

HOME

Kossi A. Komla-Ebri

Translated by Marie Orton



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GOING HOME

*Heaven may not know it
But the earth is covered with footsteps,
The reluctant footsteps of those who leave
To seek a home.
For home is not only
Here where you were born,
But it is where
The man that is in you
Can look up at the sky at last, grateful
For the day that ends
And can hope
In the day that will come*

DONATELLA MARTELLI AVANZI

“Yao, if you want to go back to Abidjan,¹ I have a plane ticket for you on tomorrow’s flight.”

This was his brother-in-law’s idea.

“Really?” Yao asked incredulously.

“Yes! But . . .”

It was a Sunday afternoon, a beautiful spring day. After greeting the African girls from his sister’s boarding school, Yao headed home. Getting on the metro at the Montrouge station, he walked, almost skipping, trying to suppress the anxious tumultuous joy that was trying to escape from the tips of his toes up through the roots of his hair and out his eyes. He couldn’t repress the quiver in his soul that

1 The capital of Ivory Coast.

had turned into a tension so intense it made his muscles ache. He tried to take deep breaths, tried to order his thoughts, but he couldn't hold back that deafening cry echoing deep inside. After hopping the turnstile to dodge paying the ticket, he continued jubilantly down the endless metro tunnel in the direction of Porte de Clignancourt, fists clenched, waving his arms in triumph, and finally burst out, with his arms outstretched and all the strength he could give to his voice: "I'm going hooooomme!!!"

In the half-light of the empty tunnel, an echo returned with an almost ironic "Oh . . ." But in his sparkling happiness, Yao paid no attention.

He swayed on his feet, immersed in his thoughts, turning a blind eye to the crowd of passengers pushing him into the old subway car with its hard wooden benches.

One thought expanded in his mind until it occupied it entirely: "I'm going home, I won't get up at dawn every morning and drag myself like a zombie through the metro, the RER,² then buses, and then walk miles to get to the Halles of Rungis in the hopes of finding some fruit and vegetable trucks to unload, and then stand freezing in cold storage. No sir, never again will I have to drag myself back in the evening with a shattered spine just to stretch out on a cramped bed in that cramped room in Rue Barbes, while I listen to my stomach rumbling from hunger."

Who would have thought that life in Paris would be so inhumane?

After all his years here, Yao was still amazed at the love-hate relationship he had with the city.

Of course, Paris was beautiful, this was an irrefutable truth.

Paris could enchant you, from the wandering Seine to the cobblestones of Notre Dame, not to mention the Luxembourg gardens. The Latin Quarter was fascinating with its fire-eaters, acrobats, bookstores, and *caveaux*.³ Just sitting there at the Archangel's fountain gave you a sense of freedom. It was pleasant there early in the morning to go from Blanche to Montmartre's imposing cathedral, then wander

2 *Réseau Express Régional* [Regional Express Network]: Paris' system of suburban commuter trains and rapid transit trains.

3 Cellars.

around the Place du Tertre when things weren't cordoned off, parceled off, and organized coldly.

It was actually delightful to stroll around with one's hands in one's pockets sniffing the pungent air, to walk with a bohemian step, to browse among the masters of copying, the chiselers of profiles, the skilled draftsmen and the geniuses of the pencil who in a few minutes immortalized portraits, under the astonished and admiring eyes of the tourists. Yao, with his restless soul, couldn't help but fall in love with the Paris of postcards, the Paris of the bistros, of *panaché*,⁴ the Eiffel Tower, *pommes frites*, oysters, and the luminous and luxurious sensuality of the Champs Élysées.

Living in Rue Barbès, how many times had the torrid and unconfessable desires of lust dragged him, painfully, to beg and peek with lowered, furtive and ashamed eyes at the daring photos in sex stores, from the Tati store of Pigalle to Blanche.

