Dealing with the Dead

ALSO BY ALAIN MABANCKOU

African Psycho
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The Lights of Pointe-Noire
Black Moses
The Death of Comrade President

Dealing with the Dead

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First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
SERPENT'S TAIL
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

Originally published in French as *Le Commerce des Allongés* © Editions du Seuil, 2022

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Tramuntana Text by MacGuru Ltd
Designed by Nicky Barneby @ Barneby Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80081 770 8
eISBN 978 1 80081 772 2

to my mother, Pauline Kengué,
whose stories appear here, more or less

to my father, Roger Kimangou,
who liked to contradict my mother's version

to the young people of Goma, and Bukavu (DRC),
for their warm welcome
while I finished this book

Dealing with the Dead

Alain Mabanckou

THE LONGEST DREAM OF YOUR DEATH

New Life

YOU TELL YOURSELF OVER AND OVER till you come to believe it: your new life started an hour ago, when a shock ripped through the earth around you, and you felt yourself being sucked up by a cyclone, then flung down where you're lying right now, on a heap of earth topped with a brand-new wooden cross.

'I breathe! I live!' you murmured to yourself in triumph.

But now, with daylight peeking over the horizon, you're not so sure. You're haunted by images of your last few hours, a dead man trapped in a coffin, borne in great pomp to his final resting place, here in the cemetery of Frère-Lachaise.

Try as you may, you can't stop dwelling on the memory of the long procession escorting you through the main streets of Pointe-Noire. The parading of a corpse before burial is common practice in this town; people embrace it as a mark of homage to the deceased, giving them a lively send-off. You are carried by six square-shouldered colossi with rippling muscles, wearing white suits and shiny black shoes with pointed tips. Their job is to execute orders, not to wonder how the person they're carrying came to die. They'll stick to

the route prescribed by the bereaved families, throughout the long procession their voices will stay silent.

Sealed up in the coffin, trailed along endless winding streets, you consider what will happen at your journey's end. You've seen funeral processions pass through the rue du Joli-Soir where you lived with your grandmother till the time of your death. So you know you'll end up at Frère-Lachaise, and that there you'll be just one among thousands upon thousands of dead. If you're lucky you'll get a few visitors a year besides your grandmother, Mâ Lembé. You'll find sweet bunches of flowers laid on your gravestone on All Saints' or Independence Day, though somewhat ironically in the latter case, since your death is linked to this day of national celebration. Once you've been laid in the earth, time will start to do its work, and for all their good intentions, the people who knew you will gradually forget, till one dry season comes when not a soul ventures forth to your tomb. Weeds will stifle it, lizards will haunt it, and black snakes too – those 'souls of no fixed abode' who, according to your native Babembé legends, caused such harm while they were alive that in death they are turned forever into reptiles of the grave. . .

You could get quite depressed by thoughts like these. But instead you dismiss them with a flick of your hand and do your best to convince yourself this is your new life, it won't be all bad, and soon you'll be heading into town to sort a few things out.

You relax your legs, stretch your arms out in the shape of a cross, and try to release yourself from the protective foetal position you instinctively adopted when the vegetable matter hacked up by earth's eruption and hurled back by the furious cyclone ended up scattered all around you. You crack each of your knuckles in turn, as though an explosion

of microbubbles in your joints is irrefutable confirmation of your existence.

Now to check if you can pick things up. You manage to find a small round pebble, like a marble. You roll it between your thumb and index finger, enjoying the relaxing feeling of its touch. Then you close your palm around it and, without getting to your feet, clench your teeth, eyes shut, and hurl it into space.

At first – silence. It feels interminable. Then you hear the little stone bounce several times against the marble of a tombstone three or four rows from yours. You had thrown it way up in the air, no mean feat in itself.

Your lips spread in a broad smile of satisfaction – surely this justifies a resumption of your previous joyful mood, countering the trail of doleful images that lately paraded through your mind.

Refreshed by your wave of euphoria, you finally decide to get up. It's the first time you've stood upright since you emerged from the tomb. Supporting yourself on the wooden cross, you manage somehow to straighten up without breaking it. You ignore the creaking of your elbow joints as you shake the reddish earth from your clothes. You're wearing an orange crepe jacket with wide lapels, a fluorescent-green shirt with a large collar, three buttons and round musketeer cuffs. Your white bow tie is a little askew, so you adjust it, remembering how Mâ Lembé hated it when you wore it off-centre to church. You seem to have got a bit wet here and there; your shirt is a little damp in the armpits, down the back, round your belly. You must have been sweating back there in your casket, you think.

