending, if you like. But there's a lot to be said about how you reach the happy ending. It's a typical story, in its way. Listen.

He had a business somewhere in the north of Italy, he was separated and already had two children. And there was a Nigerian girl he was having an affair with. She called herself Jessica. She lived in a house near the factory, a house Luigi had given her, together with one of her brothers. And Luigi had not only given her a job and a house, he had also financed a business of hers and of another brother who lived in Nigeria.

This guy was supposed to be selling bits of rubber used for repairing cars, at the market, but in two years he hadn't sold a thing. So Luigi went to see how things were going, and spent a day going around with this brother. They'd meet some guy and the brother-in-law would say to Luigi: give him 15 naira. They'd meet another: give him ten. This went on all day.

In the end Luigi said: what's the hell's going on? I'm your guest, why should I be giving money away to everybody? Hey, said the guy. Because you're my bank account.

He was big-noting himself with Luigi's money, see.

Then Luigi realised that all the money he'd sent to Nigeria had finished up the same way, including the money that was supposed to have been used to buy land and build a house on it. Nothing, there was nothing. He'd spent everything showing off in the beer shops, paying for everybody's drinks.

Rather than keep on throwing money away like that, Luigi decided to help Jessica's family in a different way: he arranged for her sister to come to Italy. He guaranteed everything for her, a house

and a job. But as soon as she arrived in Italy, this Pamela went to live with a male cousin and in the evenings she went to work on the street. At this point Luigi began to get frightened. But if they pick her up, what happens to me? He said: I've gone guarantor for her, after all.

He started arguing with Jessica, and in the course of the argument he discovered that the boy who lived with her wasn't her brother at all, but her boyfriend. He felt he'd been made a fool of. And who could deny it? He said to both of them: I never want to see you again, get your things and get out. But to get them out the carabinieri had to come, they insulted him and threatened him for so long.

At that point Ekeme arrived on the scene. Because to pay back Jessica who had betrayed him, Luigi had gone to the street, in Turin, and found this other girl.

Ekeme.

They went out together for a year and Ekeme continued working as a whore. She never asked him for a cent towards her debt, I have to stress that, even though he offered to give her a hand and said let's go and live together. No, she said, because she could see the mess he was in with the other girl. Jessica used to go and threaten her from time to time, even on the street; you stole my white man, she'd say; and she'd ring her up too and insult her. She really did. To protect her Luigi started accompanying her to work, and often he'd actually stay there to keep an eye on her. To make sure nothing happened to her.

One time a group of maniacs arrived there on the kerb, and started whipping Ekeme with a chain. She protected her head with her hands and in the end her arm was all swollen, as big as that. And he picked her up and took her to hospital.

Another time she was only a step away from being murdered. She was on the kerb as usual and a car pulled up, with three men inside. She took them to her usual quiet place. All went okay with the first two but the third wasn't satisfied, he wanted his money back, he got all angry. So the three of them decided to throw her out of the car, and right there just below the road was a lake, a dam.

I don't know what got into Luigi, what it was about the whole thing that didn't seem right to him. Maybe he realised Ekeme had been away too long, maybe he didn't like the fact that there were three of them. He got into his Porsche and followed them. He overtook them. He cut them off and stopped their car. Then they threw Ekeme out and fled, but she had a really narrow escape, she was half in and half out of the car window.

After that, she started thinking about stopping.

She says: I felt like I was already dead.

If Luigi had gone off for a coffee that night, I wouldn't be here.

This thing of the Italian boyfriends who accompany you to go and fuck other men for money is very widespread. They say it's so they can watch out for you, for your own safety, so that you don't tire yourself out with buses, that sort of stuff. They say: if she hasn't decided to stop yet, I can at least keep an eye on her and make sure nothing happens to her. I really do not understand them.

But I'm not a man and I'm not Italian.

What can you do.

At any rate, Luigi had always said to Ekeme, never go with more than two clients, it's dangerous.

After that night, every time she went off to work on the street he'd be furious. That's it, he said. I'm not going to take you there. Go ahead and get yourself killed.

And after a couple more times she stopped.

She'd kept on working even though she'd finished paying off her debt, because she had her family to keep back in Africa. The usual story: father doesn't work, mother copes as best she can, lots of brothers and sisters. So she'd go on the street to get a bit of money together. I was really tough with her: well then, it means you like it.

And she: but I pay the rent on the house in Africa, I pay to send my brothers and sisters to school, twice a month I send them a suitcase full of clothes, and they have their photos taken with the clothes on and they send them to me. If I stop working on the street, what will they do?

Yet they knew that's what she did, because it was one of her own family who had brought her to Italy. Not that she'd been particularly well-treated, either.

Once when Ekeme was ill, she had appendictis, she needed the operation, the maman wouldn't even let her go to hospital. She said: first you finish paying me the debt. And only when Ekeme had finished paying everything was she able to go and have the operation, but by then she was really ill, they had to make this huge cut, like this. She really had risked death. And the only thing the maman said to her was: if you want to waste time in hospital instead of making money, you are really dumb.

After the operation Ekeme started working again, but this time on her own behalf. Instead of giving a thousand euros every ten days to the maman, she sent them home. The family was really pleased, everybody in the village could see how their lives had changed. Her brothers and sisters even started going to private schools and she paid for everything. The textbooks, the uniforms, the notebooks. And she even had to send money for the youngest boy's birthday party, a party at school and a party at home with all the neighbours, the music, the drinks. They sent her the video. See? We're spending your money well.

In the beginning, she was proud of enabling them to live like that. But the moment she started feeling better herself, they rebelled. It was when Luigi asked her to marry him, and she said yes. They tried in every possible way to make her change her mind, you're too young, you haven't built a house yet, if you get married you'll never do anything again. They didn't want to lose their money from Italy, that was all. Ekeme was so upset by all this, she said nothing more to them, she got married and amen.

But they kept asking for money money money.

She replied: I don't have any papers and I don't have any money. I can't.

But still they kept on at her. They sent her a video: there's your daddy in hospital, he's dying, send us money. Then she couldn't resist any longer and she asked Luigi for the money, but he's not as well off as he was before, either, because he retired. So they ended up fighting because of her family.

Ekeme, I say to her, you've got to learn to say no.

But she always feels guilty because she can no longer send them all the money she used to when she was on the street.

Ekeme, I say, you nearly got killed on that bloody street.

But it's hard for her all the same.

She's happy with Luigi, they got married straight after he ended up in hospital for using too much Viagra. I'm not kidding. He was using the Viagra because he's getting older but she's only 25, and it was important for him to impress her. His blood pressure shot way up. Who knows, maybe he felt inadequate compared to the men she'd met on the street. I don't know. Anyway, he was literally killing himself.

He had an operation and the first thing he did when he got out was to marry her. He said: at least that way if I die she's got her papers.

After which Ekeme worked for a while, off the books, for a factory. They'd bring the work to her at home, because without papers she couldn't work on site. She had to finish off some kind of fabric, all day long by herself, with no-one to talk to. Always making the same movements, all day long. She was going crazy. Then when she got her papers she went to work in the factory. At least now she's with other people, she can exchange a few words with them.

On Sundays she goes to church and that's her whole life now, in just two words. Work and church.

But she says that finally she's contented.

12.

So Ekeme and Luigi got married.

And so did Marco and Agatà.

And Giovanni and Joy, who now have a baby, too. He was born in Rome last year and the first thing Giovanni did was send everybody the baby photos. There's a happy Giovanni in the birthing room, with a showercap and a face mask on, holding a newborn baby the colour of milk coffee in his arms. Joy is lying on the bed watching them with this huge smile. There's the doctors, there's the nurses. There's the baby bath. The first breast feed. There's even the words Obstetrics-Gynaecology written on the glass doors of the ward.

There's a wonderful party feeling in the photos.

Forgive us if we're getting on with living our lives and don't see you all anymore, says Joy.

But I want you to know that things are good.

I want you to know that I'm happy.

Osas is also getting the papers together so she can get married.

But à propos of that I must tell you a story.

Osas is probably my best friend. We've told each other everything about our lives, she's invited me to her home, she's introduced me to Giacomo, the man she lives with and who she

wants to marry. But only one week ago I discovered that Osas is not her real name. No no no. I'd gone with her to Rome to the embassy to sort out the papers, and she filled out the form right there in front of me. On the form she wrote a different name: Eudwa. Great riches, in Edo.

I was stunned.

And Giacomo couldn't believe it, either.

How could you, he said.

We're about to get married and I don't even know your real name?

But I know it wasn't done out of malice. It's just that that's the way things work. To come to Italy they give you false papers for the journey, and if they take them off you after you arrive, you find a way to get hold of others. There's stacks of that stuff around, you just have to pay for it. Passports, residency permits, papers that sometimes aren't exactly false, but a few things have been changed here and there. There might be a name and a surname you share with two or three other girls somewhere in Italy, and only one has the real document, and she may be the one who sold it. The others have a copy. It usually works fairly well, at least to a superficial glance. And having them means you're less anxious when you're working.

Sure, if the police take a long hard look at them, they realise they're no good. So sometimes when they pick you up it's better to invent a false name. This happens once, twice, sometimes three times, so you've muddied the waters a bit and even if the police consult their computer terminal they see there's nothing about you on record. And so you manage to get by.

Now, however, they're starting to take finger prints. And then you can invent all the names you like but they know immediately who you are, whether you've been picked up before, if you've got an expulsion order or whatever. Everything's becoming more complicated.

But for years and years that's how we got by, and the system worked well.

For example, I was Izogìe, I've already told you.

I never told anyone my name was Isoke, or Rose. Isoke is my African name, Rose is the name I was baptised with. Those are my names and I hung on tight to them. And it's like that for all the girls. I think it's a way of not dirtying your real name. You think: when I get out of all this at least my name will be clean.

But it's not an easy thing to handle.

You end up living a double life, you become two different people, and you no longer know which is which. Who something is happening to, and who is doing what. I think it's is also a way of controlling you, by stripping you of your name and your identity. A way of taking everything from you. Of reducing you to a piece of meat for the street.

You no longer have a history, a will, not even your own name.

If you think about it, it's appalling.

But the girls adapt to it, as I was saying, in the illusion that at least that way they can save something. Their reputation, maybe. They might think: I'm doing this thing but it's not me who's doing it. And in the end reality becomes so jumbled up that when you ask them: what's your name, where were you born, what day, they just stand there confused and say: wait a minute, I'll have a look at my passport.

What do you mean, I say.

You don't know your own name?

It's true that in Nigeria there's no registry of births and deaths. But still.

So it happens that you never really know the names of the girls you have to do with. Your roommates, your friends, girls you might have known for years: you never know anything for sure about their identities. The names come and go, and it's the same with their stories, their biographies, their situations. And this is the bad part. The good part, from a certain point of view, is that you can invent a brand new history for yourself every day, tell only what you want or what suits you about yourself; and it's hardly ever the truth.

Truth and fantasy become so mixed up you no longer know yourself which history is the truest, the one that really belongs to you.

You're just a girl from Benin City.

And that, when you get down to it, is the only truth.

I understand them, anyway. I understand myself.

It's not easy to look at yourself every night in the mirror and say this is me and this story is really happening to me.

To stand there, night after night, getting ready for the parade.

Then make the sign of the cross, close the door and leave the house.

You ask what's the parade.

I say: it's dressing up in disguise.

The way you dress to go to work.

I say: it's a disguise because those are not your clothes, that's not your real personality. It's playing a part for the job.

Everybody invents something, hoping to catch a client's eye. You have to get their attention in a fraction of a second, as they're cruising by in their cars. You have to get them to choose you out of the hundreds, if you want to work.

Nobody explains to you how to do it. You have to use your imagination.

You might be a new arrival and you're ashamed to show your breasts, then you see that the girl next to you with the plunging neckline is getting picked up by one car after another. And so you learn. You invent things. Maybe if your breasts aren't big enough, you stuff your bra with cottonwool and the following night you're flashing all you've got, too.

Then if the clients want a feel, you slap them over the hands. If you want a feel you have to pay extra, you say. And hardly any of them do.

There was this friend of mine, Lisa, who was already a size 40, but she still stuffed her bra till she was blown up out of all proportion. I'd laugh like crazy watching her get ready. You should have seen her. She walked like a diva, like a model, she played it like a real fashion show. She got an incredible amount of work.

In other words, you have to show off what you've got.

If you've got a nice behind you show that off.

On the street I've seen behinds so big that under normal circumstances nobody would give them a second glance, but if you show it off with a nice pair of knickers and a pair of shoes with very high heels…wow, does it work. They queue up for it.

And then there are the wigs. They keep you warm and they make you look sexier, because with short hair nobody is going to look twice at you.

Each girl has her own style.

But the shoes must always have really high heels.

There's a rule, anyway, and that rule is valid for everybody.

You've got to show your wares. And the more you show the better.

Even in winter.

When winter approaches the maman takes you to buy some skimpy little jackets, the kind that only cover your shoulders. There are mamans who let you get something warmer, but the ones like Carol are inflexible. They say: if you cover up the men can't see a thing. And so, even at 10°C below there are girls on the street practically naked, with a bottle of gin in their bags to warm them up. And when they get back home, it's like they've returned from the North Pole, they are so frozen.

If a girl has dark skin you don't see when it turns red, but you do when it turns purple. You can see that the blood is no longer circulating in your hands, in your toes. You feel like you're dying and you swear: tomorrow I'm not going back. But if you don't go back, obviously they'll beat you and you'll have to go back anyway.

The worst moment is when you can no longer feel your feet and your knees. Maybe you haven't accepted the situation yet, you stay perfectly still, you stand there like a tree trunk. But at a certain point, you can no longer feel your legs or your hands or anything. And when you go home to the warm house, it's hell twice over. You don't know which is worse, the cold on the street or the heat at home.

I'll tell you a story about when I was little in Africa. When I did something wrong, my mother would mash up hot chilis and smear them on my bottom or in my eyes or in my armpits as punishment. It burnt like hell. Well, that's what it's like when you go home to a warm house. Everything burns, just like that.

Some girls have a hot shower to get rid of that icy cold feeling, but the pain nearly drives you out of your mind. If you get under the covers without having a shower, though, it takes hours and hours to get warm. You lie there shivering and shaking, even if you're surrounded by hot water bottles. Then the bottles get cold and you say: time to go back to work.

It’s always like that.

Sometimes on the street the girls light a fire to warm themselves up. But it depends on the maman, whether they allow it or not. There are the ones like Carol who won’t even allow you near the fire. And so to the girls drink to get warm. Gin or whisky, depending on your tastes.

Obviously you fall ill.

And when you fall ill obviously nothing changes.

They send you to work just like all the other nights.

The maman says: what do want me to do, nurse you? We’re all sick here. Don’t waste time. So even with a high temperature you work. Even with the flu. Even at Christmas, Easter, New Year. The girls from Benin City work 365 days out of 365. And even when they stop, they carry the street inside them forever. Rheumatism everywhere. Aches and pains.

And every time winter comes round, they feel like they’re on the cross.

13.

Seven days a week.

For fifty-two weeks.

For twelve months.

For three or four years.

The girls from Benin City don’t know what holidays are, or Christmas or Easter, or fever or illness. They’re always there in search of clients, every night of every day the Lord sends upon this earth. In the heat and the ice. In the rain and the snow. Always there, you see them, with their ridiculous high heels and their flesh in full view.

Five clients is the night they say: there’s no work.

Eight is okay.

But sometimes there are days when there isn’t a single client in sight; and they wait and they wait and in the end they go home, hoping tomorrow will go better.

Saturdays and Sundays, though, they work till 5 or 6 in the morning, especially in summer; and that way they can do up to 12 clients. Some even more.

Physically it's very hard.

You get a thousand inflammations, you feel all swollen, when you get home the swelling is so bad you feel like your genitals are practically hanging out. So you put on compress after compress. Hot water. Cold water. But it doesn't help much with the pain.

My roommate Susan sometimes had so many clients she couldn't even walk any more. Then she'd douche with a disinfectant called Ditoi that all the girls use. But it's really strong and burns like the devil. I remember my mother used to use it after she'd given birth. It's a disinfectant, astringent, antiseptic. I read the label. Girls, I said, this stuff is no good. Go to the chemist and buy something else. But no. So once I went and I bought a vaginal cleanser, but they tried it and said no, it's no good, it doesn't sting enough. You can feel it's no good.

The fact is that the maman had said: I've always used Ditoi, my whole life, it's great. And so all the girls go to the African shops and Ditoi and only Ditoi is what they use.

But an astringent is no good for someone who works on the street, I say. Even a child could figure out that a lubricant or an emolient would be better for girls who fuck for a living. Instead they use this Ditoi that tightens everything down there so hard even a finger won't go in. The girls get so tight I remember them coming home crying sometimes, saying: we couldn't manage more than two or three clients.

And it was even worse when they used Kabolik, which really is diabolical - a hundred, a thousand times stronger than Ditoi. In Africa they use it to treat suppurating wounds.

Imagine the effect it can have, on flesh as delicate as that.

The girls cry, but they use it all the same, because they think that at least this stuff will save them from diseases. And the more it burns the harder they grit their teeth. They think: this stuff comes from home, so it can't hurt me.

Pious illusion.

The trouble is the girls know nothing. Nothing.

It's not as if in Africa they explain very clearly what happens when you grow up. What menstruation is, how you get pregnant.

When I got my first period, for example, my mother said only: keep away from boys. And all of a sudden I, who had always played football with the boys, couldn't play with my friends anymore. I was always alone. And I was so uncomfortable with the other sex I even asked to go to an all-girls school.

Until one day I saw a girl older than me kissing and cuddling with a boy. But won't you end up pregnant? I asked. She laughed. And she and a couple of girlfriends explained a bit about how things stand.

