

TOMORROW I'LL BE TWENTY

ALAIN MABANCKOU

Translated by Helen Stevenson





Culture

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In this country, a boss should always be bald and have a big belly. My uncle isn't bald, he hasn't got a big belly, and you don't realise, the first time you see him, that he's the actual boss of a big office in the centre of town. He's an 'administrative and financial director'. Maman Pauline says an administrative and financial director is someone who keeps all the company's money for himself and says: 'I'll hire you, I won't hire you, and I'm sending you back to where you came from.'

Uncle René works at the CFAO, the only company in Pointe-Noire that sells cars. He has a telephone and a television in his house. Maman Pauline thinks things like that cost too much for what they are, there's no point having them because people lived better lives without. Why put a telephone in your own home when you can go and make a call from the post office in the Grand Marché? Why have television when you can listen to the news on the radio? And anyway, the Lebanese down at the Grand Marché sell radios, you can beat them down on the price. You can also pay in instalments if you're a civil servant or an administrative and financial director, like my uncle.

I often think to myself that Uncle René is more powerful than the God people praise and worship every Sunday at the church of Saint-Jean-Bosco. No one's ever seen Him, but people are afraid of His mighty power, as though He might tell us off or give us a smack, when in fact He lives far far away, further than any Boeing can fly. If you want to speak to Him, you have

to go to church and the priest will pass on a message to Him, which He'll read if he has a spare moment, because up there He's run off his feet, morning, noon and night.

Uncle René is anti-church and is always saying to my mother: 'Religion is the opium of the people!'

Maman Pauline told me, if anyone calls you 'opium of the people' you should punch him straight off, because it's a serious insult, and Uncle René wouldn't go using a complicated word like 'opium' just for the fun of it. Since then, whenever I do something silly, Maman Pauline calls me 'opium of the people'. And in the playground, if my friends really annoy me I call them 'opium of the people!' and then we get into a fight over that.

My uncle says he's a communist. Usually communists are simple people, they don't have television, telephone, or electricity, hot water or air conditioning, and they don't change cars every six months like Uncle René. So now I know you can also be communist and rich.

I think the reason my uncle is tough with us is because the communists are strict about how things should be done, because of the capitalists stealing all the goods of the poor wretched of the Earth, including their means of production. How are the poor wretched of the Earth going to live off their labours if the capitalists own the means of production and refuse to share, eating up the profits, instead of splitting them fifty-fifty with the workers?

The thing that gets my Uncle René really angry is the capitalists, not the communists, who must unite because apparently the final struggle won't be long now. At least, that's what they teach us at the école populaire in Moral studies. They tell us, for

instance, that we are the future of the Congo, that it's up to us to make sure that capitalism doesn't win the final struggle. We are the National Pioneer Movement. To start with we children belong to the National Pioneer Movement and later we'll belong to the Congolese Workers' Party – the CPT – and maybe one day one of us will even become President of the Republic, who also runs the CPT.

Hearing me – Michel – use the words my uncle uses, you might think I was a true communist, but in fact I'm not. It's just that he uses these strange, complicated words so often – 'capital', 'profit', 'means of production', 'marxism', 'leninism', 'materialism', 'infrastructure', 'superstructure', 'bourgeoisie', 'class struggle', 'proletariat', etc., I've ended up knowing them all, even if I do sometimes mix them up without meaning to and don't always understand them. For instance, when he talks about the wretched of the Earth, what he really means is the starving masses. The capitalists starve them, so they'll turn up to work the next day, even though they're being exploited and they didn't eat yesterday. So before the hungry can win their struggle against the capitalists, they must do a tabula radar of the past and take their problems in hand, instead of waiting for someone else to come and liberate them. Otherwise they're truly stuffed, they'll be forever hungry and eternally exploited.

When we sit down to eat at Uncle René's house, I always get put in the worst seat, bang opposite the photo of an old white guy called Lenin, who won't take his eyes off me, even though I don't even know him, and he doesn't know me either. I don't like having an old white guy who doesn't even know me giving me nasty looks, so I look him straight back in the eye. I know it's rude to look grown up people in the eye, that's why I do it

in secret, or my uncle will get cross and tell me I'm being disrespectful to Lenin who is admired the world over.