You cast an admiring look at your purple flares, also of crepe, and your shiny red white-laced Salamanders. And since they might restrict your movement, you resolve to slip

off your shoes and toss them from your grave, goggling at those elevator heels – after all, you're not exactly lacking in the height department.

You have to admit it: these shoes were a quick sell from some trader near where you work at the Victory Palace. It's a French hotel, close by the Lumumba roundabout, and not far from there is the Grand Marché, where every day Pontenegrins fall upon the bundles of clothes and boxes of shoes that have been shipped out from France, mostly from Marseille, Bordeaux or Le Havre. Young people have a word for these hand-me-downs – *sola*, which means 'choose' in Munukutuba. The clothes arrive in Pointe-Noire packed tight, wrapped in plastic and sealed against theft. The shoes come in tough cloth bags, again tightly sealed. The big-time traders (Lebanese, Senegalese and Maghreb) buy them in bulk and pass them on to the little traders (the Pontenegrins) to sell at retail. Once the bales and bags have been opened and unpacked, the traders place the shoes and clothes in piles on squares of canvas spread out on the ground in the centre of the marketplace. The customers sniff at them like dogs, and try them on, heedless of the people watching them strip off in public. They put their selection to one side, or between their legs, and proceed to payment only after haggling for a considerable reduction, especially if they've found a hanging thread, a missing button, a loose label or a microscopic stain. Who cares if only the buyer can see them; the customer is always right, what matters is what he sees. No price is set in stone, it's all 'negotiable'.

As well as a whiff of *sola* – from the clothes bundles or, a more likely hypothesis, from the shop of your favourite Grand Marché trader, Abdoulaye Walaye – you pick up a stronger smell, of Mananas, a kind of eau de toilette sold in Lebanese shops and often sprinkled on corpses. No one would ever use

Mananas in Pointe-Noire, people would think they were a ghost or that they worked in the cemetery or the morgue.

You don't recall quite when your clothes began to smell like this. But you do know you haven't changed your outfit for close on five days now, which means these are the clothes you were buried in. . .

World Upside Down

NERVOUSLY, YOU TAKE A LOOK about you. . .

The lingering silence and morning mist put a damper on the delight you've been feeling till now. In fact nothing here seems to have been turned upside down or shaken up quite as you thought: the earth bears no sign of seismic tremor, and you start to think the shock you felt three hours ago, the cyclone sucking you up and flinging you back down on your grave, may just have been the product of your reeling imagination.

Also, getting out of here won't be easy. No one is going to forcibly stop you, but something doesn't feel quite right and you can't just dash out there without taking stock of all the pros and cons, or without listening to the hapless tales of those who've gone before you. As a result you're standing stock still by your gravestone, your arms hanging limp at your side. Opposite you, about three hundred metres away, you notice several paths converging at a great central water fountain. Earlier you were unsure which path to take. One of them, the widest path, the one you were tempted to follow, looks endless, with, at the far end, a minute round house, or rather a kind of little hut with a cross on the top, where a

giant crow presides, while others, less imposing, perch on the roof cawing or dozing on one leg.

But more than any of this, what alarms you most is the realisation that you're actually seeing everything upside down, so that your head feels like it's at the bottom and your feet at the top, and the distant hut you can see at the end of the main path is upside down as well. All in all, what you can sense ahead of you is behind you, and what is behind you is actually ahead.

Perhaps it was like that all along, that's why you felt the earthquake and the cyclone, but you were so overjoyed you failed to pay attention and focussed on convincing yourself you were alive, you could breathe, pick up objects, throw stones, when in fact your bearings were not at all what they were before.

Don't rub your eyes, it won't change anything.

The sky? Don't look up for it, it's down there, below.

The earth? Don't look down for it, it's up there now.

The many different paths before you, including the widest, which intrigues you, turn into lines that twist and move, glittering, making circles. They all merge together and you can't see properly; your head starts to hurt, your stomach too. You get more and more dizzy as you see planes flying down below, not above, so that you feel you might crash on top of them. Instinctively you hunch up as they pass. You now know that in order to advance you must retreat; and in order to retreat you must advance. In fact you are less bothered by what is happening up above (that is, beneath your feet) than by the aerial traffic down below (that is, beneath your head). You're not surprised to see your footprints facing backwards, as if your eyes and your feet had fallen out and, in their failure to agree, decided to go their separate ways, without asking for your approval. . .

Since you are now finding it hard to lift your feet off the ground, every step demands a Herculean effort, and as soon as you manage to take one, it echoes in your head like an earthquake, reminding you of the moment the earth moved a few hours earlier. But you force yourself to move forward, bearing in mind the chameleon's traditional wisdom, as acquired at primary school in the Trois-Cents district. Monsieur Malonga, your teacher, told you the tale of this reptile, worshipped by the African people. When the chameleon sets off in one direction he never turns his head, just an eye, so as not to lose sight of his goal. When he moves forward, he does so with caution; first he looks up, then down, gathering information before blending into the background.