So what can you expect them to know, the girls who work on the street? Who sometimes are still virgins when they arrive, and the maman has to tell them everything?

Take when they have their periods. The maman gives them some cottonwool and says only: push it in as far as you can. That way the blood stops and they can still work.

But the maman doesn't say: you have to change it from time to time.

They keep it inside for hours, sometimes they actually just forget about it, until the cottonwool is so soaked the blood trickles out and maybe dirties the client. Then the client is furious. How dare you! Filthy nigger bitch! So at home you try and talk about it: how do you know when the cottonwool is full. What do you do. I do this. And then sometimes you help each other take it out, because with so much fucking the cottonwool goes further and further in till in the end you can't even reach it with a finger. Once Ekeme had to spread her legs like she was about to give birth so we could get the tampon out. She really couldn't do it by herself.

And then there was this colleague of mine, Gloria her name was. She said: I've got a pain here, a pain there, she couldn't sleep any longer because of all the pain she was in. She didn't want to go to a doctor, because she didn't have any papers. But in the end she got to the point where she felt like she was about to kick the bucket, so she got over her fear of hospitals. She went to the emergency room and they pulled out a piece of cottonwool that was completely rotten.

She came home with this damn piece of cottonwool in a plastic vial.

The girls all looked at it with their mouths hanging open.

That was what did it?

Life on the street is also this stuff here, the bits of cottonwool and the infections and the ignorance.

Life on the street is also about condoms.

The maman takes you to the African shops, and says: buy them and use them. They make them in China, a box of a hundred costs fifteen euros. But they have a horrible smell and they tear as easy as anything. Sometimes for more protection the girls try and put two on, but the client is none too happy. So when the condom tears they go home and use rivers of Ditoi in the hope that at least they won't get pregnant.

They're so silly.

A lot of our babies have been born in Italy now, twenty or so just in the last two or three years. And they're are just the ones I know personally.

Obviously a lot more girls get pregnant, but most of them have abortions. Some have had several.

How do they do it.

Well, some go to hospital, if they can find a client who will help them and go with them. The others do it at home with the aid of medicines the maman finds somewhere. And it's a horrendous way to do it, as you'll see.

They gave this medicine to a roommate of mine, Amina, one morning. She had hours and hours of pain, then in the evening the miscarriage started with a haemorrhage that wouldn't stop. To stop her bleeding to death, I and another girl got her dressed and took her out, haemorrhage and all, took her to a bus stop a long way from our place, and then we called the ambulance. We hid there and watched to make sure it arrived and picked her up and took her to hospital. Then we left.

All three of us were scared to death, because none of us had any papers.

They took Amina to the emergency room. What did you take, what did you take? Nothing, she said, I didn't take anything. But she obviously had, and the pregnancy was also fairly advanced, so they ended up having to do a curette.

When she finally got back home we asked her: but why did you take that stuff?

She said: what could I do, the maman didn't want a bastard running around the house.

But sometimes the girls refuse to do it.

They say: this is my child, I want it and I'm going to keep it.

And if there's really no way to make them change their minds, the maman gives in. She says: okay, you go to work, I'll look after the baby.

But she makes them work right through the prenancy. When it comes down to it, she says, your hands aren't pregnant. And it sure doesn't put the clients off.

In fact there are men who find pregnant women erotic, so much so they queue up for them, night after night.

The girls stay on the street until a week before they are due to give birth, they work with a belly as big as that. With their ankles swollen and their legs aching, backwards and forwards on those high heels.

And when they finally can't stand it any longer, they give birth.

Usually the baby is born at home, but if something goes wrong during labour, if the baby isn't coming, if the mother really is on the point of kicking the bucket, then the maman gets the girl and takes her a long way from the house, labour pains and all. Then she calls the ambulance and leaves.

Even I, Isoke, have helped babies into the world.

The first was in the first house I lived in, and it was a boy. He was the first child of my roommate, Amenawa. The birth was very easy. Amenawa had the first contractions as we were leaving for work, she was calm when we went, and when we got back home it was almost time to push. We got the sheets and the hot water ready and we helped her push just the way you ought to, until the head appeared, and in a flash Osarò came into the world. But my hands were shaking as I tied the umbilical cord, so his mother said I'll do it, and she tied and cut it herself.

The baby was healthy and beautiful.

The mother had no haemorrhaging or complications or anything.

She stayed home for four weeks, then she too had to go back on the street. She worked afternoons, and those of us who worked nights took turns looking after the baby.

Then the maman started saying: this is no good.

Amenawa is not working enough, she's not trying hard enough, all she thinks about is racing home to this baby.

And so she decided that Osarò had to go to Africa. She organised everything. She got hold of papers belonging to another baby born in Italy, legally, and she sent him to Amenawa's parents.

He wasn't even two years old.

Sent.

Yes, sent.

This is how it's done. You find a Nigerian woman who has children with regular papers, and when she goes to Nigeria she takes your child with her pretending it's hers. This is a business, too. Because obviously the mother has to pay for the plane ticket, and they make her pay an adult fare for the child too. Not a child's fare. Sometimes they make her pay double, sometimes triple. And this goes to increase the debt. Needless to say.

The child ends up with its grandparents, or with some aunt.

And this becomes the mother's worst nightmare, because each week she has to find money not just for the debt and the rent and the joint, but also for the child and the entire family that's bringing him up. If she doesn't send enough she's frightened her child won't be looked after properly, that something will happen to him. Because there's no warm welcome from the families for these half-white children. They are the proof that the mother has led a wicked life in Europe.

So, as long as the mother sends the money, it's okay.

But if the money doesn't arrive they give him less to eat, they treat him badly, they take photos of him and then send the photos to Italy: look what a terrible state your child is in, send money straightaway.

Every time something of the kind happened, Amenawa would cry for hours. Osarò will be six now. She has never seen him since, except in the photos and the videos they send on his birthday.

From a certain point of view, when the girls have a baby it's good for the maman. That child becomes their weak point. They stop thinking about escaping or rebelling or anything else, they think of nothing but working and sending money home.

There are also girls who refuse to separate from their children.

Or who maybe have no-one in Africa who could look after them.

Then the maman says: I'll help you keep the child, but you'll have to pay me the cost of the babysitter. And she keeps it at her place, that way the girl can work.

The child becomes practically a hostage.

The mother has to pay for the babysitter each week, for the milk, the nappies, the clothes, the bother. And she can see her child only when she brings the money.

If she doesn't bring enough, no baby.

The most horrible thing, though, is the life these kids lead.

They don't go to kindergarten.

They don't go to school.

They don't even go out into the street, for fear someone will notice them and call the social workers.

So these little ones never play with other children, except the ones who are prisoners like them.

Children who never leave the house, who don't know what rain or sunshine are.

I met a boy of nine who asked his mother to send him to school. But how was she do it? After asking and asking and searching around, she finally got hold of the papers of a boy who'd gone to Africa, and she sent her boy to school in his place.

However the teachers realised he wasn't the same child as the one on the papers. They called him by that name and he refused to answer. He said: but it's not my name. Then the school phoned the parents, and obviously the false parents went to the interview. And the boy: but that's not my mother, that's not my father.

I don't know how the story finished.

Badly, I imagine.

In Ogwebi's case the social workers arrived and took her baby away. They told her: you must look for a regular job, as long as you work on the street you can't have your child. Now she's looking for the regular job, but if you don't have regular papers there's just no chance.

It was better that way, anyway.

This Ogwebi lived for years alone with her child, terrified by the idea that they'd take him away from her. She wouldn't let him even go near the window for fear someone would see him. And out of the same fear that the neighbours would notice him, she kept moving house. The minute anybody showed signs of wanting to make friends, she would move.

Maybe the neighbours didn't want to be a nuisance, maybe they just wanted to give the little boy a toy.

But she would send them away: there's no child here.

But there is. I saw him yesterday.

Then she'd take her son and disappear.

Abeo, was his name. Happy to have been born. And her name, Ogwebi, I love my family. Every day she'd tell him: keep quiet, don't run, don't yell. Abeo was four years old and looked like an old man. A poor old dog inside his kennel. Nobody was ever to hear him or see him. He spent all his time drawing or watching television. She would take him out in the evening, sometimes at night. But she always kept him locked in the car, and through the window she'd show him the shops and the streets.

He spent the days drawing the things he'd seen through that car window.

And he never spoke.

He never said a word.

He spoke only with his eyes, and they were sad eyes that said: take me away from here, I just can't stand it anymore.

In the evenings Ogwebi would put him to bed and go out to work, leaving him there alone.

She wanted to get out, you know. She had tried asking for help from a rehab community, but they said: we don't take children. It's not in the regulations. By then she was living in terror at the idea that someone would harm her little one. She couldn't stand it anymore, either.

So just as well someone called the social workers, say I. Better for him, but also better for her; she'd reached the end of her tether. She was lonely and tired and blamed him for everything. She was full of aggression and anger, she says. But above all of solitude and desperation, I think.

And then.

Then there are the babies born during the long journey, when the girls are raped in the desert. You don't know what the men who live in those parts are capable of doing to women. They have no mercy. So sometimes the girls arrive here pregnant or with a newborn baby; I know at least five. And all five of them, all of them, were forced to send their child home, so that they could work without distractions.

And finally, there are the children born by calculation, or for 'business' reasons.

Like Egimè's daughter.

I've told you the girls use condoms. But sometimes a client arrives who asks you to do it without one and offers you double. Egimè says a guy offered her 500 euros, he was a regular, he always behaved well. So why not? The thing happened two or three times and in the end she got pregnant. She wanted to have an abortion. But he said: have the child and I'll pay for its keep. I'll give you money.

She took the money, almost twenty-five thousand euros, and she went to Africa to give birth.

A little girl was born, Jumoke. The best loved. But loved by whom?

Now Egimè wants to return to Italy because her family won't accept the child, the situation is very heavy, when the money runs out she doesn't know how she'll get by.

At home they keep asking her: but her father, when's he coming?

Because she told them that there was a father, and that it had been her choice to come back and give birth in her parents' home. In the beginning the family said, you did the right thing, because she'd brought the money. But now that the money is about to run out they never let up. But when is this guy coming.

She doesn't want to tell them the truth; she'd be mad if she did.

And so she's trying by all possible means to return to Italy.

This part of the story is not very nice but there's nothing I can do about it.

Egimè had a client in Italy who was in love with her, so she called him and said: the child is yours. This Alessandro went crazy with happiness at the news, he has already sent her three thousand

euros three times to pay for the visa and the plane ticket. But she never comes, nor does the daughter, and meanwhile he's going nuts.

We said to him: at least do the test to see if the baby is really yours.

But Egimè refused, she says she doesn't trust these tests.

He no longer knows what to believe or what to do. But he keeps sending her money, and calling her old friends to get news of her, they in their turn take advantage of him, they ask him for money, tell him stories.

By now his friends are desperate, they call us, do something.

But what can anyone do.

The only thing Alessandro can think of now is this daughter.

Scarica l'allegato originale

15.

But the girls, you say, don't they ever laugh?

Sure they do.

They laugh at the clients.

The funny-looking ones.

The odd ones.

The ones who have no idea what to do with a woman.

A lot of them come to the street, especially the young ones. They don't know a thing and you have to do it all for them. Maybe they come in a group, you go first, no, you go, until one of them cranks up the courage to be the first. When he comes back all the others look at his face to see what the thing is like. Did you do it? Yes, yes, I did it.

Then the next one comes over and says: same as my friend.

Sometimes they come for a bet, a whole bunch of them, and they bring the friend who's never been with a woman. They're practically dragging him.

The others pay, and then they say: follow her, go on, go with her. The guy is terrified. But where do I go? What do I do?

Sometimes they can't do it and then they say please, please don't say anything.

So when you both get back, you say only ohhh, he was great. And then you go home and laugh about it with the other girls.

But it's another way of getting to know Italian boys, too: look how funny they are, they're such babies…Not to mention the ones who fall in love with you, it happens, and it can easily be a guy there's never been anything with. He just stopped once to chat and you told him your story. That's enough to do it.

Everyone knows young people are the most sensitive to injustice.

I'll tell you the story of Matteo from Viareggio. He met Amonike in the pinewood at Migliarino, he was cycling by and he saw her standing there. I don't know why he stopped, maybe he was tired, maybe he needed to drink, maybe he was curious - though he'd die rather than admit it. The point is that the two of them started chatting. And that's how it all began.

He'd arrive on his bicycle, he'd bring her jam, chocolate, he'd stay there a while to keep her company and in the end she'd send him away because the clients weren't stopping any more. Then he'd hide so he could spy on her, and he says he used to wish he had a machine gun so he could shoot all the clients in the world.

At the time he was only nineteen.

He talked about Amonike with his mum, with his dad, with the parish priest. His mother even went with him to the Carabinieri and the Assistant Public Prosecutor. Nobody did anything. So then he wrote a letter to the newspapers describing what it's to be nineteen years old and fall in love for the first time with a girl who is a slave on the street.

A couple of papers published it on their letters page.

But nobody did anything about it that time, either.

So saving Amonike became almost an obsession for him. He'd spend hours in the pinewood, he'd phone her at all hours of the day and night. You've got to stop, Amo, you've got to get out. He'd bring her jam and he'd lecture her. She had the debt to pay and a family to support.

In the end she couldn't stand it anymore so she changed districts.

Today she says: I liked Matteo, I really liked him, but until I've paid the debt I can't even think of having a relationship. It only causes me pain.

So she said to him: I've found a job serving in a shop.

She said to him: don't you worry about me. I'm fine.

Then one day he saw her on the street again. He was so upset.

Now he has an Italian girlfriend and no longer thinks of his Amo, or so he says.

I only know that things aren't going too well.

He doesn't seem happy to me.

Matteo never was a client.

Matteo was too ashamed.

But even among the clients there are decent people, civilized people.

They're the only moment of freedom for the girls, especially for those who never know a moment's freedom.

There's the client who gives you the money and says: we won't do anything, let's just go and have something to eat.

Or the client with money who arrives and says: how much do you have to earn today? I'll give it to you and we'll go out.

And sometimes it might be a dull night out, you go for a pizza and you're embarrassed, you don't know whether to use a fork, you don't know how to cut it up, you just don't know what to do with that pizza. Pizza is really terrible. Lisa always tells the story of the evening she went for a pizza and didn't know how to tackle the thing, until in the end she went at it with a knife, it looked as if she was trying to skin a goat. The guy said nothing, just watched her. Everybody was watching her. She was mortified. And so was he. See, all he'd thought about at first was being seen around with this beautiful girl, he wanted to look good. Then when the whole restaurant came to a standstill watching her struggle with the pizza, well, that annoyed him. He said let's get out of here, and he took her to a McDonald's.

The girls like going to McDonald's, because at least there you can eat your hamburger with your hands. Nobody stares at you.

You're a person just like all the others.

Then there are the young guys who need a girl to take to a party. They say: come with me, pretend you're my girlfriend, you have to say this, say that, do this, do that. In other words, be an actress for a day. It's all cinema. Okay. You're paid for it, you go to the parties, you go dancing. It's always better than being on the street.

And that way you see how Italian girls live.

You get an idea of how normal people live.

But love doesn't come into it, no, definitely not.

As long as you're on the street, that's where all your encounters with men take place. The girls never go to the cinema, to a restaurant, to the dentist. They don't go out dancing, they don't even go to the supermarket. Only to the African shops where there are only African girls like you. And there, at most, you meet some African boys.

There are a lot of boys in the African clubs, too.

There are the boys who work in the factories and the boys who deal drugs. But the factory workers aren't interested in the girls who work on the street, they're going in a completely different direction. At most, couples come into being where she works as a prostitute and he deals drugs, then he asks her for the money to do a little business, takes all the money she has, after which he dumps her. And immediately finds another girl to take to the cleaners.

These guys are involved in ugly scenes, they deal drugs, control the street, if there's a girl who doesn't want to work they don't mind beating her up for a little extra cash. They're part of scenes run by petty mafiosi with their petty codes of honour. Nasty people it's best to stay well clear of.

In fact the girls always say: for goodness sakes, keep away from those guys.

And they're right, I say.

The relationships are never happy.

Or at least: I don't know of any.

And so that's what it always comes back to, the clients.

Who are your bread, and butter, but sometimes your roses too.

The reason you are here, the centre of your existence, the beginning and end of every relation you have to the world. Your whole life revolves around the clients.

And it doesn't take you long to understand how things work with clients.

Take the *rapidò*, for example, your maman's little darling. The one who earns heaps of money and with so much less effort than you.

Not because she's the most beautiful.

But because she's the quickest to understand and adapt. The most determined. The most cunning. The one who always arrives at work first, is the first to understand how the market works, what the best times are to find the clients who pay the most. And it's not that she has more clients than the others; on the contrary, sometimes she has fewer. But she's learnt all the tricks for extorting money from men.

For example, the *rapidò* is always chatty, she talks a lot. She plays the nice girl, the funny one, the friend. She knows that if the girl is frightened, the client gets frightened too. If she's depressed or she cries or she complains too much, then the client will sympathise with her, but he'll make sure that's the last she'll see of him. But she also knows that when you've got him to like you, well, that's when you can stringing him along. And milk him for every penny he's got.

The *rapidò* always knows immediately what the client wants.

And sooner or later you understand it, too.

The client doesn't always or only want sex.

On the contrary, sometimes sex is the last thing he's interested in.

And once you realise that, you're home and dry.

A lot of clients come to the street just so they can tell someone their problems. They want company. They want to pour their hearts out to somebody. They want to talk and to ask questions. And the ones who ask the most questions and talk more than all the others put together, those are the *papagiri*. There's no way you'll ever get any money out of those guys, though.

