

Prologue

My story interests no man. If I tell it in the depths of night, it is because I want to be sure that eternal silence will do away with it. I don't want to open up a dialogue at all. My name is nobody. I am the nourishing grain that will never get my way with those who believe that might makes right.

Why exist? Have I come too soon? Have I mistaken my destination? I am assuredly not of this world. Mine is without a doubt somewhere else, or still to come. When? Certainly at the end of this world. I must frankly admit that the end of the world doesn't frighten me in the least. Because, in fact, that would be the end of my nightmare. And the beginning of my life. And then I, too, will have a face, a name, a voice, a presence. I, too, could exist.

That's why war, peace, happiness, honors, wealth--I just couldn't care less! The atomic bomb? The destruction of Planet Earth? Why should I be concerned with any of that?

I am undoubtedly a heat that doesn't end. But my name is nobody. I have nothing to say to men. Everything exists. And me, I am not at all. I am an impurity in an immaculate universe.

Am I an error of nature? How is it that I can be? How beautiful and pure the world would be without me!

I advance in shadow; I close my eyes. Do I have a face? I think not. However, if it has to exist, what horror must it be?

I don't want to see it, this face of mine.

O you with the eagle's gaze, a piercing gaze that tears the darkness to pieces, can you forgive my presence? I do not know what I should be. I don't know anymore where I should keep myself.

I feel myself strange and intrusive everywhere.

Help me, you with the piercing eagle's gaze. Help me find my homeland.

I don't wish to be an eternal bother to the world. Isn't there a land somewhere, a sea or a sky, where I would not be troublesome?

Everything is clear at present; I am not of this country. That's why my story is so strange. I would like to tell it now in the depths of night. Without lies, I would like it to be heard, like the voice of a thick shadow, living and indestructible. Nothing and nobody will know how to stop it when the moment has come to take a recognized and respected face. It's in the order of things.

And so my story? It would not have been able to be told at all. It is not a necessity. I tell it for myself and for the night. The night is my mirror. In it, I contemplate myself.

The Father, Koffi Lumo

A thick fog hung over most of the Rhineland. Early 1945. The entire region came under occupation by Anglo-American troops.

Evident signs of fatigue showed on the faces of all the men participating in the action. In his own way, each was already a hero in this terrible war where the juxtaposition of human frailty with the all-powerful technologies put into play had become a lesson on which to meditate in the coming years.

The soldiers were very tired, having advanced in a forced march for three days, behind the tanks. The objective of the moment was Coblenz. To achieve it, they had to lay down a constant attack on the German troops to prevent them from regrouping before the Rhine.

The vanguard of the 8th Brigade of colonial infantry commanded by Colonel Griffith now had the objective, Coblenz, within the range of their binoculars. In spite of the thick fog, you could make out the city, majestic and beautiful, displaying its magnificence in despite of the horrible massacres perpetrated from one side of this highly strategic region to the other.

The mission of Lieutenant Koffi Lumo and his men, solid, turbaned Indians and some West Africans reinforced by a handful of Scottish survivors from the 6th Brigade, was to clear the vicinity around the oldest, but also the largest and most beautiful, bridge spanning the Rhine and leading into the very heart of Coblenz.

It was getting on into the end of February. Winter had already made its presence felt in the campaigns. A harsh, dry cold, borne in by the spirited wind, cast sadness and melancholy everywhere.

Nevertheless, everyone burned with the desire to finish it once and for all. Those on the side of the affiliated troop now knew that if Coblenz was taken, they would be able to link up very quickly with the American Ally troops of General McGovern who were already in the suburbs of Frankfurt.

The Americans were considerably hindered in their progression by the few German fighter planes salvaged from the Russian front, now on the Western front risking everything they had. Indeed, they were staging some very deadly raids.

In these conditions, the 8th Brigade had to penetrate the German front as quickly as possible and create insecurity throughout the entire zone by hitting many points at once with tremendous speed. Koffi Lumo and his men of the most diverse origins had to open the way for the main body of the troop in the direction of Coblenz.

