

# ***The Typewriter***



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*The Typewriter*

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## CHAPTER I

### FRANCO ON THE BALCONY

Franco takes his eyes off the sheet of paper and absentmindedly raises his head, perplexed. He extends his arm and moves the page he has just read a little further away, to better look at that muddle of ink marks. It's as if he's looking for a vision among all those commas and periods, uppercase and lowercase, corporals and quotation marks. And then the words, a flood of words. He has always liked reading, but he has always been convinced that writing is something else entirely. He chooses a page at random and starts reading again.

### *CHAPTER XXII (WALTER'S STORY)*

Despite the stifling humid heat, Walter went a little closer to the bonfire that was keeping the mosquitoes, the size of airplanes, at bay. To survive in that Godforsaken place he'd had to learn to live with much more terrifying and lethal animals, from piranhas to leeches and Black Widows to snakes. Yet he continued to harbor a deep hatred for mosquitoes, and was certain that this would be the case as long as he lived.

How strange, after spending so much time here in the heart of the tropical forest, that I've managed to get used to everything but these useless insects. Mother Nature has established a very specific

role and function for all other living beings, even for the most repulsive and dangerous. But not mosquitoes, not them! They just buzz in your ears and destroy your peace when you're resting and suck your blood, maybe even infect it at times. Maybe God created them to spite man, he pondered, in fact they had represented the only reality constantly unchanged during his long stay in that place; they had kept him unpleasant company at every hour of the day and night like the Chinese torture of dripping water. Goodness knows if I will miss them, he wondered at last, then returned to reflect disconsolately on the absurdity of the situation in which he found himself.

Being forced to sneak away like a thief, without even having understood why, just wasn't right! He sighed disheartened and let himself be lulled by the somber and familiar grumbling of the river, which for so long he had made his own, just like the intense smell of humus. Having to abandon everything in that way burned inside him, he felt the dull pain of those who feel defeated without even having fought, without even having had the opportunity to understand who the opponent was that they were fighting.

The bonfire was about to go out, but Walter decided to wait a little longer, cherishing the hope that Sarah would show up. He wished she would tell him "I'm coming with you" or even just "I'm sorry". But Sarah didn't come. He thought back to her long black hair, straight and shiny, her deep, dark eyes, and the scent of her skin that reminded him of honey. Only a few hours earlier, perhaps because they had sensed that things were falling apart, they had made love for the first time.

They were walking along the river, near the small waterfall, when all of a sudden they had started arguing furiously. After a few moments, though, they had stopped, just as suddenly as they had begun, and had stared at each other angrily. With nerves worn down by the tension of recent days, they had moved slowly towards each other, challenging each other with their gaze, ready to hit each other mercilessly and hurt each other by any means possible.

But instead something incomprehensible had clicked in them, and they had let themselves be overwhelmed by their instinct.

Neither of them had ever done it in such a wild manner: panting, they had exchanged bites and scratches, screaming and holding onto the slippery stones of the river. Walter had felt as if every little part of him exploded in her, with her. Afterwards they had stayed there on the muddy bank, clinging to each other for a long time, in silence, her nails still stuck in his back.

For the first time since they had met, Walter had felt she really was his, but when he returned to the village he had found those papers on the desk in his clinic. It was an official invitation to appear before the Court of the Capital, to shed some light on the sudden and mysterious death of many inhabitants of the village where he had worked for many years. After that, the papers stated, they would transfer him to an unspecified hospital located in Europe.

But that was just waste paper for him, he knew he could not trust the word of the bureaucrats. He was not stupid, he had known immediately that he had been chosen as a scapegoat and knew that his own life was at stake.

The fat sweaty representatives of the local police would come to pick him up at dawn with their Jeep and their arrogant ways. They would politely invite him to follow them and then throw him into a cell where they would let him rot for the rest of his days, so that news of the corruption in which he had become embroiled would not leak out.

Walter knew that a copy of those papers had certainly been delivered to Sarah, so he knew that, just moments after finding her, he would lose that wonderful girl forever. He knew that she would not come because there was nothing to add, seeing each other again would only serve to make everything much more difficult. He realized that he was already missing her.