The *papagiro* is the guy who never comes to the street for sex.

He cruises up, stops the car, he brings you chocolates, a sandwich, a thermos full of boiling hot coffee to warm you up when it's really cold. He talks a lot, too, he is always talking. He asks questions, he's nosy, where are you from, how much do you have to pay, where's your family, what kind of journey did you make.

I still haven't really understood what kind of man he is.

Whether he's shy, or ashamed, or a voyeur, or impotent.

I only know he gets his kicks from circling round and round the girls, hovering and buzzing like a big fly. Sometimes the girls get sick of it: ah, that guy's always wasting our time and he's never a client. Sometimes they actually avoid him, because he's liable to become suffocating.

The bigmouth, they also call him.

But there is some good in these *papagiri*.

For example, they're capable of hanging around the whole night, like a sort of street social worker. They know everything that happens on the street, and no street is complete without its *papagiro*. Ah, there he is! They park the car, watch to see who's coming and going, maybe give the alarm when the police are arriving. Then they get you into the car and they take you away, they take you for a coffee somewhere, or a pizza. Sometimes they even give you fifty euros as compensation for the wasted evening. And if you need an abortion, the *papagiro* is the one you ask for help, and off he goes, he makes the enquiries, maybe he'll even take you to the doctor.

Usually the new arrivals are the principal recipients of his attentions, as soon as he sees one he swoops like a falcon, he hovers around her, they become great friends. He comes to get her at 10 in the evening to take her to work, then he comes to pick her up around 4 or 5 am. They go and have breakfast at a bar, he pays for the cappuccino and the cornetto, and maybe this is the first time she's ever gone into a bar and drunk a cappuccino. Then he takes her for a drive around the city, maybe even till 10 in the morning. And he talks and talks and keeps on talking.

He explains how Italy works, how Italians think, who you can trust, who you can't.

The *papagiro* is always talking.

But after a couple of months he gets bored and moves on to the next girl.

Then the girls start to fight. That's my *papagiro*, you go find yourself another one. They fight and fight and then they appeal to him: Antonio, which of us is your real girl? Then he gets very embarrassed and defensive, no, no, I only gave her a lift, you're the only one I'm interested in…

Ridiculous scenes, as if they're husband and wife.

Every now and then some girls will let their *papagiro* have a bit of sex.

Just like that, as a gift.

But I don't think sex is what drives that kind of man. In fact the maman's never make trouble when the girls bring a *papagiro* home, whereas they carry on like anything if a boyfriend turns up. A boyfriend is a threat to the established order, who know what ideas he might put into the girl's head. Whereas the papagiro is fine because he takes the girls to work and brings them home, he takes the maman to do the shopping, she only has to call him: Antonio! and he comes running. He acts as a fulltime chauffeur and even pays for the petrol.

Maybe his life is dull. Sometimes he's an old guy. Maybe it's a way for him to feel useful or to do things that seem interesting to him.

He always knows everything about the girls, he knows what they eat, he's there when they cook, then he sits down at the table and eats African with them. No-one thinks of him as a man, he's like the eunuch of the harem.

Sometimes he gets so involved in the scene that the maman gives him a car, she pays for the petrol, he takes her all over the place. Sometimes the maman will even ask him: Antonio, will you marry me? Because although she's got her papers in order, her goal is always citizenship, so she can carry on her business with all the guarantees. Sometimes she asks the *papagiro* directly herself, sometimes she gets the girls to ask him. And when a girl has the right guy on hand she brings him home and introduces him, and in exchange the maman gives her a present.

The *papagiro* who agrees to marry her also gets a present. It used to be around five million lire. Not a lot, you say. But I believe what drives him to do a thing like that is not so much the money as curiosity. A kind of fascination, that's what it is, that the world of the street exerts on this strange category of male.

There's a guy from Catania who actually wrote a book to explain this thing.

The title is obvious.

The *Papagiro*.

He's an older man, very cultured, who has studied the history of Nigeria; he's read books, done his research. He now knows everything about Nigerian culture and cuisine and traditions. Maybe he's become a little bit Nigerian himself.

A few days ago I heard he's about to marry a girl.

Blessie.

She is ill, she has diabetes, she needs treatment.

He's decided to marry her so she'll get her papers. He knows that if she keeps on living the life of the street, she's a dead girl.

And so, you see: sometimes real love stories are born between the girls and the *papagiri.*

And these love stories sometimes even end in marriage.

There are also the stories of the girls who take advantage, though, who marry only for the papers and then continue living the same life as before, with the difference that now they no longer have to worry about being illegal. Maybe they don't even live with their husband, he continues to take her to work and pick her up, exactly as before; and that's that. But sometimes the wife sucks him into the business, wipes out all his savings to pay her debt and then maybe she'll set up on her own. At that point he's in up to his neck.

I'll tell you the story of Abunene and Pietro, a factory worker from Turin. This story even ended up in the papers a while back. He was fifty-two, she was thirty-one. To release her from her debt, this man took out a loan from a finance company, ten thousand euros, which they deducted a bit at a time from his pay packet. With that money she brought other girls to Italy. The police discovered she was making something like a hundred thousand euros a month. And Pietro was taking the girls backwards and forwards to the street, so he ended up in jail, too.

The police discovered this story only because of Mario.

He'd been to the street and there he'd got to know one of Abunene's girls. He was twenty-one, Amiwu was twenty-one, in the end they fell in love and he kept trying to convince her to come away.

One day, three Nigerian men arrived and beat him to a pulp.

So he called us. He asked: what can I do?

We told him: first talk to your parents, then go to the police.

He did.

I can tell you that his father went with him, but if you ask me what happened to Ami, his girlfriend, I'm sorry.

I really am.

I don't know.

17.

Now I'll tell you about a dangerous variant of the *papagiro* category.

The desperate variant.

The girls call them: the ones that roll around.

And frankly, I can understand why Italian women don't like these men very much.

The desperate variant, unlike the normal *papagiri,* go with the girls and have sex as clients. But every time they get involved.

And that's when disaster happens.

They are *papagiri* in their attitude, so much so you can pick them straightaway. They cruise by, cruise by again, they take ages to choose a girl. They're not even sure how to choose the girl. This one is better-looking, no, that one, how much do you want, they leave, they come back. Then they bargain and haggle over the price. And right up till the last moment you don't know if they're going to let you into the car or not.

They may already be going with one, two, three girls, yet they never know which one they'll choose that evening. They might be fascinated by one girl's story, but then they want to understand that other one better, in short, they roll backwards and forwards on the pavement in a kind of paralysis. And even when they come for sex, they don't just pay for it and do it. They talk, they ask questions, they want to hear stories. Their classic question is: why are you doing this job? And the girls, straightaway: because I have to pay the debt. That's what the girls always say, to everybody.

Then he starts enquiring about the details. How much do you have to pay, how often. He always promises to help. Another classic phrase: if you want to get out, I can help you.

But how?

The girl immediately thinks that maybe he can give her the money for the debt.

Eh, says he. How much do you have to pay?

Three thousand euros.

Lately they all say they only need another three thousand euros.

Obviously the client doesn't have it.

First he likes to do the whole rich guy with the beautiful car bit, then he says no, I haven't got the money, but hang on, I'll enquire, we'll see, I'll call that organisation, I'll let you know.

They want to show they're able to do something to help.

Just imagine, a cop from Genoa called us: can you give me three thousand euros, I have to pay off a girl's debt?

This type of papagiro has always has a series of relationships with Italian girls that ended badly. Because they dumped him, I think. And rightly so, sometimes. So they invent these new relationships for themselves with African girls, they probably feel more secure, deep down they think: but she's on the street, I'm the stronger one. In fact, at the beginning they big-note themselves; then they run away as soon as things get serious. Their problem is that they can't cope with responsibility. They really panic. They say: but I never made any commitment to you. And then they vanish and go looking for another girl to save.

Each time the story starts all over again.

And each time the girls end up disillusioned, to the point that they think: better the ones who arrive and pay and go away without all that carrying on.

Abeiuwa, known as Abe, for example, is in a desperate situation. Twenty-two years old. Slender as a blade of grass. Her father and mother are dead, she supports an entire brood of brothers and sisters; she has a terrible maman, and she cannot cope with life on the street. She tried to say she'd had enough and they kidnapped her brothers. See what you think about it now, you might want to change your mind.

She went back on the street but she can't get used to it, every day is as hard as the first. She's no good with clients, so she earns very little. She's depressed, she's really unhappy, she's already tried to kill herself twice. She won't eat. Since she discovered antihistamines she's become a kind of addict, she takes them constantly, that way she's always out of it and doesn't feel the hunger and the desperation and at least she manages to keep going.

One day Abe met Luca.

A nice boy, but one of the ones who roll around. Who go on the street, talk to one girl, talk to another, try to give a little help here and there, but in the end do more harm than good. Luca started looking after Abeiuwa, he bought her woollen stockings, sweaters, stuff to keep her warm. Every so often he'd take her out to eat, or for a wander around. He'd say: at least that way she's not thinking about the situation she's in for a while.

Little by little Luca became a point of reference for Abe's colleagues, too. They'd all call him up, I need this, can you help me do that. Things went on like this for several months, until Luca's conscience got the better of him. He already had another Nigerian girlfriend, Onomè, she calls herself Lowett, though, who in some sense he considered his fiancée. This Lowett lives in another city, she says she's finished paying off the debt and lives with her sister. It's not clear how she makes a living, though. She comes and goes from Luca's place, men phone her and then she takes off and disappears and no-one knows what she's going off to do.

One day Luca decided he couldn't cope any longer with both of them, and even his sister kept saying: at least make your mind up. And so he did. He went to Abe and said to her: I'm going to marry Lowett.

So Abe didn't want to see him ever again, and I wonder how she is, how she keeps going. She is so hurt she no longer wants to see anybody.

And as for Luca, well, he didn't marry Lowett. Obviously. At a certain point he opened his eyes and realised it just wouldn't have worked. She said to him, marry me, let's have a baby.

But now he's decided he's had enough of Nigeria. He wants to go and do volunteer work somewhere in Rwanda. Well, what can you expect.

I think the guys who roll around this way with the girls are the ones who roll around with their life problems, too. Bad marriages. Incapable of having relationships with women. Insecurities. Failures.

They come to the girls and they pay them and tell them all their troubles.

Then the girls get angry.

They say: Come on! Here I am, in the rain, the snow, the sun, the cold, I have to stand here and fuck for a living and along comes this guy looking for sympathy.

They say: he rolls up, promises to help you, says I'll save you.

Then all he does is moan about his own problems, then disappear.

They get angry then and say go away, and don't come back. And the guys disappear, sure, but only to go and find themselves another girl to save.

They should be thinking about saving themselves, say I.

They should do something good for their own lives.

So the girls fall for it once, but then they swear: I'll make the next one sorry.

The next one rolls up, talks, makes promises, but sees that the girl is keeping her distance; and then, well, you know how the heart works, white or black there's not much difference: he ends up falling head over heels in love with her. I'll save you even if you don't want to be saved, he thinks. Especially if you don't want to be. I'll save you in spite of yourself.

She teases him and she uses him for a while. When she's got all she can out of him, she dumps him. And instead of saying okay, that's it, I get it, I'm over it, he plunges straight back in and tries it on with another girl. Always the wrong one. Obviously.

He helps this new girl as if she were the same one who left him.

In a pretty unhealthy way. He keeps talking about the other girl, making comparisons, as if he wants to fit the new one exactly into old one's place. He wants her to behave like her. To do and think and say the same things.

On the street these guys come and go and they're never sure who to choose, but when they do it's someone who, strangely enough, is just like the girl who left them, even physically.

It really is as though they'd caught some kind of disease.

Men like that don't go back to Italian girls.

They're fascinated by stories of Africa, by the girls' problems, their lives and their food. Maybe they feel that they are the powerful part of the couple. But if you ask them: what's so special about this girl you like so much, they don't know what to say.

There's nothing.

Apart from the fact that she's on the street.

That she's a lost soul to redeem.

Ugo is like that.

With a marriage that ended badly behind him.

One day he met Ailelè on the street, as a client. He started saying I'll take care of everything, I'll help you. She recognised the type straightaway and decided to use him for 'business'. When the amnesty* was declared she had him take her on as his live-in domestic help, and that way she got her papers. Then she convinced him to finance a call centre, a business all the foreigners are getting into. It usually does well. But Nigerian girls aren't all that cut out for business, so the call centre did badly, they closed it down, and the money he'd given her was gone. So then Ugo found her a job as a cleaner. She didn't like it.

One day he turned up, desperate: I saw her, she's gone back on the street.

But what had he gone to the street for, I wonder. Maybe he was spying on her. I suppose so. I don't know. Anyway, go there he did and was so upset he went back again: come away, let's try again, I'll help you. But she just didn't want to know about it.

So he found another girl. Jennifer. This lady lived with another girl who had a shop selling African wigs, jewels, fabrics that come from Holland and cost an arm and a leg, as much as 500 euro a piece. Rich people's stuff, but exactly the sort of thing African girls buy when they go back home to show everybody they've made their fortune. This woman had two little children and a Nigerian husband who went backwards and forwards to Holland to buy the fabrics. It was their business.

Ugo made himself so useful he practically became part of the family, he even used to pick up the kids and take them places, as if they were his own. Then he discovered that the woman was Jennifer's maman. And that the husband controlled the girls on the street and probably went to Africa to recruit them as well.

So Ugo said: I'm going to report them to the police.

He wanted Jennifer to testify against them. But Jennifer didn't have the slightest intention of doing so, because she was also related in some way to the maman. She said: but it's not her fault if this is the only job there is for us girls here in Italy. She's been good to me. Thanks to her I've been able to earn money.

She really couldn't see anything wrong with it.

Ugo went back to rolling around. He left Jennifer alone for a while. Then he started seeking her out again. He phoned her constantly, I'll take you to a rehab community, he kept going to the street to talk to her, kept appearing suddenly at her home. But she really wasn't interested in getting out. So he went back to his old flame, from before even Ailelè: Obahì, the hand of destiny. They hadn't spoken to each other for six months. The first thing she said to him was: my brother is in hospital, I need a thousand euros immediately so he can be operated on for appendicitis.

He said I haven't got it.

And so she disappeared.

This Ugo is a good person, and he's thrown away a lot of money on the girls. But why keep rolling around these hopeless cases, say I. Find someone who's worth it. Someone who really does want to get out of the scene.

He says he's trying, but I'm not so sure.

After all, I think it's no accident that he always goes for girls who'll end up hurting him. Maybe he deliberately seeks them out. Or maybe there's something about him that disillusions them. I don't know. It's possible.

18

Anyway, there's no mercy on the street for clients who are suckers.

They're the ones whose hair needs shaving every time it grows, say the girls.

And they have no problem with taking them for everything they can because anyway, they say, the guy's a cretin. He was asking for it. He really deserves it.

Here we need to talk about anger.

The anger the girls feel about the lives they lead and life in general, why destiny has allowed a similar injustice to happen to

them. Anger at the *Italos*. At the maman. At their own families who exploit them. They all say: sooner or later I'm going to make them pay for exploiting me like this, all of them. But in the end they never succeed, so they take their revenge how and where they can, that is, on the clients.

I say there's a positive anger, the anger that drives you to get out, to grow, to make the most even out of that worst of places you find yourself in. And there's the negative anger that nails you to that ugly world.

It's the anger of those who've had their brains burnt out by the street. Who can no longer conceive of anything beyond the street. Who says: they've exploited me but I'll show them.

I'll become a maman too and I'll make stacks of money.

The first to pay the price, and part with all the money he has, is always the client.

And he doesn't always deserve it.

Giulio, for example. He has an ordinary job, a modest lifestyle. And yet over two years he managed to find eighty thousand euros for Osomè. His entire savings.

He's somewhere between thirty and forty, neither attractive nor ugly, not rich and not poor. In other word, just a man like so many others. One day his path crossed Osomè's. Mercy, in Edo. One of the ones who was shown no mercy at all, who the minute she arrived in Italy was beaten up and sent out to be fucked over on the street. Who was miserable and turned mean and, well, you feel incredibly sorry for her but also for anyone she has to do with.

In the beginning she said marry me. She said: let's go and live together.

But he lived with a brother, he said I can't, I haven't got enough money. So Osomè dumped him and starting around looking for someone else who would marry her.

But did that stop Giulio? No. He still looks out for her, helps her, gives her money. He'd be happy if she found somebody who'd marry her, at least that way she'd have her papers. But he says: I have a duty to her, I'm going to keep doing my part.

When she needs money she calls him and he comes over and gives it to her.

Where he finds the money I really don't know, maybe he asks his brother for it. Could be.

I only know that it went badly for Osomè with another client as well, he hung around for quite a while too, but in the end it was obvious he had no intention of marrying her. So she went back to working on the street, and she often calls Giulio to ask him to give her a lift there.

He calls us, bewildered. But what should I do?

Well, what can you say to a man like that.

Giorgio from Mestre was saved, though.

Kirù had said to him: I need five thousand euros to pay off my debt.

He gave it to her, straightaway.

But she kept on working and he was giving her a lift to the street every night. Sometimes she'd call him after a while: it's too cold, can you come and get me? And off he'd go.

It went on like this for quite some time. They were living together, and he was paying for the food, the rent, everything, he'd even give her the ten euros for a phone card. Then in the evening she'd get ready for work. Can you give me a lift?

He was in love and accepted it all, but he was as miserable as a dog.

One day he just couldn't handle it any longer, he got her suitcases and took them to her, there on the street.

So she went to stay with her friend Bose. Who called him and tried to salvage the situation. But no, don't be like that, Kirù is really sorry, she swears she's stopped, she wants to come back to you. Make it up.

No way in the world.