And yes, he hated Paris, because it knew how to be cruel and demanding like his beloved who only deigned to gratify him for the feel of money: the Paris of multicolored Arab sweets, of giant pictures of spaghetti Bolognese and steak-frites, making him salivate while his cramped guts twisted in hunger; he could fill his eyes but was forced to turn home, satiated only in his imagination, to drink water heavy with the stench of chlorine because he was penniless. He hated that cynical city, which when you were too far from the city's famous public urinals wouldn't even let you use the bathroom in a bar because you didn't have a franc.

The abrupt braking of the metro brought him back to reality: he had arrived at his destination—surely for the last time!

Leaving the metro, he was swallowed up by the motley throng of poor people pressing through the entrance to the Tati store. There, the

4 A drink mixing beer and soda.

flimsy and outdated, bright-colored clothes were sold cheaply and, in the confusion, with a bit of luck and some cunning, it was easy enough to slip a pair of socks or underwear into your pocket.

Today Yao was too happy to go “shopping.” Turning the corner of the street, he didn’t even stop to chat with his blonde friend Annie, who teetered unsteadily on the clattering high heels of her black ankle boots as she walked up and down the adjacent narrow street where she would liberally open her black jacket to expose her brimming merchandise to the porcine eyes of possible customers while crooning in her husky voice, “Alors, Chéri, tu viens?”⁵

“Hello Yao!” murmured the girl when she saw him.

Yao returned her greeting with a wave of his hand and a complicit smile. He crossed the threshold of his building with no elevator where he lived in the attic.

As he climbed the stairs, he thought of Annie and her companions for whom he felt a great regard. Chatting with the girls many times, he had discovered how loyal and supportive they could be of each other and of people who, like him, had to live by their wits in the winding tracks of the rough and stingy City of Lights. These days, public opinion and the media herded drug addicts, prostitutes, gays, delinquents, immigrants, and sometimes even the handicapped into a single pen located on the borders of respectability and did it the courtesy of the most hypocritical forms of legality.

Yao remembered that on his way home a few months earlier, it was Annie who stopped him, “Yao! Watch out, there have been *flics*.”⁶ He spun around bewildered like a hunted animal, as he felt his legs go weak and his heart throbbing in his throat. But he replied in a tone that wished it could swagger, “You’ve got to be kidding!”

Yao realized with astonishment that the girl had called him by his own name, and not by his street name, “Eric,” the name he hid behind as a precaution for his more or less illicit activities. A thought came to his mind, quick as lightening and convinced him danger was imminent.

5 “Are you coming, sweetheart?”

6 Police.

“The *flics* came. They caught your cousin at Dudu’s with the goods. They poked around at your place and questioned us about you.”

“That’s how she knew my real name,” Yao thought before running off. He roamed around Paris all night, looking over his shoulder, wandering and changing directions a thousand times. Then finally exhausted, he stopped to think. It was certainly pointless to run away; if the police were looking for him, sooner or later they would find him. He might as well give up now and face it. Resigned, he took the subway and returned home calmly and resolutely.

At home, he found the door open and an incredible mess in the room. His suitcase was still there, open, with his things scattered about. With a sigh of relief, he saw that his passport and all his documents were there. He walked over to the skylight and stretched his hand out in search of the lanyard attached to the bag containing the stockpile of goods. The plastic bag was gone. The envelope at the bottom of the suitcase with his last remaining loose change was there, intact, proof that this had not been the work of thieves. He sat on the bed waiting for the cops to arrive, convinced that they were there somewhere waiting for him.

Two hours passed, then four, but no one came. The arrangement with his cousin must have worked like a charm. They had agreed, “If one of us gets caught, then he will cover for the other; that way, one of us will be free to get the first one out of prison.” Back then, still full of illusions, his cousin had further coached him, “Just say you’re here visiting me, and you don’t know anything about what I do, and I’ll say the same. The police don’t beat people here anyway like they do at home, and for a few grams they’ll keep me in jail for a week at the most.”