The large bridge wasn't but five meters from the place where the men were camouflaged. Its entrance was guarded by a considerable number of enemy troops. The Germans were earnestly attempting to prevent the Allies from crossing the Rhine. All the points of access were being closely watched.

Lieutenant Lumo had an extremely difficult task. But Colonel Griffith had full confidence in him and his men. They had proven themselves in a good many reprises over the course of these repeated engagements, their tremendous ardor seeming more fitting for a less seasoned troop.

In fact, joking and teasing came fast and furious among the men of this detachment that in its composition prefigured the United Nations soon to be born, after the vast destruction and the wholesale slaughter. Men, suddenly seized by terror in the face of so many horrors caused by themselves, soon took a step back, turned around, and, like migratory birds, raised themselves above the horrifying theater to soar up toward less dismal skies, skies bathed by the light of the sun.

But thoughts like these were still a long way off, then only inhabiting the minds of some crazy dreamers, pacifists, defeatists, all the races who had no place at all in the sun of heroes.

And a hero Koffi Lumo surely was, in view of the respect and even the admiration that more than half of his men pledged to him. The rest had in due form set up a cult that had its own observable ritual during the rare moments of relaxation.

The entrance to the Chief's tent was transformed into an improvised theater where the most able among them came to parade their talents: one improvising a

battle song to an old air of his country, one recreating, to himself alone, the atmosphere at a village wake under the full moon. Scotland, Gambia, the Ivory Coast, India, and Togo were often represented at these improvised concerts where everyone was both actor and spectator.

Koffi Lumo was very close to his men. The most curious part of the story was the complete absence of any racial incidents. Any good psychologist will tell you that men born at geographic points a great distance from each other, having received such various educations, and moreover being of different races, are not at all cut out for getting along with each other.

And to say that these men were called to make up a homogeneous group, a combat force! No one would risk advancing a hypothesis so preposterous.

And yet, the phenomenon was there, clearly visible, a biting refutation of the most pat theories. Must it be concluded that this group was so solidly knit together and that they had succeeded so many times in breaking through the German lines because they constituted a harmony resulting from the assembled dissonances?

Another element appeared among these men. Without giving it a name, it was the pride or the conceit inhabiting all who represent their community to strangers. Each one felt himself invested with the mission of representing his people. He must, therefore, conduct himself in an honorable fashion, disguising his faults and offering up an appearance worthy of others' respect. This element definitely played its part. Nevertheless, the feeling of Koffi Lumo, which he jealously kept to himself, was that fear remained a powerful factor in the equality, the homogenization of human groupings. Fear made them into fellow men, nearly equals. To discover all of a sudden that the other was also scared stiff under his coat of assurance and arrogance largely contributed to boosting your morale, at the same time keeping you from scorning yourself beyond reasonable limits.

Of course, a sense of decency, a certain style, and maybe even a touch of boastfulness worked well for men trying at any cost to conceal the feeling of fear which brought them together too quickly and too closely with the others.

Nevertheless, the moment always came, the unpredictable instant, where it would all abruptly collapse.

That was the case with the young Scotsman of twenty years, brave Highland boy, whose surly look hid a rather tender heart. Hard to think that these wildcats, too, had hearts just like other men, even though theirs seemed to be full of hardness and indifference.

In reality, wasn't each one held together only by his violent faith in the advent of a miracle? Did some believe in it so strongly that they would forget all doubts? It was by all evidence this limitless faith, this hope which defied all logic, this fervent desire to reach, through ardent belief, invulnerability that galvanized the men of Koffi Lumo. Faced with the danger of death, all felt the extensions of a soul which they had no desire to see perish.

No soldier wanted to think of his own limits. All prejudice fell away. Each discovered in this or that comrade respectable qualities. In the Africans, one generally recognized a large generosity and an exceptional fervor in combat. Some of them had that collective quality of an aptitude for invulnerability in double.