You can hear your teacher, Malonga, his deep voice, praising the wisdom of the ancestors – a wisdom you need to channel right now to find your way out of here.

You tell yourself: choose a direction, don't turn your head, just your eye; look up, look down, till you find the exit leading to the other side and down into town, so you can go and sort out what's weighing on your heart.

You boost up your courage by muttering: 'I, Liwa Ekimakingaï, am a chameleon, a real chameleon. Oh yes I am. . .'

Alas, unlike the chameleon, who is able to move forward, you find yourself walking round in circles for hours on end, believing, quite wrongly, you've been walking so far that your feet are about to explode. The distance from each grave to the next seems like a chasm. You gasp for breath, though you have no recollection of walking at a great pace, or with a long stride. Your mouth feels dry; you would trade your most precious possession, that is to say your soul, for a glass of fresh water from a limpid stream bordered by trees in blossom, from which the sweet song of new and unknown species of bird meets your ear as you sit on a rock and contemplate in

wonder the majestic river's flow and the leaping fish with their iridescent scales.

Whatever you see, and try to approach, retreats with every step you take, and when you think you've reached it the whole thing pops up behind you, when you believed it lay ahead. You look down and notice, to your disappointment, that although you moved around a little bit, you only circled round and round your grave, or round a grave two or three down the line, never more than that, and your wooden cross is still planted there; you're in your stockinged feet, your Salamander shoes are scattered about, your orange crepe jacket with the wide lapels that you dropped is lying there on the ground, and your green fluorescent shirt with the broad collar and round musketeer cuffs is no longer wet under the armpits, or at the back, or above your belly, as the sun has now risen and quickly dried up the dampness, though it has failed to deal with the stubborn stains that look almost like the contours of certain countries of the world, drawn up by a skilful cartographer.

You're still wearing your purple flares, there's still a strong smell of Mananas – but that won't surprise anyone round here.

At first you held the anxiety and exhaustion in check, but now they they're back. You slump down on your grave, in the exact spot earlier where you struggled to your feet. You realise there's no getting ahead of yourself; there are things here beyond your control.

Again you hear the breeze stirring the leaves of a tree. It's a mango you hadn't noticed till now, just by your grave. You should be happy; you're the only one here lucky enough to lie beneath a fruit tree. Leaves and wind together dispense a calming sweetness, as though unseen forces in the air are cradling you, bringing you comfort.

You've grown accustomed to this pleasant sense of indolence, and you start to drift into a deep sleep, unaware that you are now entering upon the longest dream of your death. . .

As Cormorants Take Flight

IMAGES CROWD IN ON YOU in this longest dream of your death. They arise in no particular order, following their own whims and fancies, with an autonomy previously unknown to you in dreams. Images from the four days of your funeral interrupt others from your childhood; images from your adolescence mingle with places in Pointe-Noire, and people, or significant moments from your life.

You feel this immense happiness, no resistance, nothing blocking your way. You stretch out your arms, you take off, flying from one point to another with the ease of an eagle. Yes, it turns out you have wings too, the cormorants having nothing over you now, those birds you admired as a child, flying over the Côte Sauvage, heedless of their weight as they took proudly to the air in elegant flight, and you wondered what you would do one day if you too could fly like some aquatic bird.

And now here you are, flying. You rise higher, and from up here you can see the dilapidated roofs of the poor districts. For a while you follow the twists and turns of the Tchinouka river, bearing its cargo of detritus on to the Atlantic.

You notice buses caught in traffic and pousse-pousses at the busiest junctions in the city. You pass the town centre, studying the colonial architecture that jostles with the chaos of new buildings in the Mouyondzi, Mvoumvou, Kilomètre-Quatre or Mbota districts.

Up, up and up you fly, then descend with the grace of those cormorants from your childhood to the Trois-Cents district where you used to live.

People are spread out all around you, clapping. You are moved by this welcome for your landing, the more so as it comes with compliments attached:

'Bravo, Liwa Ekimakingaï! Bravo!'

'You fly like Superman!'

'How does it feel up there?'

You've come to rest; your arms fall back by your sides. Your wings retract beneath your shoulders. You know now that if you just raise your arms up high and flap them a few times your wings will reappear and you'll take off.