So, with Olympian detachment, she said,: I'll introduce you to another girl then.

Obviously word had got around their little scene. Here's a guy you can take to the cleaner's, step right up.

I know we don't come off too well in all of this. But that's how it is, and who am I to tell it differently? When I say the street burns

your brains out, confounds good and evil, makes anger the engine of the universe, well: I'm not inventing anything. I learnt it at my own expense. That's for sure.

This Bose is also involved with an Italian. Massimo. Who is married and has two children. He rented an apartment where she lives with three other girls who work on the street and two boys who do nobody knows what. Maybe they deal drugs. Maybe not. Bose says they're just friends. The fact is that Massimo pays for all six of them. Rent, electricity, heating. The food shopping. Everything. Bose still works, together with her three friends. Massimo gives all four of them a lift to work, and picks them up afterwards. None of the girls has any intention of getting out of the scene. They lead the same old life, but with a great many more comforts.

If you say you can't understand this guy Massimo, fine. I don't understand him either.

He spends all his free time with them, they'll go to an African restaurant maybe, and he pays for everybody. Evenings he spends babysitting for Lowena, who lives with Bose and has a son not quite two. Caritas *had found a family to foster him while she went through a rehab programme. She chucked in the programme, grabbed the baby and fled. She went to live with Bose, since they work together. So in the evenings they go on the street and Massimo stays home with the little boy. He hardly ever sees his own kids.

His children are grown up.

One day he took them aside and said: I've met some girls who need help. He explained to them what human trafficking is. He said that the clients must assume their responsibilities. Excellent arguments, you can't but agree. In fact his children said, good on you, Dad, they appreciated the courage he showed in telling them these things.

Only now he's rolling around in this hopeless situation, and it's not even clear whether he's in love with Bose or she with him. To be sure, on her part there's self-interest. But for him? What does he get in exchange?

Good question. I have no answers.

Omoyè, on the other hand, doesn't go to work anymore.

She found a client who paid off her debt. He was a pusher who'd pulled off a good deal and he gave her the money not just for the debt but also to build herself a house in Africa. She showed me the video, five hours of it, that house has absolutely everything. But the dealer started going off his head because of the drugs, they spent all

their time fighting and bashing each other, until she found out that he had another woman. Nigerian, obviously. For a while the two of them fought over him, he's mine, no, he's mine, but when the situation got too heavy Omoyè left him.

Maybe she thought he'd come running after her.

She was wrong.

Omoyè has been here for eight years, she got her papers with the last amnesty. When she ended up alone, she found a job in a hotel. Working as a cleaner. And there one day she met Gianni. My agent, she calls him today, laughing. He lives with his wife and children but he pays for her apartment, her living expenses, her clothes. He gives her the money she sends to Africa. He gives her the money for everything. Last year she went back to Nigeria for her father's funeral and he gave her ten thousand euros. Who's ever seen a ten thousand euro funeral in Nigeria, I ask myself.

It doesn't matter.

She is very beautiful and he gives her all the money she wants.

She doesn't work and spends her days just cruising around. She gets up at midday and goes shopping with her girlfriends. In the evenings they go the African clubs and they eat and dance and drink beer there till late at night. Then they go to a disco and she spends the whole time getting the men aroused, Nigerians or otherwise. She has a good life. She's contented.

But the day Gianni dumps her she'll have nothing, apart from what she's got him to buy her. Two cars to send to her family, the clothes, the shoes. She hasn't saved anything and she hasn't built up anything. And even if now she has a house back in the village, with the lifestyle she's used to, how could she ever go back there?

If Omoyè doesn't decide to grow up, she's ruined.

She'll go back on the street and it'll all start all over again. Even now, every once in a while she goes to see the joint where she used to work. There's only the transsexuals there now, she sighs, you should have seen the way that street used to be.

Not that the street experience weighed on her all that heavily.

The worst thing for her was the long and terrible journey across Libya. Once she'd got through that, all the rest seemed child's play to her. Since she's very beautiful, she's never had to struggle to find the really rich clients, and even now she loves playing with men and shamelessly driving them crazy. She treats it as one big game of

power and seduction. A game that lets her show that she's the one holding the reins of her life in her hands, I think. It's a way of fighting back against fate, after all.

Her mother is always telling her it's time to settle down.

To have a child.

To get married.

You're nearly thirty, she says.

But Omoyè has no desire to do so at all.

19.

In other words, it's not easy to get out of the scene.

A lot of girls no longer work on the street, but the street continues to be their point of reference. Their friendships are all there. They haven't settled in here, in any sense. They live in Italy but keep on living their African lives, no regular hours, living in the here and now. They have relationships with Italian men, but instead of those men helping the girls become more Italian, the men become more African. They don't offer any other life models. They don't provide alternatives, nor do they help them grow.

The problem is that, without any papers, the girls cannot find a regular job. And so they have to keep living in hiding, like before, for fear the police will find them and repatriate them. Every time they see a police car go by, they make the sign of the cross.

They're frightened.

They are always frightened.

Amina lives in fear all day long, and the man she lives with is even more frightened than she is. He won't even let her go to the market near their home for fear she'll be arrested and sent back to Africa. So she hardly ever leaves the house. He goes to work and she stays home waiting for him.

Deathly boring.

She never even watches television because he always says: what are you doing that for, you're wasting electricity. The only thing she does is clean. Clean, clean, always cleaning. Two rooms and a bathroom. Amina scours and polishes and dusts all day long. And when he comes home maybe he'll say look at that, you didn't clean that properly.

The only thing she does for herself, this girl, is go to the hairdresser once a fortnight, and have her hair done and a manicure. He looks at her and grumbles, what have you done to your head, why did you get your nails done that colour. Then she gets angry and won't speak to him.

And then he's overcome with anxiety.

Why won't you speak to me? Don't you love me anymore? You know I love you so much.

But meanwhile he makes her live like a prisoner.

She is depressed. She doesn't even have any girlfriends. She chose to make a total break with life on the street and that has left her completely alone. And she doesn't have much to do with Italians. He's always uneasy, he doesn't want people to suspect she was on the game. He's ashamed of her. But he's the one who should be ashamed, I think. They met on the street because he'd gone there looking for girls. And so?

So he doesn't want anyone to suspect that part of his life.

It's a sad thing, but it has to be said.

That's the sort of life they lead, the girls who don't work and don't have papers. The ones who live with a guy who 'sponsors' them in everything, who maintains them financially, who keeps them at home; that's what happens, that's how they live. They never go out. They never see a soul. They simply swap one form of slavery for another, neither better nor worse. But it's slavery all the same.

In the evening they wait for him to come home; they want to go to the cinema, go for a walk, see people. He says no. He says he's tired. And he collapses in front of the megascreen TV they bought to watch films with friends, but there's only ever the two of them, one of them snoring like a warthog. They never even feel like talking. It's never the right time to talk about anything.

What kind of a life is that.

These are young girls, twenty-two years old, maximum twenty-five, and they want a life like all the other girls. They want to go to the cinema, hang out with other people, maybe go dancing once in a while. But these men never want to do anything. I don't know if it's an age thing, being twenty, twenty-five, thirty years older makes a big difference, but maybe it's also a question of personality. A lot of them have never been able to have relationships, even with Italian girls, they've never assumed responsibilities, they've never been

able to maintain stable relationships. And that's another reason why they go with African girls, I think.

I think they thought it would be easier.

That things were codified from the very beginning.

I saved her from the street, I put a roof over her head, I feed her. What more could she want? She should just shut up and thank me. What's she got to complain about?

I think a lot of them think like that. Maybe they don't know it, don't realise it, they might be in perfect good faith. But that's their attitude. They expect to be thanked, not to have any bother, to be revered and served and adored.

When it comes down to it, they've done their bit.

They've done the Prince Charming thing.

And they count on living off the dividends for the rest of their lives.

As for the girls.

They have nothing to do all day. They're sick of cleaning and polishing. They have no prospect of ever improving their lives. How can you blame them if at a certain point they ask themselves: what on earth am I doing here?

After a while some of them crack. They'll go and see their old mates to gossip a bit. They tell each other old stories about the street, about men, about the mamans. They talk about the villages they come from, cook African things, breathe out a little. And one fine day they flee that little domestic paradise they've been locked away in, and with a sigh of relief they go back on the street.

Amenawa says: I couldn't stay there and be a slave in my own home. Always washing, cooking, cleaning, never going out, never having fun. The idea of spending my whole life like that, it was just unthinkable.

So Amenawa went back on the street. Secretly at first, then more and more openly. Andrea came by her street one day – and who knows what he'd gone there for, think about that for a moment, to that street – and he saw her working.

The whore.

After all I've done for her.

But did you see the alternative he offered her?

And then, look, there's always the money problem.

Scarica l'allegato originale

The girls who don't work never have a penny for themselves. They always have to ask him for money, for everything. Then he grumbles: but do you really need to buy a new dress? To go to the hairdresser again? And each time you feel like a beggar.

On top of that, he will hardly ever say how much money there is in the bank account. His bank account. Not yours. Not even your joint account, or the family account. It's his account, and there's no question of sharing it, much less equal access. He continues to manage his money the same way he did when he was alone, he'll buy a new car or not, as the mood takes him, without even consulting you.

This makes you feel ignored.

Worse: useless.

And then you always have the problem of the money to send to Africa. Every time your family asks for something you end up fighting. Because if you don't work you can't even send them the hundred euros a month that down there make all the difference, and if he says enough is enough, it's time to put a stop to all that, then there are fights.

Until one day you just can't stand it any more.

Some girls try and work, even without papers, just to get through the day and have a little money in their pockets.

But the only work around is cleaning.

It's not very gratifying.

And is this what your Great Italian Dream has boiled down to?

Suffering and enduring, only to find yourself working as a cleaner just to escape the slavery at home?

Something doesn't quite add up.

But what.

Now you're being good but you don't have a cent, whereas before you were leading this horrible life but you had plenty of money.

You tell me, where was the error?

20.

So, if you talk with the girls and you ask: what do you want? What do you need? they'll tell you one thing only: papers.

Without papers you can't do anything, you can only stay on the street and whore for a living.

Or else live with a man in conditions that practically amount to segregation, worn out by the fear they'll find you and send you back home.

Without papers you can't look for another job, you can't rent a house, you can't get a licence. And you can't go to school, you can't go to the dentist or the doctor.

You can't do anything at all.

The residency permit is the turning point, once you've got it you can start a new life. Be like all the others. Stop just dreaming and put your dreams to the reality test.

What do the girls dream of, you ask me.

A job in a factory. Or to be a hairdresser. Or open a shop.

But then if you ask them then what they would like to sell, they don't really know.

I say: be rational. I say: you've never been into an Italian shop, you don't even know what they sell, what you can buy there. I say: to open a shop in Italy you have to go to school.

And then they're mortified.

You know, they say, I was thinking of our kind of shop.

But you're not in Africa, sweetheart. Wake up.

In other words, they need support. To help them settle in, to understand the country they're living in. What do they know about Italy? They only know that there's Rome, there's the Pope. They know the names of the cities they work in, they know that there's Naples, Turin, Milan. They know the name of the prime minister,

they knew about Berlusconi, now they know there's Prodi. The guy with the face like a mortadella, they say. But they don't know a lot of other things.

About Nigeria, though, they always know everything. How do they do it. I don't know. They don't watch a lot of television, they don't read the papers, a lot of them don't even know how to read. They know everything from gossiping, among themselves and with the clients. On the street they tell the most horrendous stories, did you know, did you hear, the TV said a girl was knifed…And someone who knew her always pops up.

You say: but why should Italy assume responsibility for them.

I say: why then you haven't understood a thing.

Because the street has devastated our lives. It has ruined us psychologically and sometimes even physically. It has cost us our health and our hope and our happiness. But we didn't choose it ourselves, your street, that's for sure. The demand from your men created this trade, and with the trade, us - the thousands of victims.

We are the victims. Us. Don't forget that.

And you are the executioners.

The women too. The Italian women who know and who close their eyes to what their men are doing. When one of you is raped, it ends up in the papers and there's a huge outcry that takes forever to die down. Whereas when one of us is raped, it never makes the news. You think: well, she was asking for it. But an African woman raped is an Italian woman saved, I've told you that before.

Try and see things from that point of view.

Think of us as a kind of sexual safety valve. A funnel for all the violence. Think of the anger of thousands of immigrants who don't have women, who don't have a home, who don't have a job. Think about how they're feeling when they go out in the evenings, and who they take it out on.

See, you do understand.

In the countryside around Castelvolturno or in Puglia there are thousands of young guys who living in conditions of slavery, just like us. Africans, Romanians, Poles. They pick tomatoes, and grapes, and apples, twelve hours a day for a handful of euros. They're full of anger and frustration, just like us. But the difference is that they can make somebody pay for it in some way, the weak link in the chain. The girls.

I'd like to spare myself this part of the story, at least, but I can't. It has to be told.

The girls on the Domiziana* make five or ten euros a go, they live in hovels, they don't have running water or electricity. Itohan, before she was murdered, used to say: it's like Africa, except it's much much worse. She used to say: there's no law and there's no protection. She'd say: every day you're lucky if you're still alive when it's time to go to sleep.

She was right.

Because there the girls are the absolute, the perfect victim. Of everybody. Including their own countrymen, who are disgusted because they sell themselves to the whites. These guys have no money, they don't pay them, they actually rob them because they know they have absolute impunity. They rape them ferociously, that's how they take their revenge for the vile shitty life they lead. On them, on us. The girls from Benin City.

Then you say: and the police turn a blind eye.

You say it, because I can't.

You say: the police don't just turn one blind eye, they turn two, maybe even three, and it'd be four if they had them.

I'll say only this: just as well there are the girls from Benin City. They're the perfect safety valve, the perfect lid to clamp down on social and ethnic tensions. The girls are the designated victims, the sacrificial lambs. Call them what you like, the substance doesn't change. An African woman raped is an Italian woman saved. And the raped African woman cannot speak because nobody takes any notice of her. She isn't news and she isn't a statistic. She is perfectly invisible.

I say to all you women: think about it.

And you pay your debt too.

21.

You say: you can report it to the police.

But a lot of women can't.

Think of Abe, whose brothers were kidnapped just because she couldn't stand it on the street anymore.

Think of my family, who were threatened just because I was resisting.

Think of Ibiè's friend whose house was burnt down because she didn't want to know about paying her debt anymore.

Imagine what can happen when someone lays charges.

A massacre.

Itohan didn't want to stay on the street fucking for a living anymore. Maybe she was thinking of laying charges, maybe she wasn't. I don't know whether she was or not. I only know she didn't want to pay anymore and at a certain point she just dropped out of circulation. But they had already murdered her brother, beaten him to death, just before she disappeared.

Don't tell me it's a coincidence.

Then one day she disappeared too, and her remains had already rotted before they were found by a dog.

Let me tell you, she was always full of life.

She was twenty and always laughing and she had this huge behind, and all the clients would come up to her, amazed. They could hardly believe it. Can I feel it? they'd say. And she would laugh.

But I've already told you that.

I didn't tell you how much it hurt me not to be able to go to the police. Go there and say: I know her. Say: she didn't want to pay anymore, they threatened her many times. I couldn't even do that for her, and only because I didn't have any papers and I was afraid. I was a coward, and I still reproach myself for it.

Itohan arrived here six months before me. In Naples, by ship. They made her work for a while on the Domiziana*, she said it was full of foreigners and nobody ever enforced the law. She said: it's just like being in Africa.

Then she came to Turin and she was happier.

The city was less violent, she liked it.

When she arrived from Naples she didn't have anywhere to live because they'd promised her a place that turned out to be unavailable, so they sent her to us and we slept three to a bed. That often happens. You take turns to sleep, one goes to work during the

day, the other at night and then on the rare days off, you all get in together. Especially in winter, you know, when it's really cold, it's so nice to be all under the covers together, all cuddled up, it keeps you warm. You fill up a hot water bottle and when the water gets cold you say, it's time to get up and go to work.

I prefer to remember Itohan like that.

Itohan is dead, Tessie barely survived. They made her drink hydrochloric acid so the other girls would see what happens to anyone who says no. Learn the lesson, if you want to stay alive. And there are too many stories like those.

Who ever dares lay charges?

Then there are the families.

These days, before a girl leaves the *Italos* take the family to a lawyer. They have to put up all they possess as a guarantee for the journey. Land, for example. A house, if they have one. So, if the girl decides not to pay, they don't even need to beat her up or make trouble, the family will be stripped of everything they own in a perfectly legal way.

So the family becomes your adversary, out of fear of losing what little they have.

As soon as you start thinking of getting out, they phone you and say: don't make us lose our home, don't get us into trouble. Please pay them. Work. Don't make a fuss.

Some dare to, however.

If she doesn't have a family who can be held hostage, if there's someone who offers her a way of escape, if the situation becomes unbearable, then she goes to the police and lays charges.

And that's when the trouble begins.

Iberatu, twenty-five years old. Beaten up by everybody. By the clients, by the police, by the racketeers. In the end she was more dead than alive, and she laid charges. With the help of an association she went into hiding, but the *Italos* were looking for her everywhere. When her residency permit was finally granted for judicial reasons, and it took months, she was so fragile and worn-out that she had an attack of total hysteria. She hit out at everybody, she yelled, they said she became completely uncontrollable; she ended up in hospital, in a psychiatric ward, and there they had to sedate her and treat her for several days.

Then she went back to live in her old neighbourhood.

Rome. San Lorenzo.

And on the streets she ran into her maman and all the thugs she'd laid charges against. And why wouldn't she. It's not as if they give them big long sentences. And now there's also been this amnesty, and so the girl traffickers are all out of jail.