Then there's the photo of Karl Marx and Engels. It seems you're not meant to split these two old guys up, they're like twins. They've both got big beards, they both think the same thing at the same time, and sometimes they write down both their thoughts in a big book together. It's thanks to them people now know what communism is. My uncle says it was Marx and Engels who showed that the history of the world was actually just the history of people in their different classes, for example, slaves and masters, landowners and landless peasants and so on. So, some people are on top in this world, and some are on the bottom and suffer because the ones on top exploit the ones at the bottom. But because things have changed a lot and the ones on top try to hide the fact that they're exploiting the ones at the bottom, Karl Marx and Engels think we should all be quite clear that the differences still exist, and that nowadays there are two big classes at odds with each other, engaged in a ruthless struggle: the bourgeoisie and the proletariats. It's easy to tell them apart in the street: the bourgeois have big bellies because they eat what the proletarians produce and the proletarians or the starving masses are all skinny because the bourgeois only leave them crumbs to eat, just enough so they can come to work the next day. And Uncle René says this is what you call the exploitation of man by his fellow man.

My uncle has also hung on the wall a photo of our Immortal, comrade president Marien Ngouabi, and one of Victor Hugo, who wrote lots of poems that we recite at school.

Generally speaking, an Immortal is someone like Spiderman, Blek le Roc, Tintin or Superman, who never dies. I don't understand why we have to say that comrade president

Marien Ngouabi is immortal when everyone knows he's dead, that he's buried in the cemetery at Etatolo, in the north of the country, a cemetery which is guarded seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, all because there are people who want to go and make their *gris-gris* on his grave so they can become immortal too.

Anyway, there you go, we have to call our ex-president 'The Immortal', even though he's no longer alive. If anyone's got a problem with that, the government will deal with them, they'll be thrown in prison and given a trial once the Revolution has got rid of the capitalists and the means of production at last belong to the wretched of the Earth, to the starving masses who struggle night and day, all because of this business with the classes of Karl Marx and Engels.

Maman Pauline knows I'm very frightened of Uncle René, and she exploits it. If I don't want to go to bed at night without her coming in to kiss me goodnight she reminds me that if I don't go to bed her brother will think that I'm just a little capitalist who won't sleep because he wants a kiss from his mummy first, like those capitalists' children who live in the centre of town or in Europe, especially in France. He'll forget I'm his nephew and give me a good hiding. That shuts me up pretty quickly, and Maman Pauline leans over and just touches me on the head, but she doesn't give me a kiss like in the books we read in class that take place in Europe, especially in France. That's when I tell myself that not everything you read in books is true, and you shouldn't always believe what you read.

Sometimes I can't get to sleep, though not always because I'm waiting for my mother's goodnight kiss, sometimes just because the mosquito net bothers me. Once I'm inside it I feel as though I'm breathing in the same air as the evening before, and then I start sweating so much you'd think I'd wet the bed, which I haven't.

The mosquitoes in our *quartier* are strange, they just love sweat, it means they can really stick to your skin and take their time about sucking your blood till five in the morning. Also, when I'm inside the mosquito net, I look like a corpse, the mosquitoes buzzing round me are like people weeping because I've just died.

I told Papa Roger this. I did, I told him I'm like a little corpse when I'm inside my mosquito net, and one day, if they're not careful, I'll really die in there, and I'll never be seen on this earth again, because I'll have gone up on high to join my two big sisters, who I've never known because they were in too much of a hurry to go straight up to heaven. I was in tears myself as I told him that, imagining myself as a tiny little corpse in a tiny little white coffin surrounded by people crying pointlessly, since if you're dead you're not coming back, except Jesus who can work miracles, and resuscitate, as though death, for him, was just a little afternoon siesta.

It worried Papa Roger that I was starting to talk about death like that at my age. He told me children never die, God watches

over them at night while they're sleeping and He gives them lots of air to breathe so they don't suffocate in their sleep. So I asked him why God hadn't put lots of air in the lungs of my two big sisters. He looked at me kindly. 'I'll see to it, I'll take off the mosquito net.'

But it was weeks and weeks before he did anything about it. He finally took my mosquito net off yesterday, when he got home from work. He'd been to buy some Flytox from someone in the Avenue of Independence. Usually any self-respecting mosquito who hears the word Flytox buzzes off quickly, rather than die a slow, stupid death.

Papa Roger put this stuff all over my room, so the smell would last longer. Now the mosquitoes in our *quartier* are no fools, you can't trick them that easily, particularly since you can see the picture of a dying mosquito on the Flytox packet. Is it likely they'll commit suicide instead of fighting for your last drop of blood? They wait till the smell wears off, then they come right back and bite you all over because they're angry with you now for waging war on them. When in fact they're just like you, they want to live as long as they can.