You greet the group applauding you. You wander round the streets of the Trois-Cents district where other people wave to you from the doorways of their plots or from balconies. Some ask where you've been since yesterday. You went off into the forest for a rest, you say; now you're on your way home, your grandmother, Mâ Lembé, is waiting for you. Some invite you in for a bite to eat, a drink. You refuse their invitations; you're sorry, you say, next time. You explain that Mâ Lembé's worried; she hasn't seen you since the night of Independence Day, 15 August, over five days ago. You see the disappointment in their faces, you apologise once again and continue on your way.

You've been walking for over thirty minutes now, and are concerned you haven't yet found the road that leads to the house where you've always lived. In theory it should only

have taken about ten minutes. You know for sure that your street is the one where the Joli-Soir dance bar is, or rather that the bar is to be found in this street, so if you can locate it your old home will be very close by.

Swallowing your pride – it's ridiculous, surely, to ask for help – you ask some young people playing draughts in front of a plot where the house is half-built but already inhabited.

You've scarcely said hello and they're already shrieking in horror:

'Help! Help! Help!'

They abandon their game and leg it, leaving you standing there stupefied by their reaction.

You go back the way you came, convinced these young folk – some of them your own age – are cretins of the first order who devote their lives to indolence and leisure.

You come to the place where you landed earlier to great applause. You can still hear the emotion in those voices as they watched you descend from on high and fold up your wings.

Alas, many of the individuals who cheered you then, chanting your name, also take to their heels when you approach. Four of them stay, though, like they're looking for a confrontation. They're walking purposefully towards you now. Their bodies are human, but each has the head of a different animal: a hyena, a shrew, an orangutang and a white shark.

'Go back to Frère-Lachaise!' one of the men cries, the one with the white shark's head.

The one with the orangutang head chimes in:

'Yes, back home with you!'

Shrew Man pipes up:

'You're frightening the children, the dogs are going crazy!'

Hyena Man is categorical, not to say threatening:

'If you don't turn back now you'll die a second time!'

Though they're shaking sticks at you, ready to strike, your reply is conciliatory:

‘Come on, guys, you’ve made a mistake; we met earlier. I’m looking for the rue du Joli-Soir. I just want to find my house, I’m really tired, please let me through. . .’

‘Get out of here! Go and join your own kind!’ they all shout in chorus, getting more and more aggressive.

Now it’s your turn to take off like someone who’s stolen fruit and vegetables at the Grand Marché, with these ogres flinging their sticks after you, clearly loving every minute of it.

You come to the top of an empty patch of land, far from everything, and try to redeploy your wings and take flight. This time, though, nothing comes out from your shoulder blades. You must keep walking along the avenue de l’Indépendence, trusting your intuition, hoping it doesn’t steer you back to those horrible people who chased you with their sticks of wood.

You’re still pretty confident; surely you’ll find the Trois-Cents district in the end, and the rue du Joli-Soir. . .

Tastes Like Mood Balls

YOU WERE RIGHT TO KEEP WALKING directly down the avenue de l'Indépendence, which runs perpendicular to the rue du Joli-Soir.

You're now right outside the dance bar. Your grandmother's house is only three plots on from here, and the café's closed right now. It always closes when someone local dies. It allows the bar owner both to honour the deceased and avoid disturbing the funeral celebrations by creating an overly competitive atmosphere between those who are having a great time dancing for joy and those who sing and weep in sorrow.

You stand there, outside your plot, intrigued to see so many people packed together inside. From a distance you can just see your own body lying under a canopy of palm leaves with tearful women of a certain age standing all around. You don't like the look of this, and you refuse to believe that the vigil is for the corpse of your good self, Liwa Ekimakingaï. You'd really like to just go to your room and have a rest. But for that you would have to make your way through the kind and sympathetic crowd who have turned out to support your grandmother in her grief.

You can't do that; you've exceeded the number of times, according to Babembé legend, that a dead person can see themselves. In theory it's only possible twice. Which means you can't be in your death bed under this canopy and in Frère-Lachaise dreaming the longest dream of your death *and* also want to shut yourself away in your childhood room while all these people in your house are showing support for your grandmother.

You catch odd bits of conversation. The women round your corpse congratulate your grandmother on owning property 'without a man's help'. You bring your gaze to rest on the wood-built house, which seems even smaller in your dream, angled slightly towards the street, as though peering at what is going on over at the Joli-Soir. And yet that's where you lived your whole life, one of those rooms was yours. The iron sheeting on the roof needs replacing. You'd promised to deal with it, you haven't done it yet; it lets in rain water and in the dry season swallows and swifts build their nests between the rafters.

Since you can't be in three different places at once you abandon the idea of hiding out in your room; instead you stand there like a pillar of salt, while in your mind's eye scenes from your childhood jostle for position, including several memorable ones from Joli-Soir. So you turn back in that direction, fascinated by the constant flow of people arriving at your house. Before long the people coming to the wake will fill up most of the street.