Just try and imagine it: on one side there's the maman, who's been in Italy for years, she has regular papers, she might even have married an Italian to get citizenship; on the other there's the girl, and the only thing she has to show is the scrap of paper on which she's written down the money for the debt. How much she's paid on the debt, how much she's paid for rent, a long line of numbers that to a judge are worth little or nothing.

The maman can say: ah, all I did was take her in to live at my place. I took money for the rent and that was it. How would I know what she was up to after she went out my front door?

And at most she might end up being charged with harbouring an illegal immigrant. After a few months she's out and back home. And at that point you have a serious problem.

You've got to run for it and keep on running, otherwise you're done for.

So Iberatu saw her maman walking down the street a free woman.

She nearly died of fright. Within an hour Nicoletta from the Gruppo Abele* found her an escape route. Another city. Another house. But she began to ask: why am I the one who has to leave? I haven't done anything. I'm the victim. This is my neighbourhood and my home and my friends. If you take me away you'll uproot me one more time. I couldn't stand it.

They put her under protection, but right now she is so fragile psychologically we're all waiting for her to break down from one moment to the next.

I'm not exaggerating.

And then there's Esohè.

Twenty-eight years old.

She arrived when she was twenty-seven, after a terrible journey across the desert. You know by now the sort of violence that

involves, no point me telling you the details. She ended up working in a little town in the North and she lived with a girlfriend. Ogogo, her friend, worked on the street too.

This friend was tormented by a Pakistani client.

She'd say: that guy frightens me, he's violent, he's evil.

And one day they found her body in a field, full of knife wounds.

Esohè was an illegal but she got up her courage and went to the police. She took her friend's mobile phone with her, she told them the story of the Pakistani man, in short, she gave full and complete evidence. Thanks to her, the police were able to pin down the murderer, beyond any shadow of a doubt. There were fragments of this guy's skin under Ogogo's fingernails, because she'd defended herself up till the very last.

As you know, because she had laid the charges, Esohè was entitled to police protection and placement in a rehab community. They took her to Novara. But justice is very very slow, the trial kept being remanded, the court couldn't get round to giving her her papers. And there was Esohè, waiting. You tell me, how was she supposed to live in the meantime?

The community gave her a place to live and brought her food, but the volunteers didn't have a lot of resources. Take it easy, they said. Take it easy and wait. But meanwhile she had the problem of the debt. Her family had been seriously threatened because she was no longer paying.

And she said: How is it possible? I'm already in difficulty because of this business, and it's not as if I laid charges against my maman, I denounced a murderer. And now these people are taking it out on my family.

So she went back to the police station and laid charges against her maman as well.

Doubly brave, say I. Doubly deserving of a residency permit. But months and months went by and the residency permit still didn't arrive.

Now it finally has arrived, but for almost a year she was completely abandoned to her own devices. Without a penny, with nothing. She couldn't even buy a prepaid card for her mobile and call home to say I'm okay. She actually thought: now they'll send me to school, they'll help me find a job, I'll finally lead a normal life. Instead she found herself living as a prisoner again.

In the end she almost regretted having done it.

Sure, now she has her papers, she does a bit of cleaning work, as far as the association is concerned her case was closed successfully. But she's got to reconstruct a whole network of friendships and relationships. Alone. And how will she do that? It's hard to reinvent a life for yourself in a foreign country, if nobody helps you. If you're a black woman, on your own, and with such a heavy story weighing you down.

So I say: why don't they apply Article 18-bis* of the Immigration Law to the girls? The one that says you're not obliged to lay charges or enter a rehab community in order to get your papers? Sometimes there are people, whole families even, who are prepared to take you into their homes and guarantee for you. Who are prepared to support you through a step-by-step process of integration, like the one we're doing here in Aosta, to be precise.

But all this always involves clashes with the bureaucracy.

In a lot of police stations, this article of the law is not applied

And so, at this point in time, if you don't lay charges and you don't enter a rehab community, you can forget about the papers. And even the community almost always asks you to lay charges, as a sign that you've broken with the old life. Otherwise nothing doing.

What's more, the girls don't like entering a rehab community.

After years of slavery they can't stand rules, and impositions, and prohibitions anymore.

They say: we're already prisoners, we don't want to go to another jail.

And how can you blame them, say I.

A lot of girls give it a try, but can't cope and after a few days they run away. The rules are too strict and they feel segregated. They can't take it. They don't even manage to hold out long enough to get the residency permit, they try for a while but as soon as they can, they leave.

For anyone who enters a community the process is too long.

Up to two years.

You live the daily life of the house, you do the cleaning, you learn Italian. After a while they find you some sort of part-time job, cleaning or babysitting. The girls do it well enough but they don't

find it particularly gratifying. And it's hard to get used to earning six or seven hundred euros a month when you've seen how much you can wring out of the clients.

Then there are the rules about how to dress, when you can go out, sometimes it's obligatory to go to Mass. And that's an effort, too. Because the girls are very religious but they are used to a different way of being in church. In our churches you sing, for example. You talk. You're very involved in the services.

Here there's nothing like that.

If the priest is a good person, he'll make some concessions to their needs, but if he's at all rigid then they become more inflexible too. And then they'll be constantly asking themselves: but what are we doing here. This isn't a serious church, what am I coming here for.

And word gets around.

These days, when the church social workers arrive on the street, the girls don't even look at them anymore. Sometimes they arrive in pairs, sometimes they come alone. Usually it's a nun. The girls give her a few minutes, just because she's a woman of the church. But it really is a moment only. The second time she comes they say look, it's best we don't waste time. I absolutely have to work.

Then the nuns say: you are offending the Lord.

The girls say: well, if the Lord didn't want us here, he would have done things differently.

Which is a pretty watertight argument.

The nuns don't give up, though.

Come away with me, they say. You only have to want to. You can change your life, starting from tomorrow. And the girls say, yes, sure, and immediately turn their backs on them and a moment later they've already forgotten all about it. The clients arrive, it's all a coming and a going, and then there's always the fear that there's a spy watching to see if you are talking to anybody.

If an ordinary social worker arrives, though - sometimes they come bringing chocolates, or coffee - then the spies appear instantly and send them away. The girls have to work, they say, get out of here. And if they find you talking with the guy again, as soon as you get home they beat you. To teach you another lesson.

I'll tell you this story, which Don Benzi* has also told in his book. The book is called Prostitutes: They'll Enter the Kingdom of Heaven Before You. But nobody knows the name of the girl in question. Don Benzi is someone who has always done social work on the street, he goes up to the girls on the footpath and starts to talk and talk.

What are you doing here? Would you like to pray with me? Do you want to get out of this?

That's his style.

One day he went up to a very young girl on the street in Rimini. He went back once, twice, three times. She was terrified. More terrified each time. In the end somebody noticed, or else informed on her, whatever it was one evening the girl was no longer at her post.

She'd vanished.

When they found her there was nothing you could do except cry. They'd beaten her and tortured her. They'd ripped out her fingernails. They'd finished her off with an injection of weedkiller. Then they'd thrown her back onto the corner of the street where she usually worked, so the others would see her and learn their lesson.

And I think Don Benzi has always felt responsible for this.

Bear in mind that only a tiny number of girls have gotten out via the street social workers. From the stories I know of, five in three years. All the others either married a client or went to live with one.

The client, like it or not, is often the only resource we girls have.

It's not that I want to speak ill at all costs of the rehab communities.

I'm just saying what I know.

For example: they never have a spare place. Girls come to us who are minors or who have small children or who are in incredibly heavy situations. You ring Caritas, you ring Don Benzi, you ring here, you ring there, but there's never a place available. And maybe the girl has arrived at breaking point, psychologically it's the right moment for her to cut and run and leave it all behind. How do you say to her no, wait, stay on the street for another week, another month? You risk seeing the magic moment slip away, the girl changes her mind.

And in an instant, all the work you've done is lost.

22.

Akua wanted to get out.

There was no place available, anywhere.

The maman went to her house looking for her, Akua called me, I could hear the yelling and the commotion and her desperate weeping. They've found me, she howled. What'll I do?

We tried to find her a rehab community but it was Christmas, it was New Year, everything was even more complicated than usual, if that's possible. And she was crazed with fear.

That's how she ended up at my place.

This story, of Aikiakeme also known as Akua, I absolutely have to tell you, because for me it was a total and terrible failure; but from many points of view, if you look at it with a colder eye, it is a fantastically concentrated version of all the thousands of stories I've told you so far.

Akua and Giampaolo had been together for a year.

He was married and lived with his family, she worked on the street and lived in a house run by the maman. He gave her money, a lot of money, to pay her debt. He said: that way you'll be less hassled while you go through the process of getting your papers.

Akua is now twenty-two and has been in Italy for three years.

In Nigeria she wasn't too badly off, her father was a fairly well-known figure, but he had left her mother for another woman and maybe she felt lost and adrift. They offered to take her to Milan to work as a model. Sure I'll come. And she left just like that. She arrived by plane in Paris and then from Paris she made the trip to Milan by bus. The same evening she arrived in the city they sent her out to sell herself.

After she'd been on the street for six months or so she met Giampaolo. Once, twice, three times. Then he said to her, why don't you stop.

It went in one ear and out the other, because she didn't trust anybody, much less a client with the temperament of a redeemer. But he kept on coming back, he'd give her the money for the evening, and then for the week, and then for the month. He started giving her money for the rent and the debt each month, so that she wouldn't have to work anymore.

He also promised her: we'll find a house so we can live together.

And here's the rub.

They went to see a whole bunch of houses and none of them was ever right, and he continued living with his wife, but in the meantime he'd decided that they should have a child together.

Yes, a child.

His plan was that Akua would have the child and he would legally recognise it, then she would go back to Africa and he would make an application for family reunion, since she was the mother of the baby. Meanwhile he would leave his wife. Etcetera.

Just look how twisted men can be when they roll around.

I said: let's look for a rehab community, in a year or two Akua will be out and she'll have her papers, meanwhile you sort things out with your wife and then you can decide.

No way. Akua was terrified by the idea of a community, of being locked up and crushed by rules and regulations. The usual story of all the girls.

Until one day she called me, desperate.

The maman was there outside her door yelling and she sounded completely out of her mind. What'll I do, she cried, what'll I do.

A week later Giampaolo dropped her off at my place, with all her luggage.

It was just when Claudio and I were doing the paperwork to open our little halfway house. Claudio's story I'll tell you later. For now I'll tell you he's my future husband and after we'd talked about it we said to Akua: okay. You can stay here.

We began to get organised as best we could. We found her a room. We registered her as our guest at the police station.* Then we gave her time to recover. That first period she was always tired, incredibly tired. For the first month she was like a dead thing. It took her a month to confess that she was going on the street behind Giampaolo's back, because he kept making promise after promise but she didn't have a penny to send to her family.

So we asked a friend of ours in Nigeria to check out the family. Her mother sold fruit and sweets outside the entrance to my old school, and Akua was sending her money because her mother

wanted a bigger stall. But how much can a stall cost in Benin City? What is this, a joke?

I said to Akua, you've got to tell your family that you are not the goose that laid the golden egg. If you can help them, good. But a hundred euros a month is enough. A hundred and fifty. For a normal family that's already a huge sum.

Then she got angry and said we'd spied on her.

And there was no way we could make her understand that we have to keep an eye on the people in our care. We want to know and we want to understand who they're involved with and how they are placed. If you want to enter our project you have to stop everything and the first thing you must do is close the door. On the old scene, on the old girlfriends, but also on the family that keeps asking you for money. Basta.

But Akua found that really hard to accept.

She sulked for a week.

Then from Nigeria they asked for money because the roof was leaking, and it all started over again. More checking it out. The repairs were the landlord's responsibility, but for the family it was an excuse to knock on the door for another handout. Akua was really upset, she said I can't go through with this, I can't stand being under surveillance like this. She didn't have a cent, but the thought of her family's roof was driving her crazy. She got angry with me, with Giampaolo. She demanded that Giampaolo send the money to repair the damn roof. He held his ground. Furious quarrels.

In the end her parents decided to move house, and said send us the money for the move.

I said to Akua: it's their business, not yours. If they want to move house, then they can go and find it, and they can pay for it.

And she said we were too cruel.

She went completely off her head.

She stopped going to school. She stopped doing her homework. She started spending all her time who knows where. Walking along the street she ran into an old acquaintance from the village, Lucy, and she send her to us to plead her case. This Lucy had also been on the street, and she had actually been the first person to say to me: don't send a single cent home until you've got yourself sorted out. Turn the phone off, she said, so you won't be moved to pity by their stories.

I kept my phone turned off for a year, so they wouldn't be able to find me.

And Lucy actually turned hers off for two. Her family didn't even know whether she was alive. And so?

So this time Lucy took Akua's side. They sent money home without saying anything to us, and when we discovered it we said that's it, we don't want to know about her anymore. She won't study, she won't go to school, she doesn't respect her commitments and doesn't want rules. What can we do with her?

Meanwhile Giampaolo had gone on holiday with his wife. He didn't call anymore, didn't come over, didn't phone, didn't give any sort of explanation. Akua became uncontrollable. She no longer made any kind of effort, and when we held our meetings with the other girls everything made her sick with disgust. Starting with us and our project.

Now I realise she wasn't determined to get out of the scene at all.

It was Giampaolo who was pushing her.

Maybe as a proof of love.

Maybe, too, because he was looking for a way to stop spending all that money.

Who can say?

Anyway, before giving in we took her to Turin for an interview with Gruppo Abele*, to see if somehow they could fit her in somewhere. They threw up their hands in despair.

They said: we're not going to get anywhere with this one.

And at a certain point we, too, were obliged to say that's it.

Akua is the typical girl who flees and will always flee from any traditional attempt to rehabilitate her, from the social workers, the nuns, the rehab communities. She's not motivated. Or not yet, maybe.

But we often find ourselves dealing with this kind of girl, the most difficult. They're almost always illiterate, confused, rebellious. Sometimes not just ignorant and wounded but also stupid. They're the girls who, when it comes down to it, have found a way of living with the street, who've developed a taste for money and for spending it. Who've come to see all relationships in purely mercantile terms, who now see everything in terms of money.

Good and evil, right and wrong. What does any of that mean to them. Nothing.

It's as if their brain had been burnt out by the street, and their conscience and their moral sense.

They say: clients are suckers, the more money you can wring out of them, the better.

They think: the smartest girl is the one who makes the most money.

They live in Italy but they couldn't care less about becoming Italian. Much less of settling in, and working and building a normal life. When it comes down to it they have a better life here than if they were in Nigeria; they have the clothes, the mobile phone, the Italian boyfriend who takes them around and sometimes even pays their rent.

It's not such a bad life, they think.

Fucking clients for a living is not such a bad thing, the maman is your only true friend when all's said and done, and you've got the money to send home.

In the end, if that's the way your head works you end up buying a girl and sending her off to fuck clients instead of you.

It's not that awful, they say.

It's just the way it goes.

23.

I know.

This is a very sad ending, where justice doesn't triumph and innocence is not rewarded, happiness doesn't smile on the wretched, and words like deliverance and redemption are as weightless as dust.

And, moreover, the victim turns into an executioner.

But what can we do about it.

Everybody would like the victims to always be good, always be saintly, innocent little lambs, meekly deserving of our most earnest compassion.

Instead, well, you've seen it for yourself. The girls from Benin City don't want to know about sainthood.

They're ordinary people.

Good and bad.

Loyal and dishonest.

Sometimes even hypocritical, lazy, and cruel.

There are also the girls who steal and who lie, who deal drugs and laugh about it, who've made a kind of flag out of their life on the outside. They no longer look for pity nor want to be redeemed.

They want only the maximum for themselves, whatever it costs.

Telling you about it, I feel ill at ease.

But I always say to myself: remember that you are one of the saved.

What right have you to judge the ten thousand who went under.

The only thing you can do is tell their story.

So I will.

I'm telling you these stories just as they come, in bursts and impressions, because it's not as if I understand the deep sense of them. I just see that they happen. I observe them. And sometimes they leave me dumbfounded, you see.

Me first of all.

Like the violence story. Life on the street is violent, I've already told you that. But often the girls themselves become violent. They beat each other up. A lot of them beat up the clients, too. It doesn't take much for blows and slaps to start flying. A boy from Tuscany, a guy considered a bit slow in his own village, ended up in hospital because a girl cracked his skull with a stick. Twenty stitches. And only because he'd gone circling around her, telling her you're beautiful, but I only want to help you. Why don't you want me.

Another boy from Milan discovered that his Nigerian girl was using him as a drug courier. It's a thing the girls do more and more often, they're arresting them all over the place. It's easier than being on the street, they say; and what's more it pays better. So this girl said to him: I forgot my handbag. Bring it to me here. Bring it to me there. Once, twice, three times. The tenth time he looked inside the bag and found a packet of white powder. When he asked for an explanation the only thing that happened was that she beat him. Till the blood ran.

And then there's that guy in Piedmont. He's married, he's got children. He'd done all he could for a girl, with total conviction, in a very honest way. Spending time and money and effort. Gradually he realised that she was simply exploiting him. And, in addition, she was cheating on him. So they quarrelled. She laid into him. He had an arm in a plaster cast and he defended himself with that arm and defending himself he gave her a blow to the head.

The girl fainted.

He thought he'd killed her.

Out of his mind, he loaded her into the car and threw her off an overpass. A fall of twenty metres. And then she really was dead.

I'm sorry for her, but also for him.

An ordinary man who ended up inside a story that had nothing ordinary about it. He didn't know how to deal with it nor resolve it; and he ended up by killing. I think of her, but I also think of him. Of his wife and his children.

Who's the greater victim?

You have to think of it as a parallel world.