Thus the Senegalese friend of Koffi Lumo whose mother had granted him the gift of invulnerability against bullets never camouflaged himself. He had the custom of advancing without cover, a canister placed over his navel. In this vessel, he collected all the bullets destined for him.

After intense battles, he never ceased to tell his admiring comrades, "It is not me who acts, it is my mother who has given me everything."

True enough, not everyone is granted a magical mother. The consolation of the other soldiers was that, each medal having its reverse, our Senegalese friend was barely educated. He was at the opposite pole of Lieutenant Lumo, a physicist of great renown who, it was said, had participated in many secret scientific missions in Germany.

George Lloyd, the young Scotsman, even claimed to know that Lieutenant Lumo, who was once the head of the British Institute of Physical Sciences of Londonderry in Northern Ireland, was among a small group who had succeeded in stealing the heavy water of the German scientists. Those scientists were a hair's breadth away from solving the hydrogen bomb. George Lloyd equally affirmed that Koffi Lumo was in contact with a German soldier, a secret British agent, who had to stay current with the progress achieved by the German researchers in the fabrication of a cluster bomb of unprecedented efficiency.

Each man in the platoon commanded by Koffi Lumo had his particular reason for liking the chief. As far as Diop the Senegalese was concerned, the reason simply followed from the difference in their levels of culture. He admired in Koffi Lumo that which was lacking in him and which he knew he would never get.

Sometimes Diop would refuse his orders. But he promptly thought better of it when he remembered his difficult beginnings at the public school in Doukouré. Learning to read, or even worse, to write, what an ordeal! Just thinking of it, excruciating memories of the whippings that he had received came back to him. Instinctively, he would adopt the defensive position for deflecting the hypothetical lashes.

Diop Mamadou therefore willingly pardoned his chief, thinking of what he, too, must have endured to get through the difficulty of learning to read and write. But sometimes, he asked himself if it wasn't simply bestowed; like this gift of invulnerability with which his mother had endowed him? One day, he went to see the chief at the entrance to his tent to be clear in his mind about it.

"Hello, chief," he said to Koffi Lumo, seated in the lotus position at the entrance to his tent, a faraway look in his eye. "Is it true, chief, that some people know how to read and write even though they never learned it?"

"Who told you stories like this?"

"Nobody, chief, but I ask myself that question. Because me, I suffered a lot; I suffered too much. So, I got discouraged. And when I see all you people who know how to read and write, I say to myself that there surely has to be another way. And it's without a doubt the one they all used. They didn't get whipped, those people. Or maybe, they were born with particular gifts?"

"No," Koffi Lumo calmly replied. "Certainly not."

"Everyone must learn how to do it. For some it takes a lot of time, for others less. It depends, in part, on the level of intelligence of the student, on the skill of the teacher, and equally on the environment, that is to say, the country, the region, the family of origin."

"Certain European children born into well-to-do families are very quickly put into contact with books; they observe their parents reading rather early on; by this contact they acquire many aptitudes that cannot be adopted by children of other environments or regions except after a great deal of learning at school."

"And as, above all, all men are not equally gifted or intelligent, one cannot ask them to acquire these fundamental habits, that is to say habits important in the

technical civilization in which we live, with the same ease as those who are born with certain factors in their favor.

“All this is to show you, Mamadou, that in your case, the acquisition of a language foreign to the one used in your environment of origin in Africa could not be easy.

“You are Wolof. If you had been asked to read and write in Wolof, it would have been easy. You could easily have learned to read and write. You wouldn’t have had anything to worry about. In my country, also in West Africa, many men and women, the majority in fact, speak African languages. They cannot write at all. They did not learn to read.

“One must not look down on them for this. Because, even though illiterate, they are not any less men, with all the qualities and defects of the human race. We must be convinced of that. Tomorrow, when the war is over, if we are still living, we must devote ourselves to struggling for the dignity of our people in Africa. We must fight so that they become the equals of all the other men on the earth.”