To you, the rue du Joli-Soir is the most beautiful street in all the world. You can buy kebabs here, made from chicken and mutton. The air smells of 'mood balls', dough balls leavened with yeast. The smell of them, a good smell, wipes out the vision of the corpse in the middle of your plot, awakens the only child you once were, who wandered through the streets

of this town and ran barefoot along the Côte Sauvage with his shirt flapping open; who always came home in time, just as the one person in all the world he cared for, Mâ Lembé, had finished making his favourite dish of beans and salt fish, with a side of manioc leaves.

But in your dream the dish tastes different: the fish isn't at all salty and the beans are spoilt, the manioc leaves served up in a clumsy heap. No, Mâ Lembé can't have made this, she'd never have got it so wrong. And it hasn't come from the restaurants down by the River Tchinouka either; they'd lose all their customers. You have no choice; you eat, you eat the mood balls with it, and notice the aftertaste of eggs mixed with flour, milk, sugar and butter. The dough balls are sold by Beninese women who settled in the town in the 1960s. Mâ Lembé used to send you to buy some or go herself, as a treat if you'd worked hard at school – and in that she was never disappointed: you were one of the best pupils at the primary school in the Trois-Cents. Sometimes, too, she would buy you mood balls if you'd behaved impeccably towards the elderly and helped them cross the road, or find their way home, or chased off the mangey and scabby dogs, barking fiercely with bared teeth as they went by.

As you're taken back to childhood by your meal with the mood balls, even though it lacks the authentic flavour of Mâ Lembé's cooking, you find yourself sitting on a bench at school, in the middle row, squashed between two of your friends, José Manuel Lopes and Sosthène Mboma. You'd been inseparable since primary school, and your families knew each other.

José Manuel Lopes's parents were originally from the enclave of Cabinda and took up exile in Pointe-Noire when Angola annexed their territory, which was rich in petrol and much coveted by the major European powers. Papa Lopes was a militant resistant in the Liberation Front of the State of Cabinda. The members of this opposition were hunted down

and had mostly fled Cabinda. In the district he was known not by his own name but as 'the Opposer'. Calm of manner, with big intellectual-type glasses, he generally wore a desert jacket and a cap with a motif of Che Guevara or a big red star.

José had two younger sisters, Lesliana and Ana Clara, both born in Pointe-Noire, whose parents used to joke that they weren't Cabindi, they were Congolese. The children helped their father post up tracts around town showing unbearable images of Cabindi people who had been abused by the Angolan regime, or even executed, with the intention of intimidating the opposition and the symbolic Cabindi government over in Europe which Angola, naturally enough, rejected, expecting the international community to do the same.

The Mboma family, on the other hand, came from Oyo, in the north of the country. Papa Mboma worked for the Congo–Ocean Railway on the Pointe-Noire-to-Brazzaville route, while Maman Mboma, who declared herself a 'housewife', single-handedly cared for their only son, Sosthène, as the father was constantly travelling. Papa Mboma was known in the district as 'the northerner'; people wondered if being sent to work in the south hadn't been a sort of banishment, since the northerners governed the country. He could actually have lived in Brazzaville and used the fact that he was a northerner to secure a political position. But he didn't give a damn about that; he had loved the railways and trains since he was a child. He even collected miniature locomotives, which Sosthène would show you in secret.

'If he finds me touching his trains he'll string me up!' your friend warned.

Sosthène would tell you the names of all the different models of miniature trains; the engines that ran on diesel, others on steam, or the electric ones produced by Jouef or Vespa, bearing the logo of the French railways, the SNCF.

In the north of the country there are no trains; there isn't even a railway. Papa Mboma had realised his dream and passed the entrance exam for the Congo–Ocean Railway. He was quite sure he would work in the south, and one year after taking up the position he fell for the charms of a southern woman, Maman Mboma, with whom he would have a child, your pal Sosthène.

The Lopes and Mboma families had immense respect for your grandmother. Maman Lopes and Maman Mboma would stop and say hello to Mâ Lembé at the Grand Marché. The three of them talked about everything, especially the behaviour of their children, then they promised they'd all meet up back in the neighbourhood, but since their houses were some way apart these promises were never fulfilled and sadly they mostly only met up for the wrong reasons: if your trio was being talked about, and complaints were starting to build up. . .

Death Was Afraid of Me

YOU, JOSÉ AND SOSTHÈNE were inseparable all through your adolescence. You quickly got the upper hand with your two classmates, not because you were a year older, but because from primary school onwards you told them stories which they listened to attentively, never batting an eyelid, even when they were quite sure you were taking them for a ride, adding a touch of salt or spice here and there to keep their attention.