Actually, they beat him thoroughly with an iron rod across the soles of his feet and left him in jail for four months.

As Yao walked up the stairs and thought back on all this, he was happy that he could finally escape it all. By now he’d found a lawyer for his cousin and arranged to cover the expenses. He was afraid now and

seeing his cousin behind bars had stripped him of his illusions, so this plane ticket for home was a boon falling from the sky. He'd had enough of this adventure in the Whites' country; Yao wanted to go home.

The arrest of his cousin felt like an omen, directing him back to the right path. Going home was his long-awaited chance to escape the trap of drugs.

He lay down unable to fall asleep. The excitement of returning to Ivory Coast tomorrow was too great. He was leaving this cold country with its cold climate and, above all, its cold people.

He was going home, yes, home to his country where no one would ever refuse to serve him in a bar. In Paris he'd tried everything; he'd tried sleeping ten to a frigid room, taking turns sleeping on the hard floor and the rickety sofa, where five people sat with their feet up on the chairs, huddling together to shelter from the north wind that filtered through the window frames and stung their bones, howling around the edges of the piece of cardboard that substituted for glass in the door. Just thinking about it gave him goosebumps. It seemed to him that he could still smell that mixed stench of rancid, musty, and spicy odors that he invariably carried with him, despite his frequent ablutions in the public showers. Yes, sir, he was going home: he would never ever again rummage through the trash bins at night behind the supermarkets to feed himself, much less duck into the metro pretending to tie his shoes so he could pick up cigarette butts.

"Girls!" He'd announced strutting haughtily, waving his ticket at the African schoolgirls. "Girls, while you'll still be here suffering from the cold, think of me roasting in the heat tomorrow!" Then seeing their dreamy and nostalgic looks, he added wickedly and mercilessly: "Girls, I'll spare you the descriptions of spicy kebabs, *attieké*,⁷ peanut sauce, and *fufu*;⁸ I won't mention the intoxicating nights, dancing until dawn to the rhythm of reggae, coupé décalé, soukous, zaiko, and merengue, as I'm squeezed tight by real African girls, not white girls dyed black like you, warm African girls with their firm, beautiful breasts." On his way out, Yao concluded his

7 A fermented cassava dish.

8 A West African dish made from mashed yams, cassava roots, and/or plantains.

little show with a James Brown twist, exclaiming: “So long, girls! I’ll say hello to Africa for you!”

Yao spent the night evaluating the past and dreaming of the future, an uncertain future, but one that could not be worse than the present. In the morning, he quickly gathered his few belongings and put them in his suitcase.

He picked up his guitar, greeted the concierge who had always been very motherly to him, and handed her the keys. For the first time, she kissed him and murmured, “Say hello to your mom for me!” as if she’d known his mother for years with how often Yao had mentioned her.

“I will, I promise.”

Yao didn’t have enough money to take a cab to the airport, so he took the metro to the nearest stop in the direction of the airport. He’d hitchhike from there. The plane was leaving in the afternoon and he’d have plenty of time. He arrived at the subway entrance. Luck was on his side: the conductor’s office was empty. He hopped the turnstile and dragged his luggage along.

At the end of the line, Yao counted the change remaining in his pocket. It wasn’t enough for the bus. He got on without paying, despite the driver’s accusing stare in the mirror. He sat in the front seat so he could skip out at the first sign of a ticket inspector, and his precaution paid off, because at the fifth stop Yao spotted them. The officials stopped him just as he got off.

“Ticket, please.”

“I don’t have one.”

“ID and address, then.”

Without arguing, Yao gave them an address he kept for just such occasions; it was written on an envelope that he’d pasted a cancelled stamp onto, all while he thought, “I’m going home anyway!”

He walked along the road for a while, but his heavy suitcase was beginning to dig into the palm of his hand.