So, even if you pump your house full of Flytox, you should never claim victory too soon. The mosquitoes will always win in the end, and then they'll go and tell all the other mosquitoes in town that in fact you can get round the product after all. Mosquitoes aren't like us, they never keep secrets, they spend the whole night chatting, as though they'd nothing else to do. And since they're the same ones as in the Trois-Cents *quartier*, and they've seen you spraying Flytox in your house, first of all they go to the neighbours' houses, where they don't have it and then when they've finished there they come back to your room to see if it still smells of Flytox. Some mosquitoes are

even used to it, and explain to their mates how to protect themselves against it. They say, 'Watch out for those guys, it stinks of Flytox in their house; if you don't want to die, take cover for now in a wardrobe or a cooking pot or a pair of shoes or some clothes'. And they'll wait till you turn down the light on the storm lantern. They're pleased because they can see you're scared of them. If you're really scared, it means you've got lots of nice warm blood to feed them on over the winter, and you didn't want them to find out. If one of them comes looking for a fight and you try to squash it with your hands or a bit of wood, the others then turn up with their sisters and their cousins and their aunts and bite you all over. One little group makes the noise, the others attack. They take turns. The ones making the noise aren't always the ones that attack, and the ones attacking wait behind them in a circle. There you are, all on your own, you've only got two hands, you can't see what's happening behind you, you can't protect yourself, they're a well-trained army out for revenge because you've tried to wipe them out with your Flytox. You're itching all over, you've got mosquitoes up your nose, mosquitoes in your ears, and they're all biting away and laughing their heads off.

And that's why I woke up this morning covered in red spots. If I sniff my arms, they still smell of Flytox. A really angry mosquito – the leader, perhaps – bit me just above my eye, it's so swollen, you'd think the devil had thrown me an invisible punch. Maman Pauline put some boa grease on it and said, to cheer me up, 'Never mind, Michel, your eye will be better by sunset. Boa grease, that's what they used on me when I was little. Tonight we'll put back the mosquito net your father took off. That Flytox the Lebanese sell is rubbish. And he knows it.'

When Caroline looks at me, I feel like the best-looking guy in the world. We're the same age, but she knows all there is to know about us boys. Maman Pauline says she's very *advanced*. I don't know what that means. Maybe it's because Caroline acts like a real lady. Even at her age she wears lipstick and she braids almost every woman's hair in our neighbourhood, including my mother's. Caroline listens to what the fine ladies say about men, and she can't wait to be like the women she goes shopping with in the Grand Marché. Maman Pauline says Caroline knows how to make a dish of beans and manioc leaves, which a lot of grown-up people still can't do. She is really very *advanced*.

Caroline's parents and mine are friends. They live at the far end of the Avenue of Independence, just before the road that leads to the Savon *quartier*, where Uncle René lives. It's a short walk from their house to ours, ours is the one painted green and white halfway down the same avenue, opposite Yeza, the joiner, who makes loads of coffins and lines them up in front of his lot, so people can come and choose.

Caroline and I used to go to school together, at Trois-Martyrs, but now she's at a different place, in the Chic *quartier*. The reason she's not at the same school as me now is because her father had a row with the headmaster.

I really miss those days when she'd come strolling down the Avenue of Independence, and meet me outside our house.

We avoided the tarmacked roads because our parents said it was too dangerous, because none of the cars had brakes and the drivers drank corn spirit before they set off. We specially avoided the crossroads at Block 55, where someone got knocked down by a car at least once a month. In our *quartier* people blamed Ousmane, a shopkeeper from Senegal, just opposite the crossroads. Apparently he had this magic mirror that fooled the poor pedestrians, so they thought the cars were a long way off, like a kilometre away, when in fact it was more like a few metres, and bam! they ran them over, just as they started crossing. It looked like Ousmane had loads of customers, more than the other shops, because people died right outside his shop. We'd go round behind his shop, without even looking at it. Because we were scared of Ousmane's magic mirror. Sometimes I'd be behind Caroline and she'd turn round and take my hand and give me a shake and tell me to get a move on because the devils in the magic mirror always caught children who lagged behind.

'Michel, don't look in Ousmane's shop! Close your eyes!'

I walked fast. I didn't want to vanish while she wasn't looking. Our school was an old building painted green, yellow and red. When we finally got to the playground we had to separate. Caroline went into Madame Diamoneka's class, and I went into Monsieur Malonga's. My hand was damp because Caroline had been holding it tight all the way.

Around five in the evening we'd come home together. She'd drop me outside our house, then carry on home. I'd stay outside, watching her go. Soon she'd be just a little shape way off in the crowd. And in I'd go, happy.

My best friend, Lounès – who's Caroline's brother – liked walking to school alone. Was that because he didn't want to