Whenever you went to school all together they'd meet you at the end of the rue du Joli-Soir, each with an almost identical backpack – your parents bought them from the same Lebanese shop at the Grand Marché – and you'd set off down the avenue de l'Indépendence to walk over two hours to the communist secondary school, the Trois-Glorieuses, at the intersection of the Avenues Jacques-Opangault and Amílcar-Cabral.

You loved geography, learning about distant places you dreamed you would visit when you were grown up. However, unlike José, you hated history – all those dates to remember. He was an enthusiast for it – probably because of his father's

experience. His father must have talked to his children at table or at bedtime about the tragic fate of Cabinda.

Like Sosthène, you were pretty good at spelling and dictation. To help you with your homework – and also to gain inspiration for the stories you'd tell your friends – you devoured books you borrowed from the Charles-Miningou library in the central Mouyondzi district. Every year Mâ Lembé paid your subscription to the library and was reassured if she knew you were there, that you weren't wandering about by the Tchinouka river with your two partners in crime. The Chinese had built the library and provided books from all over the world. They wanted to help a fellow country emerge from ignorance, as you were taught to say in citizenship classes. Several high-school students were sent to Beijing, where they continued their studies, returning later to hold important posts in government or on the Central Committee of the Congolese Workers' Party, the CWP. . .

You could have gone on studying past the general first certificate, which you obtained with ease at the communist college of the Trois-Glorieuses. But you had to curb the thirst for knowledge that had drawn you from the Trois-Cents to the Charles-Miningou library, where you devoured *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the little American whose tribulations you would later relate dramatically to José and Sosthène. You believed that the fictional town of St Petersburg – where the little American Tom Sawyer lived, supposedly somewhere on the River Mississippi in the state of Missouri – was a real place, the sister town to Pointe-Noire. You imagined the River Mississippi as a cousin to the Atlantic Ocean at Pointe-Noire.

Ever intent on displaying your passion for this bedside read, from which you could recite entire chapters without stumbling over a single word, you cast yourself as Tom Sawyer – he too was an orphan, and was raised by his aunt Polly, as you were by your grandmother. And as if this similarity

wasn't enough, you felt the need to surround yourself with friends of the same name. So you gave José the nickname 'Huckleberry Finn' and Sosthène that of 'Joe Harper'.

These names were not chosen at random: Sosthène was pretty much your favourite, as Joe Harper was Tom Sawyer's. You liked the same things. He was prepared to follow you blindly, while José Manuel Lopes, like Huckleberry Finn, dreamed of building a raft, to escape from Pointe-Noire and leave his parents' rows behind, especially those of his father, who drank from morning till night and unleashed his wrath on his family, usually in public. In the neighbourhood they attributed this behaviour to the worsening political situation: the installation by Angola of an impressive military presence in the enclave of Cabinda had such a profound effect on Papa Lopes that he sought comfort in alcohol.

No, you would never have set foot on José's raft, you wanted to stay close to Mâ Lembé. At which point he would have asked Sosthène 'Joe Harper' to join him. The two of them would have played a game of pirates and warm-hearted bandits, like Robin Hood, another character you were all fascinated by, because he looked out for the poor and oppressed – like the people of Cabinda, José would add. Whereupon Sosthène would suggest to José that they attack the trains of the Chemin de Fer Congo–Océan and distribute the goods they seized to the people of the villages.

Either way, the two adventurers would have travelled by the River Tchinouka. They'd have ended up as young soldiers in the rebellion in far-off Cabinda, hiding out in the maquis, ready to take up arms the moment they got the signal from the commander of the opposition, who'd recruited them to liberate this rich enclave from the clutches of Angola.

It was down to you that most of the group's crazy ideas and tricks were inspired by *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. But your

gang went further – Tom Sawyer wasn't a bad lad, after all. Lazy, maybe, eager for recognition, but with a fertile imagination, which eventually earned him more gratitude than he probably deserved. But in your case, the mark had been overstepped. There were more and more complaints, and soon enough the local leaders became aware of them. Your parents were at their wits' end, their reprimands and punishments having no effect at all.

Occasionally Mâ Lembé paid the fines at the Trois-Cents police station, dragging you along with her with your head hung low, pulling your ears in front of the officers. One time someone complained that you and your gang had trashed Monsieur Kibandi's garden, then stolen mangoes from Monsieur Bilampassi's fields, over by Agostinho Neto Airport. Another that you'd stolen tyres off Monsieur Masseongo's bike, and sold them to Monsieur Kikadidi. Yet another time that you'd dropped a banana skin outside the shop of Diamoucoune, the Senegalese, and laughed when the poor man skidded on it.