After a kilometer, he stopped and sat on his luggage, tried to hitchhike, but no one stopped. He still had plenty of time ahead of him, but the agonizing thought of missing the plane tugged at his mind.

He then decided to do something he’d never done in his life: beg. He’d always felt ashamed to ask for money and had even frowned upon

the beggars who tried to stop him in the tunnels of the metro. Now he finally understood. He knew that when a man feels like a cornered animal, then morality becomes a luxury, irrelevant to survival, like wearing a flower in a buttonhole. To overcome his own embarrassment, he thought of asking the person's address when borrowing the money, so as to return it as soon as he got home.

Before he could approach a girl he saw walking up the street, she either sensed or misunderstood his intentions and hastily crossed the road to the other side:

He then approached an elderly woman, but as soon as he opened his mouth, she started in fear, clutched her purse to her chest, letting out a sharp cry. She hurried around Yao but continued to peer suspiciously behind her even several meters on.

These first two attempts convinced Yao not to approach women.

He turned to a man clutching a baguette under his sweaty armpits: "Can you please lend me five francs?"

The man walked past not even dignifying Yao with a glance, though he could be heard muttering "Go home" under his breath.

Yao felt himself seething with anger, but even more with shame, still he continued to ask now with his eyes downcast, not daring to look anyone in the eye. It seemed that all the people on the street were watching him and he read in their eyes and in their minds the same judgment, "You good-for-nothing *nègre*, get a job. Better yet, why don't you just go home?"

Yao was humiliated and disheartened, he believed this behavior shamed all of his race.

He remembered one evening when, driven by hunger, with his groaning belly burning, as he was rummaging around in a trash can, he was surprised by a girl, "What are you doing?"

"Can't you tell?" he replied defensively.

"Are you hungry?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Do you want to come eat at my house?"

Yao looked at her in disbelief and distrust, wondering what the catch was, but driven by desperation he agreed.

The girl took him to dinner with her parents. They were polite, talking about Africa and music. At the table, he ate his fill. No one asked him what country he was from, what he did, or even his name with that police-style tone of interrogation that people usually used to grill foreigners on the pretext of getting to know them.

As he remembered the episode, Yao relentlessly continued his quest back home.

He almost repeated his plea to a young man before registering his appearance, his clothing. He was wearing a pair of ragged, washed-out jeans, had long hair, and a tattoo on his wrist. Yao was about to pull his hand back when the young man took out his wallet, handed him two ten franc bills, and promptly disappeared.

Yao stood there for a moment in astonishment, regretting having judged a man's heart by his outward appearance. Moved, he promised himself that he would never, ever refuse to give money or help to anyone who asked from now on. Sure, he knew of people who exploited other people's pity, but today he understood some who begged really were in trouble. Yes, he would pay this help forward.

He arrived at the airport on time. Yao had time to treat himself to a sandwich and a beer before going to check in. A tremor of dull anguish rippled over his heart.

When he'd offered Yao the plane ticket, his brother-in-law had explained, "It's the return ticket tied to my scholarship. My name is written on it, but don't worry, no one will ask for your ID when you check in, it's just an African name to them. Don't worry, everything will be fine. Just as a precaution, I'll give you my passport, because White people think we Blacks all look alike, so they won't know the difference. Don't worry!" Thus reassured, Yao was so happy about the chance to go home that he didn't consider that between saying something and actually doing it, there was not just "a sea of difference," as the old Italian saying went, but there was also a long line and a long wait, full of anxiety. But Yao could tell that the spirits of the ancestors were with him, because when he reached the counter, a young lady with a radiant smile checked his suitcase, reserved a smoking seat for him, and advised him to keep his guitar with him so as not to risk breaking it. Yao gave her one of his wide *charmeur* smiles and took

the liberty to comment gallantly: “Thank you! You are very kind as well as pretty!” Then he thought with a heart full of joy: “It’s done! I’m going home!”

He walked lightly past the metal detectors and towards passport control. As he stood in line, he was seized by a doubt: “Is it better to show my own passport or my brother-in-law’s?”