He looked once more at the documents he was clutching in his hand; without realizing it he had crumpled them in anger. He slipped them into his leather bag and sighed again, then got up and walked sadly towards the dock.

He paused for just a moment, to take one last painful look at the small L-shaped building. That untidy pile of freshly hewn mud bricks served as a school, hospital, canteen, warehouse, and meeting room. Just as he had been a teacher and cook, doctor and storekeeper over time, at least until Sarah's arrival.



That small building was only one of the many visible results of the commitment with which he had fought day after day, in spite of the political and economic clashes between nations, to be able to give something to those poor people.

When he arrived at the meeting place, he ran his eyes over the dark tense faces lined up in a semicircle around him, pausing for a moment on every single pair of glittering eyes that stared at him in the semi-darkness of the evening.

Beyond the row of heads, in the distance, he glimpsed Sarah's figure behind the curtain of a window. For a moment he was tempted to retrace his steps to embrace her one last time, but knowing that it would be too painful he abandoned the idea.

Walter scrutinized the nearby clearing that housed the small cemetery, illuminated by the uncertain moonlight. The white crosses, which had multiplied in recent weeks, stood out in the dark. He shook his head and resumed his journey along the short path that separated him from the river, followed by the others.

He walked slowly, accompanied by the faint noises of the night, machete in hand and khaki pants rustling against the high lush grass. He stopped on the marshy shore, in front of the small jetty where the pirogues were moored. The others continued to stare at him in silence, timidly respectful, and he hoped once again that it was just a bad dream. In the light of the torch the premature sprinkling of gray on his temples could be seen, along with some small wrinkles around the eyes and the corners of the mouth.

He heard a sudden sound of running footsteps and for a moment hoped it was her, but instead a small aboriginal man emerged from the thick vegetation. He was eight years old at most, his face painted in the colors of his tribe and he had the attitude of a warrior. He was holding a bow ready to shoot towards him, while the others quickly put their hands to their blowpipes and pointed them at the child. A few seconds became an eternity. Walter motioned to his companions to lower their weapons, then half closed his eyes and once again saw the child's father die in his arms.

"I'm sorry," Walter was barely able to murmur in his language; his throat was parched and he knew it wasn't because of fear. A

tremor ran through the little warrior, but his eyes seemed to betray no emotion.

"You killed my father," he accused Walter in his shrill childish voice. He didn't answer.

"Say something," insisted the little man, but the other continued to stare at him and said no more. He dropped the machete, slipped the strap of the bag off his shoulder and laid it on the ground. Then he waited, a drop of cold sweat running from his temple. The child let out an angry roar and as he shot the arrow he moved the bow a few degrees to the right. The poisoned dart hissed a few millimeters from Walter's head and was lost in the darkness. Then the little warrior dropped the bow and ran to hug him, crying.

"Don't go," he whispered in his ear, and he felt like dying.

"Don't go Doctor, how are we going to manage without you? Who will take care of us?" echoed Sam.

Walter responded with a long, silent and sad look, clenching his fists in anger. He gathered his things, put his straw hat on his head and settled down on the canoe as best he could. Sam took his seat opposite him, Walter nodded his head, and the strokes of the paddle began to resound in the night, sharp and regular, accompanied by a plaintive farewell song.

Every dip of the oar in the water lashed his heart; against his will he was abandoning everything to which he had dedicated most of his life, never sparing himself. He wondered what he would do next, but soon discovered that he didn't care. It was as if his life had ended there, deep in the Congo River, in the heart of the tropical forest.

## CHAPTER XXIII (WALTER AND SARA)

Watching Walter disappear into the thick of the forest, Sarah realized that she had never experienced a state of mind like this. The only thing she was sure of was that she felt like a worm, for not even having had the courage to go and say goodbye to him.

Once more she looked at the papers scattered on the ground, the copy of what he had received. "For information" was written on them in large letters in the beautiful penmanship of some employee who loved bureaucracy and his work. She leaned over to pick them up but changed her mind, shrugged, and went to sit on the woven bamboo couch, seeking unlikely relief in the artificial stream of air from the fan. She was still aware of his smell on her and it kept moving it around her, exasperating her inner struggle.