Submerged, indeterminate, where anger is the rule, anger and ignorance. Where nothing is ever certain, anything is possible, where everyone if the aunt or the niece or the cousin of somebody else. And they wheel and deal and sort each other out, and in the end they go around with each other's papers, and then say she's my sister or my aunt, even if it isn't true; and for those papers they pay the sister or the aunt a fee equivalent to twenty or thirty percent of the money they earn. But that's the way it goes. You leave Milan and go to Rome or Naples to pay some sleazy lawyer or mediator, Italian obviously, that some girl has been told by another can maybe get you papers. Which then, equally obviously, turn out to be false.

For a false Nigerian passport, you pay: four hundred euros.

You pay the same amount for a certificate of nationality which usually costs a maximum one hundred euros and which lasts a year and serves no purpose at all.

Not to mention the amnesties, when it's all comings and goings and doing a little business. You pay the fake employer who makes out a fake contract for a job that doesn't exist: 2-3,000 euros. You pay to renew the contract: 1,000-1,500 euros. You pay the guy who acted as intermediary and who introduced you to the fake employer: from 10-20%. But then with that residency permit you've got your

own nice source of income, you photocopy it, you lend it, you rent it out. You give it a girl who really is going to work at a regular job and then she gives you up to a third of her pay packet.

If you have a valid, regular passport, you rent it out to a girl who has to go on a trip.

If you have a child with regular papers you lend them to other mothers who have to send their child to school, or you go backwards and forwards to Nigeria taking the children of the street girls.

It's all like that.

They all live this way, ripping off the Italian boyfriend for a while until he dumps her, working the street for a while, ripping off the roommate who then in turn starts ripping her off, and so on and so on and so on, a thousand times over. Always chasing that one mirage, of getting rich and going back to the village as a madonna. Always looking for the big break, some Luciano or Ugo or Sandro they can strip of everything he has and more.

Meanwhile they go out with homeboys who deal drugs, and who often involve them in the business. And they get up late, they stay out late in the African bars, eating only their African things. They spend their lives in a kind of borderline limbo, suspended between Europe and Africa; and often they have little children who grow up shunted around from one place to another. But it's the only sea they really know how to swim in by now, these girls.

Thinking only of today, or at most, tomorrow.

For them the day after tomorrow is already inconceivable.

It's a kind of self-segregation, you see.

A way of saying to the whites who reject them: we're rejecting you, now.

Even the ones who don't deal drugs or steal, even the ones who limit themselves to getting by periodically going on the street, even those girls by now think of integration as a lost cause. They do their shopping in the African markets, they go to mass in the African churches, even their medicines they have sent from Africa, and they don't care that it costs a hundred times more, or that when they arrive the use-by date has expired. On TV they watch the Nigerian soap operas, they get their hair braided by an African woman. And, needless to say, when they go dancing it's only in the African clubs.

They've sorted out their own little corner of Africa and they're contented like that. And even if they're not happy, tell me, do you

think it makes any difference to somebody? Back they cannot go, because this is a journey from which there is no possibility of return. Before them there are no roads that lead anywhere. They can only stay where they are, rolling around themselves; and time passes and they grow old and in the end they realise they have never got out of prison.

It's just that their prison is a little bit bigger than before.

But there's something I must tell you.

The girls spend hours and hours trying to make their skin white.

They use Ferl White to get rid of the dead cells, Cletosh for tiny imperfections of the skin, and a hundred gels and creams and ointments on which they spend a small fortune every month. These are whitening creams that come from as far as Canada, for which they do the most amazing ad campaigns in Africa.

The girls can't even read the instructions. But who cares? They mix together a bit of this and a bit of that, kneading and concocting. Each one has her own super-secret recipe. And each one hopes, every day, to find the perfect variant, the special formula that will finally work the great miracle.

What are they trying to do, you ask.

Become like the American models, that's what, or the hip-hop singers. Who are black, but not really black-black. Halfway between black and white. So beautiful and so light-skinned they can pass for white. That is. Not exactly. Almost, let's say.

That's what the girls are seeking, day after day. And it doesn't matter if they get blisters or burns, if they have allergic reactions, not even if their skin ends up like leopard skin, some light and some dark.

It's the price you have to pay. They know that. And every single day they tirelessly set to mixing and rubbing in this stuff.

They try and they fail, they try again and keep on trying.

Who can say that one day the miracle might not just happen.

Maybe one day even they may succeed in becoming perfectly white.

And on that day, even if they come from Benin City, they'll have the courage to go to the supermarket like everybody else; and, head held high, they too will buy a kilo of tomatoes and a litre of milk.

PART 3

1.

Since we began this story a few things have changed.

I've bought my wedding dress, for example.

It's cream coloured with a layered skirt, and when I went to choose it my hands were clammy and I felt like laughing and crying at the same time.

I showed the photos to the girls at a meeting in Verona, the 8th of December. Ailelè hugged me tight as tight, and Ofurè and Obulu actually had tears in their eyes. As if they were the ones getting married. You can imagine.

It was the Feast of the Immaccolata, you say.

Good, say I. From a symbolic point of view that seems like a happy coincidence to me.

Claudio and I are getting married on March 3rd, in the Aosta Town Hall.

It'll be a civil ceremony and you absolutely must be there.

As for the honeymoon, we're going to have it in Nigeria, and it'll be the first time I return to Benin City since I left.

I'll be going home after six years, I'll have a white husband but I won't be taking money or grandiose presents for everybody. I didn't make my fortune. I'm not, nor will I ever be a madonna for anybody. But look, for me it's perfectly okay like that.

My mother is dead, my father hasn't spoken to me for years now.

Since you got yourself into strife, he said.

Since he said: it's all your fault and your fault alone.

I don't know what I'll find on my return, you see, much less what sort of welcome I'll get.

I'm very frightened.

But at this point, for me, Isoke, it's a necessary journey.

2.

I've started using my Nigerian name again, the one I was born with. Isoke. I am Isoke and I'm also Rose, because that's the Christian name I was baptised with.

And I am also Ovbhokan, which is the name my mother used when she'd call me, because I'm a twin and I was the second to be born. My brother is called Odiòn, which means first twin.

For five years I had to forget all these names.

Why, you ask.

Because it's such torture remembering the happy times when you're living in misery, that one fine day the girls decide to spare themselves. You simply live where you are, on the street.

How much do you want. 25 euros. What's your name. Izogiè.

And I never did tell them much more about myself.

Not my story.

Nor my past.

Nor about that something in my past that one day made me say: I'm leaving.

3.

Now I have to tell you this story too, because I want you to thoroughly understand how a girl from Benin City is born.

And this time that girl is me, Isoke.

Forgive me, if it's hard for me to get it out.

I am the third of eight children of Felix Aikpitanyi, a clerk of the court in Benin City, and of a woman called Ovhoweyemé Nomode. Ovhoweyemé in Edo means: I like what I've got. Apart from looking after all those children, she liked running the fruit and vegetable stall she helped support the family with.

I was born at home, in Benin City, in the neighbourhood of Obwelawé, where Catholics and Muslims and animists live in peace.

I was born on the June 24, 1979 and even if you tell me there's no real registry of births and deaths in Nigeria, and I say yes, it's not all that well-organised, I am sure, absolutely sure, of the date, because in my home the kids' birthdays were always a celebration. We did without practically everything, but not the birthday parties. And they were wonderful.

My childhood was a happy one, I swear it, even if we got by on the skin of our teeth. With my father's salary and ten mouths to feed there wasn't a lot to laugh about. But at my place we were always laughing.

Only that one day my father started coming home a little less often. Less and less often. Until another day a women arrived at our house. She said: may I come in. She said: give me a glass of water, would you. I was the only one home and I gave it to her. She had a newborn baby in her arms. He was the child my father had had by that woman.

I was six, seven years old. I didn't really understand what was happening, but I remember the huge fights. My father hurling accusations at my mother, too: you betrayed me. And yelling: ah, the youngest twins are definitely not mine. And then it came out that my big brother was not my brother, either, but the son of a dead sister of my mother's, who she had taken in and raised exactly like her own children. I remember that in a short time everything was shattered.

I was little then, but I remember the sense of catastrophe very well.

I told you that in Nigeria, when a couple separates, it's usually the mother who takes care of the children.

In our case, the families intervened, wanting to lay down the law of their tribes. They intervened to decide what was to be done with my father and my mother. They wanted to marry my mother to the father of the twins. My father was to stay with the other woman and his new son. The other kids I don't know, they were dragged this way and that, they were a weapon used for blackmail in that village war. Yelling and rows and threats of voodoo. In the end they were entrusted to my father.

My mother wept every tear she had in her.

And I, only just seven years old, who had already been helping my mother for quite a while, in the house and with the fruit stall, I, instead of going to school, was put to caring for Nosà, my youngest brother. In Nigeria you start primary school when you can touch your left ear with your right hand over the top of your head. I

managed it at seven, my sister at ten. But I didn't start school till I was eight and one month, because I had to look after that little brother. No-one in my family looked after the little boy, Dad went to work in the morning and got home in the evening, my mother wasn't there, and my other brothers and sisters went to school, the ones who were old enough. I stayed at home changing nappies and preparing babyfood and chasing after Nosà, who was just one year old. But it was too big a responsibility for a seven year old girl, far too big.

When he was a bit older I said to my twin brother: you and I will take turns looking after him, and we'll take turns going to school too. One in the morning and the other in the afternoon. And that's what we did.

I loved studying, I really did.

But you don't know what it's like to go to school when a toddler of two or three scribbles all your homework book. And rips pages out of your textbooks, and will never let you study in peace, not for a moment.

I did really well at school.

But it was a struggle, you know. What a struggle it was.

When he was four years old, this little fellow took sick and died.

Inside of me, I took on all the responsibility for it and all the guilt. I thought I'd go mad. And even though now I can say: there was nothing I could do about it, the adults should have assumed responsibility for him and instead they loaded it all onto my shoulders, at the time I wasn't capable of making that kind of distinction. He'd been entrusted to me and he was dead. I was ten. Eleven, perhaps.

From that point on, an even worse upheaval began.

My mother took back the younger children, the older ones stayed on living in my father's house. Except that by now my father was living somewhere else, he'd come back from time to time, and as if nothing had happened he expected to boss us around and make all the decisions. One brother went to an uncle, a sister went to another relative, in short, we were scattered all over the place. They were difficult years. Not because of money so much as that feeling of being completely adrift.

I went for a while to my sister, who lived with my mother's sister, but this aunt couldn't afford to keep me and decided she didn't want me there anymore. So I went to an older male cousin, but after a time he stopped sending me to school too, he wanted me

to do the housework, while his own children studied in peace and quiet. I also had to go to the market and help his wife sell palm wine. It's not fair, I said to myself. I want to go to school, studying is really important to me. It was the only thing I had to hang on to in that disaster, going to school. The only good thing in my life.

Inside me was a vast boundless anger.

I could see my mother wearing herself out to keep us fed, I could see my father doing nothing to provide for us. And alright, in Africa that's all perfectly normal, but the children suffer, exactly the way Italian children would. They don't cope any better with seeing their home and family fall apart, just because they are in Nigeria. They feel miserable. They're angry. They take it out on each other, and in the end the only thing they want to do is disappear.

And I tell you, this is a story I've heard the girls tell a thousand times. Little girls put to work too early, divided families, daughters shunted around from one place to another. Our relatives made us do the housework and help at the market, we were treated like servants, while their own kids went to school. And that's where our anger sprang from, our desire to disappear.

Even before we felt the desire to discover whether life could offer us something different, if possible something better, more than anything else we wanted to disappear.

Simply disappear.

And that's the reason, I say, that one day we left.

4.

I'm going to take a break here and tell you the story of Kudi, the only girl I've met on the street who was different to the rest of us. She said she was 18 but she looked more like sixteen to me. She was really, really young.

She'd been to university but she said she didn't like it, she wanted to travel, she'd found this offer. She ended up in Italy and we told her so many things that after a week she fled. We told her go away, get out of here, you're still in time.

She'd come to the house where I was living for a waiting period, then they would have taken her who knows where, because they were looking for someone to sell her to. However she had relatives all over in Europe and they were well-off people. In other words, she had connections and possibilities and could save herself, unlike us who had nobody and nowhere to go.

Then call them, I said to her. Call them and run for it. If later on you decide you want to pay for the journey, okay, but run for it now, immediately, and don't even tell us where you're going or who you're going to. Don't trust me or any one of us.

And after a week she disappeared.

The maman arrived: where is Kudi?

And we replied: we really don't know.

But in our hearts we were pleased.

You didn't say anything to her, did you?

No, of course not, sister, who ever has the time to talk to a girl you don't even know…

It was a great thing but it was dangerous, too, because Kudi could have been a spy and I, who wanted to help her, could have easily ended up in trouble. Or else if they managed to find her, they could have tortured her and made her talk, you see, and then she would have given them my name, and I would have been one dead girl.

Maybe they would even have tortured me first, to set an example for the other girls.

To remind everybody of the first law of the street: never get involved.

Mind your own business and shut your eyes.

5.

I used to dream about travelling, like Kudi.

There was this travel agency in a Lagos street where my sister lived, and I'd go past it again and again and every time I'd stop and stand there bewitched, looking in the windows. One day I couldn't resist any longer. I went inside.

Where do you want to go, they asked.

I don't know.

To do what, they said.

To see a bit of the world.

Have you got any money?

No.

Then in a low voice they said to me there is a way, go to this address. They'll look after the ticket and the papers and everything else you need.

Now I know there aren't many girls who decide spontaneously to leave. Who don't need the *Italos* to tell some sort of story to the family, or a family that sells them, or some kind of trickery to launch them on the big adventure.

I would never have left, and no-one would ever have convinced me, if I hadn't already been convinced myself.

I'll say it again, I fell into the trap all by myself.

And that's not much consolation, to be honest.

No-one sent me to the preachers or the shamans as happened to the girls who believe in voodoo. They knew straightaway that it wouldn't work with me. Instead, they sent me to the office of a lawyer in the wealthiest neighbourhood in Lagos, the one where all the embassies are.

The lawyer was a big man and very, very elegant.

He said that to get me to Europe a certain sum was required, but how much that sum was I didn't really understand. He talked about naira and dollars and lire and pounds sterling and francs. A tangled mishmash you needed an economics degree to get to the bottom of.

He said: the easiest thing is to go to Italy.

He said: it doesn't take a smart girl long to pay back the money we advance her for the journey.

He also said: in Italy our organisation takes care of everything, from accommodation to a job. Trust me.

It all seemed so clear and so easy.

All I had to do was find someone who would act as a guarantor.

But why do I need a guarantor? I asked.

I still remember how polite he was. He spoke about girls who scrounged the journey then disappeared and didn't pay back the money. He said that in those cases the organisation commissioned someone to find the fugitive. That however sometimes it happened

that these guys.. these not entirely controllable guys, he sighed… would find the girl and beat her.

In other words, it seemed as though the only risk you ran was a good spanking, like when you disobeyed Mum or Dad.

I felt like laughing.

To avoid all these problems we make a contract with the family, he added. At least then we are sure that you won't make any problems and neither will they. If you don't pay then your family who will have to pay.

Alright, I said.

Look, it may seem easy, but you must respect the agreement.

Alright.

Otherwise you'll have trouble with the Italian law too, you'll be sent back to Nigeria and we will lose money.

It's still alright.

If you don't like the job we find you, you can find yourself another one. You will be free to do anything you like, but be careful not to find yourself a boyfriend, nor must you get pregnant. The only thing you have to do is work and pay.

Okay.

Now, forget the name of that travel agency.

Yes.

And after we have signed the contract, forget you've ever been in this office. You and I have never met.

6.

The only guarantor I could think of was my older brother, Edward, the one we'd discovered was actually my cousin. But when I talked to him about the project I had in mind he practically went berserk.

You're a fool, he said.

The daughter of the woman who lived next door to him had made the same journey to Italy, and now she was dead.

But I was twenty years old and nothing could have stopped me.

I said: if I work I can help my mother, who's the same mother who brought you up. Think of her wellbeing. And think of yours, too. I can help you start a family, if you help me leave.

Then he made me swear I would never tell any of the other members of the family and he agreed to act as my guarantor.

That's how our business arrangement started.

Less than a month later I was on the plane.

7.

The rest of the story you already know.

But not all.

You don't know that at a certain point my father washed his hands of me, saying only: It's your fault. You sort it out.

And that inside of me I said: you're right.

You don't know that I did everything I could to preserve some shred of dignity. I haggled over the debt. I called the people in London and I said: you tricked me. There's no job. Now we'll work out the cost of the journey and I want you to know that that's the only money I intend to give you. Nothing more.

But even then they tried to cheat me

They said: there's the journey to London, the journey to Paris, the journey to Turin. They said: there's the bill for the clothes and the bags. No, I said to them, you didn't buy me anything, I arrived here in my jeans with my school backpack. That's not true. Yes. No. In short, we argued and argued but in the end the figure was 15,000 euros and that money I had to give them. It was half the sum they'd said to me in the beginning. But then to that figure you had to add rent, food, the joint, the clothes, electricity, heating. And the money to send to my mother, of course.

And so I, too, began my life in Italy.

8.

When my mother fell ill I'd been working for quite a while.

Actually I'd almost finished paying off the debt.

My cousin called me. She's ill. He didn't tell me exactly what she had either, he only said: we're trying to find the money for the operation.

But how much will it cost?

Ah, a lot.

She had cancer. For the first operation I sent almost two thousand euros, then there was another one, which I paid for, all of it, then I sent the money for a third, but at that point she was very weak and she decided not to have it.

I found the hospital for her, from Italy, by asking around, asking everybody.

She went in, but when it was time to enter the operating theatre she didn't feel up to it.

She could barely manage to talk to me on the phone, she was practically babbling, I couldn't understand a thing.