You had by now acquired a reputation for your varied bag of tricks, some of them bordering on petty criminality. Some people simply called you 'bandits', or 'hoodlums', or 'delinquents'. You were the head of operations, the brains; the others were the rest of the body, the limbs, blindly carrying out your plans.

As a last resort, Mâ Lembé evoked your mother's memory:

'If Albertine was alive today she would not be proud of you!'

She added that Albertine was not at all happy over there in the other world, where she must be thinking she, Mâ Lembé, had failed to keep the promise she had made to her in the Adolphe-Cissé hospital: to help you to become an honourable man. The doctor had just told her that Albertine had

died from complications of childbirth. Mâ Lembé suddenly realised that from now on she would be both mother and grandmother to you.

Somewhat unoriginally, she decided to call you 'Liwa Ekimakingaï', meaning 'Death was afraid of me'. At first she wanted to call you Yezu Christo, but the city authorities refused flat out, pointing out that there was only one Jesus Christ in this world, and it was forbidden to take his name in vain. To do so would be to put the child in evil odour, making a hell of his life here below.

In fact the name Liwa Ekimakingaï suited you: through it you became proof that Albertine was alive, that she had breathed her life into yours, a life eternal. You only ever saw features of your mother in the black and white photos that Mâ Lembé showed you. As a small child, you loved to sit on her knee as she leafed through an old photo album. You'd look long and hard at the young woman, whose eyes sparkled with life. This was Albertine. This was your mother. . .

'She was so beautiful. . .'

You said this to Mâ Lembé not because Albertine was your mother but because she had taken everything from your grandmother while she herself was in the prime of life. Those fine facial features, the graceful neck with sparkling jewels of ebony and sometimes ivory. . .

Yes, she was tall. You're one metre ninety yourself, and get your height from her. Mâ Lembé, who is ten centimetres shorter than you, was always saying so.

'Liwa, you're the same height as your mother. When I see you, it's like I'm seeing her.'

The Policeman

MÂ LEMBÉ IS OMNIPRESENT in your dream.

You hear her telling you she was not far off forty when she had your mother, Albertine, in Mouyondzi, in the Bouenza region, a southern part of the country you have never set foot in – why would she take you back to the place where, in her view, all her troubles began? Your grandfather, whom you never knew – she would not have wanted you to – was a policeman, and had recently been transferred to that region to work at the magistrates' court. Mâ Lembé met him there for the first time the day she went to complain about her neighbours' son who had stolen one of her goats and sold it. The policeman posted at the entrance to the building was charged with checking identity cards. After examining Mâ Lembé's document at some length he whispered to her quietly that she reminded him of his cousin in Madoungou, up in the north of Mouyondzi. Mâ Lembé simply smiled, more concerned with getting her complaint heard and receiving swift compensation from her neighbours. She was wearing a lightweight orange blouse over a pair of very tight trousers made of electric-green jersey. Her yellow high-heeled shoes rang

out with every step she took. She went on her way, unaware that behind her the policeman was staring fixedly at her arse as she advanced down the corridor towards the desk to wait her turn.

A dozen or so plaintiffs were ahead of her.

She turned around and caught the policeman signalling to his colleague at the desk that he should move your grandmother up to the front of the queue. Why would she not accept, if for once she could skip the lengthy administration everyone complained of?

Mâ Lembé was extremely pleased: the policeman promised to send an officer to 'intimidate' the neighbours into paying for her goat 'in five seconds flat'.

Her benefactor showed up that very evening at Mâ Lembé's house. Power and the general fear inspired by his police uniform afforded him the liberty to do so.

So what happened that evening? Your grandmother was pretty tight-lipped about this, conceding only that:

'I made the biggest mistake of my life... But having said that, it was a mistake that gave me a reason to live: your mother. And now, it's you... I never heard from the policeman again, once I told him he was going to be a father...'

She paused for breath then continued:

'He was ashamed to have made a child with me; in his eyes I was just some old woman...'

The whole of Mouyondzi talked of nothing but 'the woman who got knocked up by the policeman', and your grandmother was accused of having been determined to have a child with this man for economic reasons. In the end Mâ Lembé tired of the constant humiliating talk of the women, and even of the men – who dubbed her 'the policeman's easy lay' – and decamped overnight from Mouyondzi to Pointe-Noire, taking little Albertine with her.

The Little Chief with the Big Scar

IN A YEAR YOUR GRANDMOTHER had acquired a patch of land in the Trois-Cents and built a wooden house on it. She was able to do this thanks to the women of the Grand Marché, whose solidarity was no myth.

As soon as she arrived she heard talk of a certain Sabine Bouanga, an elderly woman who was both the most respected and most feared of women at the Grand Marché. It was impossible to find a stand there without going via Sabine Bouanga, and she brooked no resistance to her influence.