“That’s certain,” said Mamadou evasively.

His thoughts had wandered. And the long discourse of Koffi Lumo surely passed right over his head.

But he had noticed the passage that dealt with dignity and equality.

He found it normal that men were not equals. Didn’t whites have something that other men did not, something which brought them closer to God?

And didn’t whites have blessings which blacks lacked?

What could Koffi Lumo mean in speaking of struggle? Can our people struggle against whites, the messengers of God Himself?

Nevertheless, Mamadou realized that it would be very nice if all men could enjoy the same advantages, the same privileges. Were they really there, the dignity and equality of which Koffi Lumo spoke?

Mamadou, for his part, couldn’t imagine anything else. Equality would be when blacks could also live in beautiful houses and own large cars driven by liveried chauffeurs.

Mamadou reckoned that in places other than his home in Senegal some blacks had already reached a state of equality with whites.

Maybe it wasn’t anything but a matter of time, he thought. For him, it all came down to a matter of appearance. If tomorrow every man from the city and the fields could be dressed in a beautiful suit, if lots of cars were all around, if big, beautiful houses could shoot up everywhere, the magic trick would have been pulled off.

Koffi Lumo was silent. He contemplated the distant lights of Coblenz reflected, multicolored and wavering, in the waters of the Rhine.

The city was not far. It seemed beautiful. Koffi had never doubted that it would be in the hands of the Allied army forces in the very near future. But he never stopped asking himself the question that every soldier asks himself in the same circumstances.

“Will I still be alive after the final assault?”

For the first time, Dogadzi, his native village, appeared to him through the shifting reflections, pitching on the waves. He saw once more his neighborhood where at the same moment the inhabitants were undoubtedly contemplating the full moon whose light flooded the forest of the Rhine.

He relived his last night in the village. It was the month of August, the countryside was fresh and drenched by the first rains of the growing season.

The cacao promised a good harvest that year.

August was always a happy month in the village. The students on vacation, delivered from the worries of the school year, took the time to entertain themselves at night. It was a marvel to see them assembled in many places, imitating the adults, ironically poking fun at life, but at the same time listening to the stories which, imperceptibly, strengthened in them the foundations that made them the successors of the ancestral civilization. It was in moonlit nights that one learned to love, to hate, to cheat, to poke fun, to take things into account; those summers were the most intense periods of experience in their young lives.

In the moonlight, there was something for everyone. As for Koffi, he was seated under a tree in the square. His faithful childhood friend, Yawovi, who he had met up with the day before he arrived in the village, was beside him, drowsy from a particularly full day. Besides the greetings that had to be delivered here and there, followed by the eternal question "Amania, what brings you here?" they had to pay visits to three funeral homes in three neighboring villages.

This region had a road infrastructure that made it a window into trade with the neighboring country, of which the difficulties were innumerable.

One man's fortune, goes the old adage, is another man's happiness. Koffi Lumo was one of the men considered with respect in the village. A strong legend radiated from his name like a halo.

He passed like a lightningbolt through the little village school. No one had ever been able to take first place in the exams away from him. At secondary school in the capital, he was so brilliant in scientific subjects that the principal made it his duty to report it to the colonial administrator.

Cutting out the stop in Dakar, he was sent directly to France in 1928. He was astonishing, so much so that sometimes his fellow students circulated all sorts of rumors about him. He was supposed to have magical powers which everyone had seen that allowed him to effortlessly assimilate all of his textbooks. His excellent grades amazed everyone since, as regards black Africans, ridiculous ideas were often advanced, supported by fantastic accounts of voyagers who had lived awhile on the dark continent.

It must be said, in defense of those who were poisoned by this spiteful campaign, that even anthropologists and other ethnologists inclined to oversimplification had a tendency to dub certain regions of the world, notably Africa, with the epithet "primitive" with all the pejorative connotations that this term can convey.