In the end he decided to show his brother-in-law’s passport, because “for White people, all Blacks look alike,” plus you never know if the name on the passport is connected with the passenger manifest.

Yao raised his head and his heart stopped beating for an interminable second. At the head of his line, checking passports, was a black policeman from the French islands.

“Damn!” he thought, “He’ll know right away it’s not me in the picture for sure!” He quickly changed lines and headed toward a plump, good-natured-looking white policeman. When his turn came, Yao inhaled the warm air into the top of his lungs to slow down the deafening beats of his heart, and handed over his brother-in-law’s passport with an air of indifference and boredom. The policeman took the document and raised the stamp to validate it. His hand stopped in mid-air, he looked at the photo, then at Yao, who tried to flash a shy smile, then back at the photo again. Puzzled, brow furrowed, the chubby official suggested hesitantly, “But . . . this isn’t you in the picture!”

For a moment, the blood froze in Yao’s veins and everything spun around.

“Oh, yes, that’s me!” he argued, tentatively.

“No! It’s not you!” The policeman asserted more confidently and continued, “This person has a beard!”

“I shaved my beard,” Yao declared, lying firmly through his teeth.

“No! That’s not you on the picture!” declared the officer, staring him in the eyes.

“You’re right,” Yao admitted, stuttering, taking his passport from his pocket, on the verge of despair. “Let me explain,” he whispered, as he bent towards the policeman so as not to be heard. “It’s my brother-in-law’s passport; he . . .”

“Come with me to the security office!” demanded the officer, getting up without heeding Yao’s attempts to explain.

“Oh God! My God, how humiliating!” thought Yao as he followed the man, feeling the murmurs and the stares of the other travelers piercing the back of his neck. It was as if time and space were suddenly arrested, frozen in a vacuum of anguish. His head felt empty and his body grew heavy.

In the hallway on the way to the security office, the policeman coldly reiterated: “You can’t travel with someone else’s documents!”

“I know! But since I had my brother-in-law’s ticket, we thought...”

Yao stopped talking because the man wasn’t listening. He took another tack: “Do you think we could possibly come to some kind of agreement, I mean . . .”

He realized he’d better shut up, rather than make his situation worse with an attempt at bribery.

Yao bitterly regretted not staying in his original line. Surely his Black “brother” would have been more understanding and would have turned a blind eye to what Yao considered an unimportant detail.

At the security office, the officials immediately called him by his first name. Yao was searched and interrogated: “Whose passport did you steal and where did you get it?” “How do we know that the passport belongs to your brother-in-law? Your surnames are different.” “Where did you steal the ticket?” “You’d better tell the truth, otherwise we’ll lock you up!”

Yao had to repeat his story ten times, sweating, agitated, now standing, pacing the room with his hands in his pockets.

“Please! You have to believe me! Just let me go home.” Then he grew angry and aggressive: “What does it matter to you? You can see that I have my passport in order. Why would I have used my brother-in-law’s passport except for the ticket? On TV, in the papers, all you ever do is tell us to go back home, that you don’t want to see us around. Do you really want to send us back or not? Well, now I want to leave, now that I want to go home, you’re keeping me here! What’s the point of that? Tell me, what’s the point?”

Confronted with their impassive looks, Yao returned to an aggrieved tone: “Please, I’m begging you, let me go. I can’t stay here, the hunger, the cold. If I go back to the city now, I won’t have a place to stay, I don’t have a job anymore. Please, just let me go back to my home!”

Through it all, Yao tried to suppress the rising tears of despair. He didn't want to cry in front of these men, he wanted to save a shred of his shattered dignity. His mouth was dry and his throat parched and sore, he fell silent. Tears he could not check ran down his cheeks to die silently at the corners of his dry lips. The chief constable picked up the phone and gestured for him to take a seat in the waiting room.