She thought back to how good things had been in recent weeks, how the situation had unexpectedly collapsed, overwhelming them and leaving them no choice. Things had started to go wrong just when they had begun to know each other better and understand each other, when they had finally felt ready to let themselves go.

Making love to him had been beautiful, but now only a huge sad disappointment remained. She hated herself because she had not been selfish enough, or perhaps courageous enough, to betray the poor people of the mission where she worked as a trainee, while waiting to become a doctor of medicine. She was sure that in any case, in some way, she could continue to be useful out there. Yet, giving up in that way what seemed must become the most important love story of her entire life pained her greatly.

Thinking back to the few intense moments she had lived with him, from the clashes they'd had at the beginning to the discovery of a deep feeling, she dozed off. A light noise suddenly woke her and she gasped in fright: Sam was standing in front of her and was studying her, undecided whether to wake her or not. He was sweaty, the muscles of his mighty arms were turgid from the effort of having rowed continuously for almost three hours.

"Has he gone?" she asked. He nodded. Sarah told herself that she had really lost him, covered her face with her hands and forced herself not to cry.

"Did you do what I asked you?"

"I slipped it into his bag as I embraced him."

"Thank you," she murmured, then said no more. The giant black man realized she wanted to be alone and went away.

\*\*\*

Franco raises his head, he feels dazed. It seems impossible that he is the author of those pages, yet he has just finished writing an entire novel.

Absentmindedly he looks at his feet, which are dangling in the void as if it were the most normal thing in the world. He uses one foot as a lever on the other to take off the tennis shoes which are already unfastened, and kicks so they fall into the void. One of them gets stuck in the clothes lines two floors down, the other lands on the ground after a flight of fifteen meters and almost falls right on top of the small crowd gathered in the courtyard.

Franco looks down and is amazed at how small the heads of the onlookers are, seen from up there, even smaller than the nail of his little toe.

A loud rattling noise, mixed with sharp creaking suddenly attracts his attention. Shielding his eyes with his forearm to protect them from the light of the dying sun which is still intense, he looks in front of him. Silhouetted against the red ball, the fire truck ladder has climbed up high and is now descending straight towards him, in no hurry, shaking the branches of the pines.

For a moment Franco finds it inviting, he starts to think that maybe he is getting everything wrong.

He tells himself that perhaps it would be enough to let himself be helped and wait until his wife arrives. Perhaps the monsters in his head will disappear as suddenly as they had arrived, and he could hug his children again. It's only a few days since he saw them but he already misses them terribly.

The man on the ladder is wearing an orange jumpsuit bordered with fluorescent stripes; he is still some way off but is already extending an arm towards him. Franco shakes his head, determined, feeling as if he is wrapped in an invisible cocoon of gray cotton wool that keeps him separate from the rest of the world and prevents him from seeing things clearly.

"Go away, leave me alone! Leave, all of you, it's too late!" he shouts, waving his arms. He loses his balance and slides forward. A dizzy spell makes him lean over too far, but a moment before falling into the void he manages to grab the railing, and remains suspended in the void while the sheets of paper he has just read are carried away by a light wind.

"Stay calm!" shouts the man on the ladder after thanking Heaven: he had already envisioned him crashing to the ground. "Hold on tight and don't move, I'll be there in a moment!"

An anxious murmur rises from the road and reaches him. For a moment Franco is tempted to let go and fall on top of those damn onlookers and squash as many as he can. They have been gathered down there for a long time, immobile, waiting like vultures for him to plummet to the ground or for the fireman to save him, and then applaud like so many idiots at the circus.

Franco envies them, he knows that however things go, any solution will be a good one for them. Everyone will have something to talk about when they get home and a video to show on their smartphone.

Sneaking a look towards the living room, he sees the typewriter, sitting on the table. Beautiful. Still. Shiny. *It's cursed*, he tells himself for the umpteenth time, then he begins to remember.

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