Koffi Lumo found a malicious pleasure in beating most of his fellow students in the physical sciences. It was his way of taking revenge against a society packed with prejudices that made his life difficult.

Little by little, his work was accepted, indeed assimilated. His name began to circulate in scientific sets.

His thesis on "the propagation of soundwaves in limited space and in unlimited space" made a lot of noise.

He then took on other studies, each one more ambitious than the next. The positions he took were talked about in scientific circles. He was invited many times to be on the committee that awards the Nobel Prize in Sweden. His career was off to a shining start. He was one of the best among the best: diplomas in the physical sciences from the University of Leiden, diplomas in medicine and mathematics. He was of the line of multidisciplinary scholars at the beginning of the century. He had offers everywhere. Before making a definitive decision, he decided to take two months of vacation.

That was why he was in Dogadzi in August of 1938.

Koffi Lumo had spent more than a month in the Gold Coast where his father, employed in commerce, practiced his profession. He was at the U.A.C., the United Africa Company, an all-powerful house of trade. At fifty-eight, Evans, Koffi Lumo's father, was worn out. Indeed, his life had been rather eventful. At the end of the German presence in his country, that is to say August 1914, he was already the principal employee in a German import-export firm.

It was said that he set aside a considerable quantity of cannon powder at the time which he sold for the price of gold in the interregnum period that followed the departure of the Germans and during which French and English colonial administrations slowly put themselves in place. From 1914 to 1919, in five short years, he made a colossal fortune. Rich, but physically weakened, such was Evans at the end of August 1938, while, without drum or trumpet, clouds amassed in the sky of the occidental world.

Koffi Lumo was christened Georges at his baptism, but his father was the only person to call him that in all the family. The name Koffi, which was easier for his paternal grandmother and the other members of his family to pronounce, was more known and used.

1938 was a happy year for him as he got ready to enter a new stage in his life equipped with solid references. His university titles were truly worthy of respect everywhere in the world. Nevertheless, he was strangely troubled by something, as if the essentials were elsewhere. That which escaped him about life, his life, the life of those close to him, the life of Africans, seemed considerable.

"I pass," he said to his friend, "like a wind that leaves no memories. However, I am very content to be."

His parents wanted him to marry a girl from the village. But his heart was already taken.

He loved Lisa, a young English student whom he had met during his first stay in England. She was finishing her master's degree in the physical sciences. They met at a conference in Blumington, Wales.

After setting off for some scientific debates, Koffi found his heart touched in the most unexpected way.

Since they met, Koffi's soul was never at rest. Everything converged toward her. He could not formulate independent projects. His existence could not but be marked with the warmth of Lisa's body, the vivacity of her mind, the naiveté about her. He thought of her night and day. Barely a month after he returned to Africa, Koffi had already received a letter from Lisa, tender and full of hope for a bright future.

After such a long stay in foreign countries, he had acquired, in this period of fundamental transformations of his being, habits of comportment which henceforth became part of his character. Progressively, Koffi was becoming the man he would be tomorrow.

He still loved his village. Of that he was quasi-certain. He already would have liked to see something else, something organized according to other directing principles, so that man's existence wouldn't be merely a vegetative life, unfolding in monotone in the expectation of death. He seemed to be in the presence of a decapitated body, executing by instinct acts, coordinated for years, which still possessed a semblance of logic.

Here, nothing new happened. The men seemed to evolve in a flat, closed universe. The limits were hardly altered. Everyone seemed to be at the same level as everyone else. No one emerged.

During the long exodus of the populations occupying the hills of Dogadzi, the cripples were pitilessly eliminated, as well as those who were too clear-sighted. One day, taking pity on the first category, a great priest had the brilliant idea of presenting them to the collective imagination as being the incarnations of certain spirits. He instituted, in the most dramatic cases, veritable cults.

The cripples came out of it reinvigorated and respected. After this time, a number of them tried their best to conquer their infirmities in spectacular fashion. There was a one-armed fisherman on the big lake; there was a leper lacking most of his upper limbs who was a boatman on the edge of the river.