Yao called upon on all the saints and spirits of his ancestors.

Not five minutes later, a long lanky man in suit arrived wearing an Air France badge and a walkie-talkie clipped to his belt. He immediately lit into Yao, "This is a scam against our company, you cannot travel with someone else's ticket without our consent."

"What does it matter to you, the seat has already been paid for!"

"It matters, young man, it matters! It makes a difference as far as insurance is concerned. In case of an accident, you aren't officially among our passengers!"

Yao at that point gave up arguing. He could see that fate wanted it that way; even if he couldn't understand the reason today, someday it would be clear.

Resigned, he sat down on the sofa with his guitar in his lap.

He didn't know if it was his silence or his defeated face that softened the long lanky man, because Yao heard him fiddling with the walkie-talkie, talking a little, then turning to Yao, he said, "Come on! I'll take you to the plane, we still have time!"

Yao suddenly straightened up, euphoric, mentally thanking his guardian angel and the spirits of his ancestors, and followed the man towards the large, covered tube leading to the plane.

From a distance he saw the flight attendant standing in front of the still open door to the aircraft.

He made it just in time, "I'm going home!"

The echo of hurried footsteps sounded behind them.

The Air France agent turned around as the voice of the fat policeman called out, "Where are you taking him? Look, I've already made my report."

The airline agent stopped instantly, gently but firmly blocking Yao with his outstretched arm, keeping him from boarding.

"I'm sorry, but I can't risk my job for you."

They looked into each other's eyes for a moment. The agent assumed a distant gaze and a detached, professional attitude.

"Goodbye!" His handshake was warm.

Yao went back to sign the statement at the security office. He no longer felt anything. When the pain in the soul reaches its peak, the heart convulses, and nothing can be felt anymore. They let him go after a lecture that slid off the thick bark of his indifference. He picked up his guitar, went to request his suitcase.

"It's already been loaded," was the reply.

"At least my bag will be able to enjoy the African sun," he remarked ironically to the employee who looked at him without understanding.

Suddenly Yao felt an overwhelming fatigue invade his body.

He dragged himself and the weight of his sadness towards the bus stop. When the bus arrived, he searched his pockets for the remaining ten francs that the generous man had given him, but found only a handkerchief and a guitar pick. He hesitated for a moment with his foot on the step of the bus. The driver grumbled, "Well, what?"

Yao searched again for the ten-franc bill, rummaging in vain through every pocket he had: there was no trace of the money. He pulled his foot back. The driver angrily shifted into gear and drove off, and Yao stood there with his arms shaking, leaning on his guitar.

He turned to look at the ground: nothing. "The cops took my money!" he thought and began to laugh hysterically, shaken by an uncontrollable and liberating paroxysm.

After a while he stopped laughing and took stock of the situation coldly: "I thought I'd be home by now, but I'm still here. The only clothes I have are the ones I'm wearing, I don't have a franc in my pocket, but I still have fifteen days of rent already paid for my room in Rue Barbes and after all I'm still alive. I just have to find a way back to the city."

He made his decision. He took a cab.

Near the front door of Rue Barbes, he saw Annie.

"Hi, Yao!"

“Hi, Annie! Can you lend me money for the cab? I’m broke.”

“Sure!” she nodded, opening her purse.

“Thank you, Annie, you’re such a friend. You understand life is hard, but the important thing is to be alive. I’ll survive despite the walls of words, laws, borders, and prejudices that men continue to erect to divide them, to make life impossible. I’ll survive as long as there are people like you who care and can look beyond the limits of appearances.”

She looked at him, eyes widening, “Yao, are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine in spite of everything . . . I’ll explain . . . I’m going to sleep now.”

He walked by the door to collect his keys. The landlady looked at him and didn’t ask anything. She just said, “Welcome home, Yao.”

“Thank you!” He replied with a disconsolate smile, thinking about the girls’ faces at the boarding house when they would see him again.