Things were less complicated for Mâ Lembé as Sabine Bouanga, like her, came from the Bouenza region and was of Babembé descent. There was a tribal aspect to the market, at least when it came to trade in certain products. Accordingly, Sabine Bouanga was said to have generated not only tribal leanings in the market, but also a certain prejudice in favour of women. Women dominated its principal activities, specialising in the sale of palm oil, fruit and vegetables, manioc, tobacco, rice, salt, smoked and salted fish, letting the men get on with selling wood, charcoal, bread and meat.

In spite of the significant presence of the women there, it

was still the men who called the shots from the Mairie, and Sabine Bouanga knew them all. She was the only one they were afraid of, and no one forgot the day she was refused a stand for one of her childhood friends from Bouenza. She turned up furious to see the head of the Market department at the Mairie and the scene that ensued is etched into the memory of all Pontenegrins.

'So you're refusing my childhood friend a table? Very well, let's settle things here and now. We'll soon see who wears the trousers!' she threatened.

She took off her clothes and bellowed like a mad cow, aiming her bare arse at the Mairie officials.

'There you are – get an eyeful of that!'

The general commotion reached its peak when she spread her legs and released a torrential stream of urine that continued to flow till Zacharie Gampion, known as 'the little chief with the big scar', intervened. His face had been scarred when he was born, like many of the Batékés. Scarification, he maintained, was part of their concept of Beauty. Zacharie Gampion responded to any detractors by marginalising another section of the population, though those listening often didn't get the point of his comparisons:

'The cheeks of those without scars are as boring as a pygmy's bottom! I was lucky to receive the blessing of my Téké ancestors, who are actually the only ones who can lay claim to land ownership in this country. We're not like the rest of you – we're from the north and the south; you'll find us in Gabon as well as the two Congos!'

That day, to calm Sabine Bouanga down, the little chief with the big scar promised her the Mairie would give her friend a stand and would charge only half the usual fee for the licence in the first year.

Then he turned to his staff and declared:

'She's the boss of the Grand Marché, not me! She knows what goes on there. I'm just there to fix the administration!'

This final remark assured Sabine she was held in high esteem. While she was putting her clothes back on, the crowd turned their backs to her, for fear of being cursed. They all knew that the ancestors and traditions showed no mercy: if you didn't look away when an angry mama exposed her naked body you'd never be the same; bad luck would follow you all the days of your life.

The little chief with the big scar knew this too; he had a healthy respect for tradition and had no wish to lose his job over some argument about a table.

So the market women had a reputation for all helping one another. They paid a monthly subscription agreed to by everyone, and each of them in turn was given the money in strict order of rotation. As there were about a hundred of them and each of them undertook to contribute 50,000 CFA francs a month, Mâ Lembé had pocketed over five million, a sum she could never in her life have got together in such record time. Back then the five million francs easily covered the purchase of a piece of land in the rue du Joli-Soir in the Trois-Cents neighbourhood.

Even when someone received their big payment, they had to carry on paying the subscription, till the very last trades-woman had had her turn. It was known as the *Likelemba*, a system of interest-free credit founded on decency, word of honour, mutual trust and genuine friendship. Sabine Bouanga made sure everyone kept their word. Anyone tempted to play dirty risked losing their place at the market. As a result no one had ever been known to abuse the system, and at the end of the month Sabine Bouanga visited each woman's stand to collect her dues.

Mâ Lembé was able to buy her plot in the rue du Joli-Soir because so many people from Bouenza and the Babembé tribe had also built their houses there. The purchase price

took account of the purchaser's line of descent, so she had a bit left over to build her house of wood.

What became your room had previously been your mother's. . .

Demons in White Blouses

ONCE ALBERTINE REACHED ADOLESCENCE Mâ Lembé stopped counting the number of times she had to shoo away what she called the 'grown-up cockerels' forcing their attentions on her in the district. Among the young lady's admirers were fathers, traditional leaders, civil servants, notorious polygamists promising to pay a dowry Mâ Lembé could scarcely refuse. Some of them ambushed the girl while she was out running errands for her mother, and handed her notes. Mâ Lembé reported them to the police. The police retorted that Albertine was a tease; she ought to stop wearing short skirts and 'T-shirts that excite people in the street, showing off her two biggest assets'. Some policemen even insulted her indirectly with the repellent expression 'like mother like daughter. . .'

To warn her daughter of the dangers waiting for her out there, your grandmother drew on her own experiences with the policeman she never named:

'Men are such lowlifes! They're happy to shoot their load at night, then in the day they run off from their responsibilities like squirrels smelling smoke in the bush.'