IT WAS A DIFFERENT ERA

He was the eldest, so it fell to him to take care of his parents and the family farm. From a very young age—just like his siblings—he had to work the land: sowing, irrigating, reaping, gleaning, gathering firewood, tending the vegetable garden, looking after the cows and sheep, raising and slaughtering pigs, caring for the chickens... Back then, work lasted from sunrise to sunset, and the only machinery available was extremely rudimentary. The tasks were arduous and complex. Professional skills were learned the hard way: by following orders without a word of complaint. There was no room for fussiness or coddling. Later on, he managed to make his trade more profitable by working the land for neighbors, charging them based on the specific tasks he performed. He was an excellent worker with extensive agricultural knowledge, so he never lacked clients. Eventually, he ventured into pig farming—first with one farm, and later with three: one for breeding and two for fattening. There was no time for rest in that household; his wife ran a business that served as a bar, a restaurant, and a guesthouse all in one.

When his children were finishing their final years of secondary school, he bought an apartment in the provincial capital so that, when they left for university, they would have a place to stay—keeping them away from bad company. Times could bring unexpected turns. More and more young people were suddenly ending up as casualties, consumed by drugs. At the time, he couldn't help but think: "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree"—he himself would often enjoy a few glasses of wine with friends after work, and now his children were following in his footsteps. The most expensive part of higher education wasn't the tuition, but the cost of housing; by providing a place to stay, he saved money. He gave himself full marks for that—it had, without a doubt, been a sound investment. He demanded responsibility from his offspring. They were expected to make the most of their privileged position. He would tolerate no missed classes, no truancy, and—naturally—no participation in demonstrations or assemblies. Politics never led to anything good; besides, what was the point? Things were fine just as they were.

He never gave a thought to other events from earlier stages of his life—events that were nonetheless worthy of inclusion in his biography. In all likelihood, he didn’t recall them because he felt he had nothing to reproach himself for. He would openly declare that life was a battlefield, dismissing anything else as nonsense—the sort of talk typical of the timid, the weak, and the cowardly. Success, he insisted, could only be achieved through

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struggle and great courage. Privately, he told himself that he had nothing to be ashamed of and no reason to ask anyone for forgiveness.

One day, early in the 21st century, a tall, slender young man approached his estate. His name was Mamadou, and he hailed from Mali. He had arrived on the Andalusian coast aboard a small, makeshift boat—a *patera*—along with forty others: mostly men, though there were also a few women and children among them. He had no intention of remaining in the country where he had landed; his plan was to cross the border after a few months and try to make a living in a neighboring nation. Someone had told him that there were better job prospects there, and that the pay was higher—after all, that country was a member of the club of the world's seven most powerful economies. But things went wrong—terribly wrong.

Although he spent several months held in a detention center for migrants (CIE), the authorities found insufficient grounds for his repatriation, so they set him free. He turned to the Red Cross for assistance, where he was told that his primary problem was his irregular legal status. The young man immediately linked it to the thorny issue of the "papers"—those long-awaited, precious documents.

After spending some time wandering through various towns—occasionally taking on low-skilled, poorly paid jobs (though the pay varied depending on the task and his "productivity"—a term he interpreted as "working hard and accepting that the boss is always right")—he ended up living with three other young African men. They stayed in an abandoned warehouse, where a tap attached to the front wall served as their only place to wash. They pooled their earnings, as this made their money go a bit further. One night, a heated argument broke out over something he didn't quite understand; the others were speaking a language he didn't know. They shouted at him and threatened him, leaving him no choice but to leave.

It was then that Mamadou knocked on our protagonist's door, looking for work. The response was a curt "No," followed by the door being slammed shut—but, an instant later, it opened again. This time, the words were music to the job-seeker's ears and instantly lifted his spirits: "Yes, I have work for you." It wasn't just one job, but three: caring for the grandfather, who had limited mobility; working as a waiter and kitchen assistant in the restaurant; and tending the vegetable garden behind the family home. He ate the restaurant's leftovers. His wages—paid, of course, "under the table"—came to five hundred euros a month, from which two hundred were deducted for room and board (a bunk bed in a room attached to the shed where machinery and tools were kept).

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He also gave no thought to the constant rent hikes imposed on the tenants living in the two properties he owned: one where his children had resided while studying in the capital, and another—now held by a bank following an eviction that left a single mother and her two young children out on the street. He had acquired the latter for a very affordable price, especially considering the sharp market surge at the time. His primary and sole objective was to extract the highest possible return from his investments. He met with several real estate agents, ultimately choosing the one most uncompromising when it came to late payments or property damage. Though he never witnessed these events firsthand, he was always kept fully informed of the details. One couple with two children, after renting for three years, faced a 30 percent increase in their monthly rent in the fourth year, followed by another similar hike in the fifth. Their monthly payment climbed from seven hundred euros to twelve hundred. Although both parents worked, they were unable to meet their financial obligations; by the third month of insolvency, the family of four had to vacate their home. Once this family was gone, the property was converted into a tourist apartment. He followed a similar process with another of his apartments. In this way, the profit he derived from his properties increased significantly—almost exponentially. He remained indifferent to the complaints and comments from neighbors regarding the noise, shouting, drunkenness, exhibitionism, and general misconduct of the transient, ever-changing tenants, who would spend their nights as if the world were about to end.

In the long run, his obsession with maximizing his capital returns would prove to be his undoing. He became interested in the enigmatic world of cryptocurrencies, prompted by a well-known financial newspaper that promised exceptionally high returns on such investments. "The economic world is moving in that direction; some countries are already conducting commercial transactions using this new asset," several executives assured him during various personal meetings. His children warned him that such ventures carried significant risk, urging him to wait while they thoroughly analyzed the global performance of these digital currencies—but he chose to ignore their warnings. Before committing his wealth to the purchase of these new digital assets, he decided to distribute a portion of his properties and funds among his grandchildren, who were still minors. This way, no one could hold him responsible if the venture went awry. His wife had passed away years earlier, and he felt he needed little for himself. He had never been fond of proverbs, yet he learned the hard way that "greed leads to ruin." His gamble on these technological currencies had failed.

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His pride could not bear the thought of being seen in his town as a loser—a nobody. Nor did he want to become a burden to his children. So, once he had fully grasped the dire state of his finances, he decided to catch an early train—long before dawn—and head toward an unknown destination.

He stood, frozen, at the far end of the street. He remained perfectly still, not even blinking, in a state bordering on catatonia. He dared not speak; the words remained locked away, his body paralyzed, as if he had been turned into a pillar of salt. Everything had changed so drastically and so suddenly that he found himself completely overwhelmed. Just a few days earlier, he had spent his mornings walking on the outskirts of town and his afternoons at the casino, playing *mus* with acquaintances. Occasionally, he would join the local retirees for a game of *petanque* on the sandy patches in the park. But now… now he had nothing. He felt hollow—broken, like a rag doll.

When he picked up the bowl and walked dejectedly to the line at the soup kitchen, a series of thoughts flashed through his mind: the young man from Mali (what could have become of him?); the faces of the two little ones—whom he had never even met—from the family left out on the street (poor children!); the disproportionate punishment he had inflicted on his son—forbidding him from going out to play with his friends for two months—after the teacher reported that the boy hadn't done his homework for three days (I am beyond forgiveness); the kindness of his wife, who never abandoned him and never even raised her voice, despite having every reason to do so (I failed to love her as she deserved); and the cynical smile he would offer the neighbors in his building—where he ran short-term tourist rentals—whenever they complained about the rude behavior and the incidents caused by his tenants (all I cared about was the money)…

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"Stories without Mufflers" (2006 -)