Everyone knew--and spoke of him from generation to generation--this incomparable singer whose melodies conquered the soul, and the wisdom of the mind.

In observing the inhabitants of his village at present, Koffi strongly felt that the essential was still lacking in them. They seemed to have attained an equilibrium next door to death.

Everything seemed so calm. You really felt like it was a body that life was getting ready to leave. It made Koffi sad, and his friend, sleepy at this side, was only a prototype of this category of young people who still seemed to be without a destiny.

He thought briefly of Lisa. Then he thought of his country. Tears of despair wet his temples. He felt himself useless, a spectator resigned to the tragedy that struck his village, his people. Without saying a word, he got up and hurried away from the quiet, dreary square.

In a lane, he ran into Anita, his old friend from school who had always lived in his memory.

“What are you doing so late?” he asked.

“Do you think that I’m looking for adventure like you?”

“Who said anything to you about adventure?”

“It’s just that you young men of this village don’t have anything else on your minds.”

“Anita, why are you so harsh? Give me the indulgence of a man who is returning from “the bush.” The man who spent many years far from his country, who has seen other countries and has known other men. As for women, I didn’t have a lot of time to get to know them. My studies didn’t leave me much time for that, you know.”

A thought crossed Koffi’s mind. It seemed ridiculous at first, but it wouldn’t stop coming back and coming back.

“Why not try to have a little adventure with Anita?”

Instead of fighting against this idiotic affair of nuptials, he would choose Anita, taken from this village that was already dying, and he would cheerfully announce to his grandparents that his heart was already committed elsewhere in the village, given that it was out of the question to talk to them about an alternative solution. And after all, she was a young, beautiful, vigorous girl overflowing with health.

After that night when they quickly parted without any flights of poetry, the two of them met many more times.

Koffi must have discovered with much pleasure that Anita had barely changed. She was the same as ever. Keen intelligence, malice in her gaze, and

this terrifying repartee which warded off even the most foolhardy of the show-off boys.

Her friendship with Koffi was born, it seemed, purely by chance. But isn't it said that in the world luck doesn't really exist, only the laws that we know and the others that we ignore? The latter we qualify as phenomena owing to chance.

This was the chance that brought Anita and Koffi together for the first time.

One morning, on the road from school, Koffi saw Anita, crying and disheveled, going back home because she had lost the case that contained her pens and pencils.

Koffi consoled her and made a commitment to share his own pencils and other utensils with her from now on. He had them in surplus anyway.

After that day, the two left for school together and came back together. Their little classmates gossiped a lot about how they were getting close. All sorts of little stories were spread that had nothing to do with the very simple reality.

Aside from this affair of fiancées, a question mark remained concerning Koffi.

Did he know that his life would be brief? Did he have a premonition? Nothing, in any case, in his face indicated a short or ordinary existence, unless something unforeseen happened.

In terms of his beliefs, at the instigation of his father, he devoted himself body and soul to Christianity. He could never bring his mind to submit to a tradition that wanted every human being who was born to be a reincarnation of a being already having lived somewhere else under foreign skies. And so certain people were believed to be the descendants of ancestors who had lived on other continents. All of that seemed ridiculous and unseemly in Koffi's eyes.

The Christian religion did not allow its followers to stoop to superstitions of this nature. Had he paid any attention to these practices, Koffi Lumo would have been able to learn that it's possible to straighten out the course of life along the way. He would have known about numerous ways to ward off ill fortune, to change destiny. And, maybe, he would have led a life worthy of the intellectual qualities that he had so courageously cultivated.

But his thoughts were elsewhere. The elders of his village who had the gift of reading the invisible knew for a long time that this brilliant young man would pass like a flash of lightning.

He didn't do any harm. In a few short years would they only remember that he had been a man of good who could have been a spirit, a savior of oppressed and degraded peoples?

The young village girl that his parents intended him to marry had everything to please a local young man. She was solid and hard-working.