Meanwhile I got hold of the medicines that weren't available in Africa, or that cost an arm and a leg if they were; the doctor gave me the names over the phone and I'd buy them and send them down.

The therapy went on for a long time.

Finding the money for the medicines and the hospital became my nightmare.

9.

By this time I was only working off and on, on the street, and if I managed to get the 2,000 euros together for the first operation, it was thanks to Giuseppe. Like a lot of the other girls, I too had found a client who was a decent person, and little by little he became my friend. A university professor. He was married, he had children. A really good person. He helped me seek help from a rehab community, we went to Caritas and Gruppo Abele, I had one interview after another. But, like the other girls, I too rejected the communities that were too closed or too rigid. I wasn't prepared to go through that kind of process. And then, they kept asking me to lay charges, too, and I didn't have the slightest intention of doing so.

I don't want to get my family into trouble, I said.

And they: then come back another time, maybe you'll change your mind.

I'd go back with my mind made up just as before.

Think it over. We'll talk about it again.

In the end, I gave it away.

In those days I lived in a house with two or three other girls. The maman wasn't standing over me anymore. I practically didn't go to work anymore, either. Giuseppe, this professor, gave me half his salary each month so I could pay off the debt and the rent without having to go on the street. And when my mother had to have the operation, and I had a week to find 2,000 euros, he was the one who said: come here, I'll help you. No matter how hard I worked, I'd never have managed it by myself; I never was all that good at it. And at the time I was so upset, I just wasn't in any condition to go on the street.

I'm still grateful to him.

And not just because of the money.

Giuseppe was the first person who showed me something of life beyond the street, who invited me to dinner, showed me around the city and took me to the little festivals in the villages nearby. In other words, for the first time I saw how Italians really lived; and especially how the women lived. It was such a different life, so different. And I really liked it.

I asked stacks of questions.

Why this, why that.

He talked and explained and taught me a bit of Italian too; because, he said, if you want to live here you have to become a little bit Italian too.

Now I'm the one who says that to the girls, speak Italian, but then it was the first time I'd heard anyone say that. He was right.

In the beginning, I had a lot of faith in our relationship, but little by little I realised it didn't have much of a future. He would steal a few minutes for me during the day, then in the evening he'd go back to his wife and kids. It always ended up like that. We had no shared projects, no nothing. I never asked him for more than he could give me, but I could see that even the little he did give me made him miserable.

He hated telling lies to his wife, to his mother, to his children.

And so, in the end, I was the one who called it off.

10.

Then I met Claudio.

One of those things that can happen with a client; but after that first time he was never a client again. He came back: once, twice. He couldn't really work out what I was doing there, what my story was; he could see I was with two or three other girls, and that they were working. He asked me questions and kept on asking, but I was feeling so bad because of my mother that just then I didn't feel like telling him anything.

We went on holiday together, and I saw the Italian sea for the first time. There were people on holiday. Having fun.

Strange. But nice.

Even before we returned home, he said to me: come and live with me.

I wasn't sure about it at all, though. I didn't trust him, or myself. I couldn't understand my life at all anymore.

Give me time, I said.

After all, Claudio had only just separated from his wife, he had so many problems, I didn't want to find myself bearing the burdens of just one more desperate guy. I already had my own problems. They were enough for me. Thanks very much.

But he didn't lose heart. He went backwards and forwards between Aosta and Turin, sometimes several times in a day. He came to my place and talked and talked and one day he met Mustafa, the girls' minder. He got it, he didn't get it, I don't know. He only said: you can't stay here, I'm taking you away.

And he took me to see the Val d'Aosta.

Meanwhile he was organizing my moving out, and I still hadn't made up my mind about anything. I could think only of my mother who was dying, of the medicines to buy, the hospital to find. I didn't have the mental space to start a serious relationship with a man. To live together.

He was actually talking about marriage, already.

And me: brr..take it easy.

He'd say: if you marry me, at least you'll have your papers and they can't send you away anymore.

I said: yes, sweetheart. But…

But at a certain point I no longer knew what to say to him, and I ran away.

I went back to Turin, I hid for two, three, ten days.

I didn't even answer when he phoned.

He panicked and to find me he raised hell with the maman.

You see: he was convinced they had murdered me.

11.

In the meantime, I had my life to get on with.

There was the money to find.

The operations, the hospital, the medicines.

There was Claudio, who overwhelmed me.

And I no longer knew what to think or what to say.

I called my mother and she couldn't even speak on the phone anymore.

Mamma, I said, Mamma, can you hear me?

On the other end I could just hear her breathing. And two days later my cousin phoned me to tell me she was dead.

She was only forty-eight.

And I couldn't even go to her funeral.

12.

When they gave me the news I couldn't cry, either.

The world had simply and utterly collapsed.

That was all. I wasn't hungry anymore, I didn't wash anymore, Judith actually had to feed me and wash me and put me to bed. Nothing made sense anymore, understand? Above all my being in Italy and on the street and with the clients. I'd done it to help her, my mother. And suddenly she was no longer there.

And then, well.

13.

A month after the funeral I was already in Aosta.

I cut all ties with Turin, with the African scene, with the African girlfriends.

Basta.

The day I made my decision, I made a clean break with all of it.

I went to live with Claudio, but as friends, we said to each other, to begin with. Then we'll see.

There was the amnesty, I got my papers.

I attended courses* run by the Region.

And, little by little, Claudia became the man I've decided to marry. For me another life really did begin, and it's the life I'm living now, with which I am perfectly happy.

14.

It wasn't easy, though.

I really have to say that.

Because I wanted to shut the door on my past but, no, it just wasn't possible. The past is always there.

It never leaves me for a moment.

At night I have terrible dreams.

I wake and for hours I lie there thinking about terrible, terrible things.

Then I wake Claudio, who's sleeping there beside me, and I make him talk to me until day comes. With the light of day, I manage to be a little calmer.

A little.

Not a lot.

15.

Now I'll tell you Claudio's story.

Claudio. Who after meeting me and learning how things were on the street went crazy with rage, like us. It was the first time he'd gone with a street girl and deep in his heart, I think, he's never really forgiven himself. For going with a woman and paying for it, I mean. Can you imagine.

I'd found him crying outside the Porta Nuova station. He was sitting on a bench, crying. I watched him. He stayed there for hours. His wife had just left him and he seemed infinitely sad to me.

He says that I was the one who spoke first, but I really don't remember.

Could be.

I only remember a dishevelled-looking, badly dressed man sitting on a bench, crying.

It's the first image I have of him.

I don't know what impelled me towards him, and him towards me, that first and only time. I know that meeting profoundly changed him. He began to think about us girls, and the clients. Who certainly aren't all bastards, I've already told you that, who are sometimes very decent people. Sad. With a thousand problems. But that's no reason, he says, for them to evade their precise responsibility. Being a client means feeding the racket. You solve your own problems for a moment, but you create a thousand problems for the girls who end up on the street thanks to people like you.

I can't argue with that.

Then he got more and more troubled and upset. And he said: It's wrong. He said: something's got to be done.

He got a group going, I don't know how, of sympathetic clients.

There are a lot of them, you know. They got together and wrote a leaflet and then went and handed it out in the Parco della Pellerina, where the girls work. When the cars stopped they'd leap out and shove one through the window. From Client to Client, it said on it. And then something that explained why they shouldn't go with the girls anymore. That it wasn't right. That a sex strike against the racket was needed, in protest.

I really don't know why they didn't get beaten up.

I only know that at a certain point Claudio's car was completely trashed.

Good on them, you say.

You think it's a good thing.

Now I can say it, too: sure, it's a good thing.

But I kept finding these guys, these clients, in my home. And the problems of the street. And their relationships with the girls. And the girls themselves.

The girls came with their men, looking for help.

They wanted to talk, they wanted to tell their stories, they wanted to know things.

I've had enough, I said.

I'm through with all that.

Why are you all coming to me?

Claudio said only: it's a commitment I've made to myself, when it still wasn't clear whether you would ever be able to say I've had enough.

I can't abandon the project now, just because I've sorted my own life out.

I have to think of Guido and Andrea and Geppo, too.

Who in their turn are thinking of Jessica and Joy and Naomi.

You can't ask me to just drop it all.

I never asked him to.

But.

We went to the presentations of the book he wrote, to the book launches of Akara Ogun and the Girl from Benin City. Everybody stared at me.

Ah, that's her.

I wanted to disappear.

We went to Udine to a performance by Teatro Incerto.

It was inspired by his book. The title was Isoke.

It was definitely me.

It is me.

There's no way you can escape your past, you see.

And so, little by little, I began to talk with the girls too.

To ask questions, to respond, to explain.

Where are you from.

How did you get here.

How much do you still have to pay.

What sort of life do you lead.

And one day I realised that absolutely nobody listens to these stories, much less gives them voice. The priests talk and the sociologists and the social workers. They talk and they do research and they earn money for their studies and their rehab communities. But the girls? When do they ever have their say?

16.

So now there's the Casa di Isoke, Isoke's Place.

Two rooms and a kitchen, and we still don't know how we're going to pay the rent. The Regional Government says that maybe they will give us some funding. But they want a project, they want a quote, they want a thousand documents and a thousand figures we never would've thought we'd find ourselves getting together. I don't know. I'm learning.

The important thing is that there is a place, a something that says to the girls: there is hope.

Even if you're difficult and you don't want to lay charges, even if you live on the fringes and you couldn't care less about being integrated, even if you don't understand why, even if you don't trust anybody. There's someone who understands you and will give you a hand.

Come here.

I will.

17.

It’s not that I’m presumptuous.

It’s that I know things.

I learnt them the hard way and it’s still not over.

I know the girls’ anger, I know all about their resentment. Because I shouldn’t have been there either. It wasn’t what I’d hoped for. That couldn’t be my life.

It couldn’t be and yet it was.

The only thing I can do now is try and give it some kind of sense.

18.

Sometimes, though, it’s hard to give a sense to the things that happen to you.

I remember the first time I was attacked on the street. I wasn’t even working, I was just going for a walk. A guy stopped and offered me a lift. Why not, I said. I was very tired.

There was nothing about the guy to alarm me. He was quiet and polite. He wanted to chat.

What are you up to?

Just going for a walk.

Have you been in Italy long. Do you ever go dancing. Silly stuff like that.

We chatted away and at a certain point he stopped the car in an out of the way place.

Will you do it with me? He asked.

No way, I said. I’m not working right now.

And suddenly I felt a pain here. In the belly. I looked down and I saw the slash in my leather coat, the slash in the jumper, the gash in my belly. I saw the white of my flesh and instantly the cut filled with blood. I was amazed. And while I sat there being amazed, the guy opened the door and hurled me out.

As he was throwing me out, I don’t know how, he lost his wallet. At the hospital I gave the wallet to the police. Inside were his

documents. So as soon as I got out, they took me to the police station to lay charges, and later they called me in to identify him.

Yes, I said. Sure it's him.

He arrived in handcuffs and I was terrified, the cut was still bleeding, they'd filled me full of painkillers.

But it's him, I said.

This guy was married, with children. Thirty-five years old.

I laid the charges and I paid a lawyer, too, to file a civil suit, but I've never had a penny in compensation.

And I've never heard anything more about the trial.

19.

But the worst part was afterwards.

When my mother fell ill.

When I really started going out of my mind, and instead of working I started wandering around Turin. I'd walk up and down the streets for hours and hours. I was thinking, and thinking.

What were you thinking about, you ask.

Everything. Nothing. Or maybe about how to get out of it all. That's what it was.

I didn't say it clearly to myself, you see, not then. I think the thought was still too big for my head. I was too brutalised, too depressed, too worn out and exhausted But if I look back I can see that yes, the idea of quitting was taking shape inside me; I just needed to take the time to listen to myself and understand.

That's why I walked and walked.

In those days I still called myself Izogiè. For three years I hadn't had a thing of my own, not even my name. I lived like a somnambulist a life even dogs don't deserve, and every day I pretended that life didn't touch me. That the clients, the street, the waiting didn't touch me. The how much do you want. Quiet place. Okay, get in.

I lived that life as if somebody else was living it. I wasn't there. Where was I? I tell you: I don't know. I ask myself, too: but where was I for all that time.

Schizophrenia, you say.

It was the only way I'd found to survive.

Try and understand me.

When my mother fell ill, the deception ended instantly.

Lying, even to myself, no longer made sense.

Ovhoweyemé was my mother.

And she was dying.

She needed her daughter and that daughter was Isoke.

Isoke was me.

Isoke Rose Ovbhokan Aikpitanyi, aged twenty-three, trafficked when she was twenty. A prostitute, a slave, just a body for use on the street. That's what Isoke was.

My mother was ill and I was forced to become Isoke again, from head to toe. To say: I am me. I'm here and I'm doing these things. I.

I?

It was like waking from a dream, you see. I opened my eyes and looked around me and I couldn't cope with all that misery. Seeing the girls get ready every evening for the parade. Putting on the wig and the ridiculous shoes, then making the sign of the cross and going out to their life in Italy. I looked at them and I looked at myself; and again I started thinking it's not possible. My mother is dying and I have to stay here and lead this life.

You say: Ovhoweyemé brought you into the world a second time, in a sense.

I say: it's true.

If I look back now I see that girl with tears in her eyes, empty inside, who in turn is watching the other girls get ready to go out. They put on the lacy knickers and the shoes with the high high heels. Somebody says something. The others laugh. Then they take their handbags full of those Chinese condoms that stink like death itself and tear so easily; and off they go towards the destiny of that night. Maybe they'll come home in high spirits, with lots of money. Maybe they'll come back crying. Maybe no-one will ever see them again. I see only Isoke, listening, and saying absolutely nothing. I see her

look into the mirror and inside her there's an enormous lump, a sort of colossal no.

What is this life.

What am I, what have they turned me into.

All of this was seething, seething I don't know where, but certainly somewhere very deep inside me. On the outside I was very careful not to say a thing. Maybe I didn't even have a language capable of saying the words. Maybe the words to tell that kind of story don't even exist. And so I could only stay silent.

The only thing I did was look and walk.

And think.

And grow ever more silent.

But somehow, something must have filtered through, perhaps some small gesture, the slightest echo of a hesitation. An unmistakeable sign that I had reached a kind of limit, and that at any moment I might start shrieking and shouting and out would come the voice that would finally say: enough.

I can't say.

All I know is that one evening I was almost beaten me to death, and I still don't know how I survived to tell you about it.

Listen.

20.

It happened like this. I'd just come out of a disco along the Murazzi, I was on my way home. It was night. Around three am. I was about to cross the street when I saw two guys at the corner I didn't like the look of at all. So I started running. They started running too. At first I thought: this is a robbery. I threw my bag at them. But they kept running after me.

I ran and I ran, but they ran faster than me and they got me. They threw me to the ground, then kicking me and punching me they dragged me towards the entrance to the Parco del Valentino. There a third man arrived and he started bashing me, too. I remember hearing a woman's voice. What are you doing, she shouted. Stop it. Then they hit me on the head with a stone and I collapsed on the ground.

I couldn't defend myself any longer, couldn't do anything.

I was just a body, there on the ground, being kicked and punched and I could barely say help.

Meanwhile, cars kept passing. Not one of them stopped.

I remember that one of my eyes was completely closed, and I could barely see out of the other. I heard them talking together in Arabic. I could feel the kicks in my back. In my belly. And I thought: now I'm going to die. I also thought: what a terrible way to die this is.

At a certain point, a police car pulled up. They'd been called by the woman who had shouted earlier on. I made out the light of a torch, I heard a man's voice. Signorina, can you see me?

I couldn't even speak, my lips were all torn, and my eye - this eye here, they'd smashed the bone with a kick, it was full of splinters of bone and blood. I couldn't see anything anymore.

They called the ambulance and took me to hospital.

For two weeks it was like being dead.

And when I got out of the hospital they took me to the police station, they made me lay charges and then gave me my expulsion order straight away.

So, you see.

When a girl says to me: I'm frightened, I understand her perfectly.

I've been through it all, myself.

And yet, I tell her, I'm here and I'm alive.

21.

At the Casa di Isoke no-one will be asked to lay any kind of charges.

There won't be any experts, or social workers, or psychiatrists unless it's strictly necessary. No mediators, no community workers. Just us, who've lived what we've lived and know things about the world you others can't even begin to imagine. The girls will live together two or three at a time, under my supervision and that of Gruppo Abele. I'll be there to support them throughout the process I've already gone through.

They'll learn Italian and how to use a computer, they'll go to the cinema and dance at the village festivals. They'll go walking in the mountains and do the 150 hour courses to get their Middle School diploma and maybe, in the future, they'll open the hairdressing salon they dream of. And at home they'll learn how to live here in Italy, how to clean, how to cook, how to do laundry, exactly the way everybody else in Italy does it. Because it's time to put a stop to the segregation. It's time to start going to the supermarket and the dentist, to the bookshop and the health centre.

During this process they can be supported by the ex-clients who have now become their partners. But they, the men, will have to take a step back. They mustn't have any say in the organisation of the girls' lives, nor make any claims, nor try and hurry them up.

Because the real work you do with the girls is what happens inside.

You have to break with the street and the friendships on the street, if you don't want to be sucked back in at the first difficulty.

Break with the maman, the *papagiri*, the gossiping at this one or that one's place.

And above all: break the shackle that is sending money home.

Because this, perhaps even more than the debt, is the most difficult chain for the girls to break. The chain of a thousand family obligations and the thousand responsibilities that come with them. Of affection. Of pity. Of the desire to be accepted at least, and to think that somewhere in the world, even for you, even if you live in slavery on the street, dying every day of cold and misery, you still have a home. It's to feed this mirage that you find yourself supporting ten or twelve people, making it possible for them to live the good life while you live worse than a dog.

And it's very difficult to say: Enough.

But if you want to save yourself, you have to do it. You have to close a door, in a very determined way, and find the courage to open another, even if you don't know what lies behind it. I say: a new way of living, of thinking, of being in the world. But it's like closing your eyes and diving into a very cold sea, without knowing whether you'll be able to swim.

But you have to do it.

You have to find the guts to say: my journey has been a total failure.

And then, you see, out of that failure a new life can be born.

22.

Anger is the first thing that comes out, when you say: enough.

Furious and uncontrollable anger, towards everything and everybody.

Until the day comes when, like Osas, you say: now my anger is directed at Nigeria, a country with so many resources where so many people live in misery.

Where there's no hope of change or improvement for anybody.

And that's why the young people want to leave, she says. Because they're tired of dreaming in front of the television and they want to try to make a better life for themselves.

I, Isoke, no longer believe in paradise; but there was a time when I did, and I thought it was outside Nigeria. I couldn't stand being in a place where the poor are just so poor and the rich so incredibly rich, just two metres away from where you live. You don't have a pen to write with or books to go to school, your family struggles to feed you, and your neighbours give roast beef to their dog. How can you accept that?

You don't have enough to eat and your rich relations come to the village and say: come to the city and we'll send you to school. Then you find yourself working for them as a live-in servant.

It's unbearable.

You see all this injustice and that's where the anger comes from, the anger and the desire to escape, to achieve something better for yourself.

But what harm is there in dreaming?

None, say I.

The harm is done by those who take advantage of your dreams.

Girls like Osas are beginning to understand.

They look at what happened to them and they understand.

That they had to assume too much responsibility from when they were small, and it was to escape that responsibility that they ended up in the slave trade. But the slave trade is not the solution to

Nigeria's problems. If the families can't afford to eat, or dress their children, or send them to school, then they've got to do their bit: they've got to protest. They've got to assume responsibility for asking their bosses and the government for better salaries, better schools, a better quality of life.

It's not by selling their daughters to the traffickers that they are going to build a decent future for themselves, or for Nigeria.

I didn't think about all these things before. I saw them and I suffered from them; but it's only now that I've finally got it clear in my head, and learnt how to express it in words. I'm very different now from that girl of twenty who left Benin City one day, with her school backpack and her one pair of blue jeans. For good as well as bad, you see, this experience has made me grow.

For example, I've understood that things are never all black or all white, that it isn't a question of good guys and bad guys, of victims and executioners.

So now I want to explain to you that trafficking is not just a question of sex, of whores and clients. Trafficking is first of all a colossal business. A business. It's a form of slavery that makes a stack of money and whites and blacks share that money, in perfect harmony. Fortunes are made off the backs of us girls, and not just the fortunes of people like the maman I saw in the paper, sitting on a divan in Benin City, surrounded by piles of cash that high. There are also the respectable whites, the ones who never beat their kids or their wives, who probably go to church on Sundays, they've got a beautiful dog, nice neighbours, a reputation with never the shadow of a stain on it. They're the ones who sell the visas, who organise the journeys, who let you through at the airport without anyone noticing. They're the cops on the take, the maman's lawyers, the intermediaries, the landlords. A lot of oh so upright citizens have made their fortune thanks to the traffic in girls from Benin City.

But in everyone's eyes it's the girls who are bad.

The whores.

The ones who are a scandal on the streets.

The ones who always pay for everybody.

23.

When they told me my mother was dead, I couldn't even cry. The world had simply collapsed.

Nothing made sense anymore.

I wasn’t hungry anymore and I couldn’t eat and I couldn’t sleep.

I didn’t have any papers.

I couldn’t even go to her funeral.

I know, though, that the day of the funeral my family went to get her body from the hospital, and I know that all the relatives were there. They all got together in the house that used to be my home, to deal with the problem of my mother’s children. Who was going to take them. Only one sister was married. And the other one? They asked. The one in Europe, who’s making so much money?

There they were in my home, talking about me, with the coffin there in the middle.

Two kids went to an uncle, one they gave to my married sister who couldn’t afford to keep him after a while, the others stayed with my older brother and my sister who were still at home. The youngest boy my dad took.

They had decided, however, that the youngest boy was my responsibility.

Because I was in Italy and I was rich.

That’s what they said.

But I wasn’t even up to looking after myself, at that moment. And so for the first time I said no. Finally. No. No and no and again no.

Then they said, alright, we’ll give him to someone else. But you have to pay for his keep.

What do you mean, I said.

I’m not working, I haven’t got a cent. How can I?

They were heaping so much responsibility onto me that one day I said that’s enough, I turned the phone off and I didn’t answer it for a year.

And when I did call them I saw that they really were desperate.

So, since then they don’t ask too much of me anymore. They tell me what they’re doing, how they’re going. Nothing more.

That’s fine with me.

24.

The last story I'm going to tell you is my sister's story.

My younger sister, the one who's now just over twenty. She was fourteen when I left. I barely remember a skinny little thing with very long legs. Braids in her hair. Big big eyes.

A few months ago she told me she was pregnant and that she wanted to come to Europe.

She too had found a journey.

She said: I finally got my lucky break.

Her lucky break.

I shut my eyes and inside me a voice shouted: it isn't possible. When will this story ever end. How many years, how much pain, how many deaths are still needed before Nigeria stops sending its daughters to the slaughterhouse.

I could hardly find enough voice to say: look, if you want to dream, go ahead.

But the reality here is very different from the dreams.

Listen.

I took my courage in both hands and I started to speak. What trafficking is. What the girls do. How they live. The horrible existence they lead.

It was the first time I found the courage to speak with someone from my own family; to say it all, all of it! without sparing a single detail. You see: I couldn't keep quiet about it, not this time. And so, my mouth dry, I explained everything just as it is. I told her about the cold and the beatings and the ridiculous shoes and the fear. The twenty-five euros and the Ditoi and Itohan found by a dog, all eaten by rats.

Don't think you're smarter than the other girls, I said.

Don't think that you're different.

Don't hope it'll go better for you.

That's what I said to her.

She asked only: it happened to you, too?

I said: yes.

And she hasn't spoken since about coming to Europe.

Do I need to tell you how happy that makes me?

25.

And this is where my story stops. Even if you keep asking me this, asking me that. I don't know what else to tell you. What to tell you all. None of us enjoys talking about their wounds, the wounds to the soul and the wounds to the body. Certain things are our business alone. Mine. Because I say: I don't want to be a victim forever.

I want to get married, and have a child, and have a normal life as far as that's possible for me. At least that. At least now. I want to go back to being the nobody I was before this story began, and in which I have no merit except that of having told it. If I did so it was only because someone had to stand up and speak out, in the name of so many who no longer have a voice. The ones who went under, you call them. I say: those who are dead, or went mad, or who somehow came to terms with the horror. I stood up and I did it. Only heaven knows what it cost me. Yet I can say: I'm glad.

Because now that I've spoken my head is lighter.

My heart too.

And it's as if a weight has been taken off my shoulders.

It's up to you now. That's what I say to you all.

My sister I saved, and now she is saving her girlfriends. She says: don't leave. She says: in Italy this is what happens. Every time I think of that my shoulders feel lighter. I think: I did what a mother would have done. Ovhoweyemé is dead, but I am not. I'm alive. I. Isoke.

I look at myself in the mirror and I realise that, with every day that passes, I look more and more like my mother. It's strange; and I'm very very glad. I look at myself, and I see her looking at me. You can be proud of me, I tell her, in spite of everything.

I say: look, I was brave.

I say: look, I can go around with my head held high.

It seems to that, from the mirror, she says: good girl.

And then I, Isoke Rose Aikpitanyi, who her mother called Ovbhokan, I, who have known the misery of all the Izogìe's of the world, I feel that somehow now I am finally whole. And free.

Just wish me a little happiness.

That's enough for me.

Thank you.

Acknowledgements.

To all those who generously offered their stories and their voices for this book:

Jennifer, 22. Lives in the Veneto region. Still has to pay off the debt. Has a two year old daughter and is terrified that "the social workers will take her away". She's controlled by a maman, has no papers, to get out she'd need to find an organisation that would take her little girl, too.

Evelyn, 26. In a relationship with a boy from Milan. Debt to pay. Was a minor when she arrived, laid charges and then ran away from the rehab community she was sent to. It's not clear what can be done for her, maybe try again with another rehab community.

Rachida, 24. Phoned from Lagos where she'd been repatriated. Her mother is dead. She has no papers and would like to return to Italy; she's suffering terribly, she says, because "my family has totally rejected me".

Johanna, 20. From Lagos. Venice. Has paid off the debt. Her father is dead and her mother is very ill. Has a valid passport but no other papers. Has a lot of willpower and "really wants to work".

Noemi, 21. Bologna. Debt to pay. Parents dead. Very young brothers and sisters in Nigeria to support. She works on the street, has health problems but is "frightened to go to hospital". She thinks only about paying. She badly needs friends.

Rose, 25. Boyfriend from Aosta. Large family. Has no papers so can't study or work; is ready for programme and the halfway house, even though her boyfriend guarantees her a house and everything.

Gloria, 24. Mantua. Debt to pay. Has never known her father, comes from a complicated and scattered family. Has been beaten up several times because, she says, "I don't want to work on the street". Has no papers, trusts nobody, speaks very little Italian. Needs a lot of help.

Gladys, 28. In a relationship with a boy from Padua. Debt paid. Has an uncle in Rome and a large family in Nigeria. No papers. Works in night clubs that have promised to regularise her tax status, “but they never do”. Wouldn’t like to stay in a rehab community that was too closed. Has a headful of confusion because of so-called friends who promise her riches.

Faith, 27. Is married to an Italian and they have a child. Lives in Rome. Has the debt to pay and wants to renegotiate it, but can’t come to an agreement. Says: “I want my family in Africa to meet my son” but is frightened to go back to Nigeria because of the debt.

Mickey, 24. Genoa. Debt to pay, very poor family, residency permit expired. The family puts a lot of pressure on her and she says: “I can’t take it anymore”. Every phonecall they ask for money for another emergency.

Joy, 26. Udine. Works off the books. Has a brother in Italy, others in Nigeria, she kids herself she’ll be able to buy a residency permit. She doesn’t want to pay off the debt any longer and is very frightened, for herself and for her family. She’s not ready to go into a rehab community, even though many of them have contacted her. Says: “in the beginning, when they threw me onto the street, I cried. Now I’ve run out of tears”.

Sandra, 23. Genoa. Debt paid, has her papers but no permanent job. Is on the street because she lives with a boyfriend who is black, illegal and unemployed. Going through a crisis because her life “hasn’t improved, even with the papers”.

Patience, 26. I know her from Turin. Debt to pay. Two children in Nigeria, very poor family. The kids’ father has vanished. “The only thing I can think about is having the children come to live with me here in Italy.”

Loweth, 25. Debt paid. She married an Italian, with our assistance, but has problems with school and social integration. His family are very hostile.

Isabel, says she’s 22. Turin. May have paid the debt. Still works on the street, has already been given 4 or 5 expulsion orders. She’s a very difficult person, doesn’t know how fit into any group of friends, lives on dreams and lies. May be at least ten years older.

June, 24. Her partner is from Turin. Debt to pay. Brothers and sisters and family in Nigeria. Had a child by “an Italian client”. Repatriated, she returned to Italy then went back to Nigeria for the birth. Now she wants to return here again, illegally as always.

Sarah, no-one knows how old she is. She called from Genoa. Has the debt to pay, works on the street, doesn't have papers. Sick mother, dead sister, vanished father. Bad health. The most urgent problem is convincing her to seek medical help: her uterus may have been torn because of rape.

Rosemary, 24. A male friend from Genoa. Her residency permit has expired. Needs to enter a rehab community. The family keeps asking her for money and so does the Adventist Church where she goes every Sunday; she doesn't have a job and is on the street. Always does what the pastor tells her. She explains: "It's for the good of my soul".

Ibironke, 27. Lives in Calabria. Debt paid, large family, no papers. Looking for work so she can send money home. She'd like to solve her problems fast because, she says: "I'm not young anymore".

Essay, 22. Perugia. Doesn't want to pay the debt. Has to live 'in hiding' because the maman is looking for her, so it's hard for her to find odd jobs to keep herself. Very frightened for herself and her large family. Doesn't want to lay charges of any kind.

Marian, 23. Sardinia. Many relatives in Nigeria. Wants to renegotiate the debt, obtain papers, find a job. Is always very tired and nervous, with big mood swings. Difficult for her to make plans.

Rachel, 24. Turin. Debt to pay. Her mother is dead, her father is polygamous and does nothing for the four children he had by his third wife. She works on the street and keeps "my brothers and sisters who live in Nigeria". She needs support.

Ogogo, 24. Lives in Parma. Wants to renegotiate the debt but can't reach an agreement. Is very reserved and diffident. In Nigeria she has a large family who are totally dependent on her.

Mercy, 24. Pavia. No papers. She has an Italian friend and says: "I asked him to marry me", but he can't make up his mind. She is confused and uncertain; she is wasting time in the hope of "sorting out the situation by marriage".

Susan, 20. A male friend in Bologna. Debt paid. No contact with her family. Would like a regular job, but "I can't because I don't have papers". Has a hard time finding even odd jobs off the books.

Tessie, 22. Foggia. No papers. Has already been repatriated once and returned to Italy because her family rejected her. Doesn't want

to pay the debt any longer. She lives in hiding, and the person hiding her demands a lot of money. Around the scene they say she tried to "pull a fast one". She says: "I don't know how to get out of this mess". Is definitely in serious danger.

Silvia, 23. Pisa. Has finished paying the debt. No papers. Doesn't want to lay charges because, she says, I'm "out of the scene" now. Survives doing odd jobs off the books.

Tina, 21. Lucca. Seven brothers and sisters in Nigeria to support, plus her two parents. Debt to pay. No papers. No intention of laying charges: she is frightened for herself and her family because, she says, they "put a voodoo curse on me":

Matildah, 26. Lazio. Two years ago she married an Italian with our legal assistance. She is integrating well and has a regular job. Wants to finish paying the debt anyway, so her family won't have any trouble. Says: "My African girlfriends tell me I'm stupid because I don't steal money from my husband".

Oseme, 22. Naples. Large family in Nigeria, no papers. Debt to pay, she would like to renegotiate it. Dreams of having papers "so I can lead a peaceful life". She's a very calm, reflective girl, with very little schooling; she wants "normal simple things".

Josephine, 23. Milan. Doesn't have papers. Has finished paying off the debt, but the maman still wants money from her. She can't say no because she has a very weak character and everybody takes advantage of her. She is frightened for her family who are very poor, and sad because she can't manage to help them as much as she'd like to.

Juliet, 24. Rome. No papers. No longer wants to pay off the debt because she feels "ripped off", and because of this is always getting into arguments and being threatened. Is in real, serious danger. A rehab community needs to be found for her straightaway.

Katherine, 24. Potenza. Has good manual skills and could also work well in a factory, but doesn't have any papers and so can't seek regular employment. Has paid the debt. She supports a large family in Nigeria.

Eky, 25. Modena. Debt to pay. No papers. Needy family in Nigeria, including a disabled brother.

Deborah, 22. Florence. Is an illegal immigrant and has the debt to pay. Won't agree to enter a rehab community or a refuge because she feels responsible for supporting her numerous younger brothers and sisters; the youngest live with various aunts who are always

asking her for money. Her father and mother are dead. She says: “my brothers and sisters come before anything”.

Julia, 23. A male friend from Salerno. No papers. Debt to pay. She has a brother in Germany and a sister in France, but supporting the family in Nigeria is her responsibility alone. Impossible to convince her that they should contribute too.

Ruth, 21. Ascoli. Illegal. Wants to renegotiate the debt and leave the street. Says: “I’ve had no news of my family for a long time”. She is very worried and risks a severe depression.

Abu, 25. Debt paid, regular papers. Has married an Italian but has a son in Nigeria she would like to “bring to Italy”. She needs a permanent job, better paid than the one she has now.

Kemi, 27. The Marches. Has a residency permit. Nothing known about the debt or any other jobs she may do. She married an African and has two children in Italy. Her husband doesn’t work and often beats her; she’s frightened of him but doesn’t want to take him to court. She is terrified that the social services will “take her children away “.

Favour, 23. Reggio Calabria. No papers. Debt to pay. Works off the books. Large family to maintain. Has been stopped several times by the police and has changed cities a number of times, so she says: “I don’t have friends anywhere”. She feels very lonely and uprooted.

Becky, 22. Naples. Papers: none. Debt: paid. Work: on the street. Large family, sick parents. “On the phone they told me my mother was dead and asked me for money for the funeral”. Two months later, though, her mother spoke to her on the phone. Now Becky is confused and depressed.

Karò, 23. Livorno. Has decided “not to pay the debt”. Left the maman’s house and lives “in hiding at the home of friends’”, but still works on the street. Has three brothers and two sisters in Nigeria to support. Needs protection, because she ran away but still lives too close to the maman’s house.

Judith, 24. Lodi. Debt paid, works off the books. No papers. She is a very serene and very determined girl. She doesn’t understand why getting a residency permit is so complicated, given that when she was on the street she “wasn’t doing anything wrong”.

Roseline, 24. Aosta. Debt paid, works off the books, no papers. Has an Italian partner who helps her, so her situation is fairly good. Dreams of doing a hairdressing course. Is already very good at “doing African braids”.

Amanda, 23. Genoa. Large family in Nigeria. Illegal. Doesn't want to pay the debt but is "very, very frightened" that they will hurt her, so she trusts no-one, neither Africans nor Italians. First of all her trust needs to be won.

The biographical notes are by Isoke.