What's more, a young girl submissive to the traditions of her environment, she would never raise a finger in objection to the conditions in which they wanted to place her.

It's true that in the circumstances, Koffi was a rather advantageous party. Lots of young men of the country called him "Yovoa." This name summarized their attitude concerning him: admiration, but also rejection. Admiration for his education, which they knew to be immense, even if they couldn't exactly measure its extent. He was consequently placed above the others.

Rejection because no one dared to include him in this society where he had nonetheless been born.

He no longer knew the customs. They gave up the idea of teaching them to him, and by the same gesture, he was regarded as a foreign element. His

unblemished Christianity was also a subject of caution within a population where the combination of religions was the rule.

Yovoa, alias Koffi, was amused and perplexed at the same time by the attitude the others adopted toward him.

The clincher was when the kids greeted him with their famous “Yovo-Yovo bonsoir . . .” He found all of that intolerable since he didn’t perceive himself as any different from the others.

He didn’t know in what way his ten-year stay in Europe had so profoundly transformed him. In the little details, the minor details of daily human behavior, he noticed some differences. But he could understand them completely. They were the attitudes linked to the past of the two peoples, European and African. And all that was really rather laughable. If you scraped the varnish off, you discovered the same essence, the same motives, the same basic ideas.

So why did mountains have to be made of these differences that even really exist? But human societies are what they are. No one can change any of it. The little details have always determined the larger classifications.

A stranger in his own village, Koffi Lumo nevertheless felt loved. And, for that, he willingly forgave these little disagreeable remarks that tended to reject him from the community, remarks that made him an exterior element.

“Be indulgent with him,” Koffi often heard people in society say, “because,” they continued, “in his country,” (to put it plainly, they meant in Europe) “one doesn’t learn how to behave as one ought.”

Consequently, they forgave Koffi most of the behavioral faults that they would pardon in whites. Partly because they were different and partly because they were the bosses, and you couldn’t lack consideration toward them without impunity.

Without wanting to be, Koffi was rejected from the European society that he admired so much, but which he was also far from having adopted, and which in any case had nothing but scorn and hurtful attitudes toward him.

At the end of his vacation in Africa, things happened quickly. He categorically rejected the young farm girl proposed to him. He dug the ditch that seemed to separate him from the others even deeper. His love for Lisa suffered some from the distance between them. On the other hand, his fondness for Anita, more well-tended, rapidly transformed into a devouring and desperate love. Romance for a time, the two partners knew that it didn’t know how to prolong itself. They put all their energy into despair.

Koffi loved Anita like he loved his country. He loved her without hope. The future seemed blocked off.

With his vacation over, he would return to Europe. And that would be the end of it.

Anita was expecting a child. She told Koffi, and he burst into tears.

“Are you going to raise it, our child?”

“Yes, my love.”

“Will you tell it about its father?”

“Naturally, my love.”

“Maybe it will be a boy?”

“I would have liked a girl myself.”

“You’ll teach it how to love? He’ll know how to be big and strong and invincible.”

“Do you want a warrior?”

“Oh, yes! Because you see, the battle that I am going to lose, I would like for him to be able to win it.”

The night was calm. It was filled with much love. Early the next morning, Koffi Lumo left. And the village carried on in its own sweet way, its long agony pursuing it to the rhythm of the seasons.

Mamadou had tiptoed away a long time ago. The chief had fallen asleep in the entrance to his tent. He awoke early in the morning, when the camp trumpet sounded the wake-up call.

It was the morning of a lackluster day, without particularity, a day without a name. It was Koffi Lumo's last morning.

The offensive was launched, flashing and deadly. Perched on his old command jeep, Koffi went from one point to another along the front. At the entrance to the bridge, a mine blew his jeep to bits, scattering it into a thousand pieces.

His soldiers were terrified for a moment but took hold of themselves, and under the orders of the young Scotsman George Lloyd, they surrounded the bridge. And despite the German resistance, they crossed the Rhine. Victory!