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KUULLA

Translated from Italian by Brandon Breen

THEY CALL ME Indhokuusha: It's because of my eyes, see? They say it looks like they've been circled with kuul. But I don't put makeup on, no, to me those powders are just for women. Someone who did use kuul, though, was my grandfather, a Yemenite from Sanca, old Sharif Caddow, my mother's father. He came to Mogadishu before my aunt was born, I'm talking about more than fifty years ago, and the old man never learned a word of Somali. He worked for the Italians, even though he was by profession a butcher, a throat-cutter, goats and camels, an expert in letting animals bleed out, with the red liquid flowing in the direction of Mecca. Sharif Caddow dyed his mustache and hair with henna of a dark orange color, and then he circled his eyes with kuul. It was because of the light he would say; he was protecting himself against the light. And his eyes seemed like deep eyes, nocturnal eyes. Like mine.

Night eyes, kuulla eyes. I walk around when everyone is sleeping. Just because. It's hot during the day and I prefer to spare myself that. And then all that running, all that smoking, I don't get it.

I prefer the nighttime, the silence, and making noise that echoes, every now and again.

I think that what the night itself feels is the desire to bring together all the threads that connect people. I just sit there and listen to the city.

And the city is there, in that square where I always am. You get off the subway at Piramide and keep walking for a bit, straight down the street. Then you take a left, and there's a big, rectangular-shaped square. Some playground equipment and a few benches here and there.

You know, you eventually learn to recognize people based off places. There's this man, the man who brought me here, the man who works all night until the sunrise. I spoke to him because he sings, at night.

I asked him, Man, why do you sing? And he began laughing, with a cigarette in his mouth, I swear, he was really laughing hard. He was driving one of those little trucks, one that blows out thick air and creates piles of leaves, all dried leaves, on the street corners. He laughed as the truck was puffing, making lots of noise.

And he seemed like the wind, when the night comes, when it appears to sweep away everyone with no prior notice, then it breathes out, grinds itself down again, and blows out more recompressed air. And so at night I would recognize, by the echoing and singing, the man who had brought me here.

Then, every once and a while, a break, and he would call me close to him, would light a cigarette and give it to me—one all for me.

“Young man, here it’s just me and you. The masters of the city.”

Everyone sleeping and he’s there with his broom, its bristles made from dry twigs. You can hear it like the sound of the pavement being hosed down, *shh shh shh*. It passes by and cancels every trace of anyone else. When everybody sleeps, the darkness welcomes you affectionately. You can dump all your powerlessness into it. But not that man, no, he would make his way and bring relief. At night he would erase all the grime of humanity.

“It’s not the best of jobs, young man. But I’m able to provide for my family. And then at night . . . you see things that a normal eye doesn’t see.”

He gave me a little bit of comfort; I would see him singing, and he was like someone who works all night just to surprise people when they wake up in the morning. The man arrived and so did the night, together.

THEY CALL ME Indhokuusha, that’s all you need to know. I’ve passed through many ports, many borders. The name, the name changes, but what they call you, no, that is a part of you. Your mother and father give you a name, maybe they name you after your uncle, or maybe you’re their eighth child and they just pick a random name. But Indhokuusha, no, you ask for Indhokuusha and everyone knows.

Indhokuusha, the one that walked the whole way. Indhokuusha, the one that lived on Via dei Villini, near Porta Pia, in the old embassy. Indhokuusha, the one that has that camera roll he never developed. Indhokuusha, the one that everyone sent back.

Seventy-four people are traveling across the Sahara.

Packed together, one on top of the other. A truck that puffs along with dented tires, a truck that spits and sweats and inside seventy-four miserable people are massed together. Will it grind them up?

The desert—whoever has passed through the desert knows what it means. The sky is always the same color, you can’t distinguish anything, the sand is the same, and you keep going up and down dunes. It’s all

so similar that you don't know where the sun will rise, nor where it will set. The truck passes by and, after five minutes, its tracks are erased. The desert sand is thick and gets in your eyes and makes them burn. You know that if you walk you can go faster than the truck, but your body just doesn't have that strength. And you know that if the truck breaks down then that's the end.

And the truck crosses the desert and finds forty bodies eaten by the sand, abandoned to the sun. Will our wretched prayers be enough to keep the truck from stopping? The hearts of the drivers don't care about prayers. They kick out the remaining sixty-nine of us, they abandon us in Jazahir. People start dying and I think, Now I'll die too. Fourteen days of walking and an oasis in sight. When your body is dehydrated, you need to act with patience, lie down on the wet sand, moisten your skin, otherwise you risk death. Have you ever seen a man beg for urine? That's what you're reduced to in the desert. A month and twenty-five days go by, then we arrive in Libya—the ones who are still alive. You can't get rid of the desert. It gushes and screams out from your chest in the middle of the night, burning like a live fire.

Then one night the man I told you about talked to me: "Why do you always end up here every night listening to me, don't you have a home?"

Let me tell you about that man, his naivety. In his head I was—in the worst case—a homeless man.

"Friend, I can't sleep. So I come here to feel less alone. You just have this sweetness about you when you toss out the garbage, and it moves me!"

THEY CALL ME Indhokuusha.

"Indu what?"

The man laughed at my name. He didn't understand how it made any sense.

He was walking around with a large broom that had twigs for bristles, and with two shiny stripes on his back, in the middle of the night.

"They didn't give me the truck today!" he said. So he stayed there, close to where I was sitting. I could hear his singing better, and he was like a dad putting his children to bed, children that are the whole city, and he takes care of them all.

Because, you know, here people don't wonder where the stuff they don't want any more ends up, they just toss it in a bag and that's it. And they throw out everything together, in a hurry, things that someone

else might only dream about, *Well, anyway, if I don't need it anymore then who gives a crap.* And then they forget that there's somebody, somebody that has to take care of these scraps, someone who has to do the work and grind it down and throw it out again, recompacted, toss it out, far away.

Far away because we don't want to feel the burden of our waste!

Far away and only while we're sleeping!

And that waste—the stuff they don't think about—is defenseless, suffocated by all that abundance.

I was there, drowning in the stink and the terror, in the hull of the boat. I don't want to see outside, no. I'm a nomad, like a camel that goes crazy with fear at the sight of the sea. In the hull, all huddled up. The days pass and we cross the sea, the days pass and we arrive at the port.

"Fingerprinted, come get fingerprinted!" yell the police.

Then they free us like stray dogs that don't have a place to go. I wander through the station's womb. Every once in a while, I get the urge to jump onto one of those departing trains, right there in front of me. Then I meet people from home, people who speak my language, because I haven't yet learned this country's language. And they tell me: "Come with us, we're going to stay in a hole in the wall, but at least we'll have company."

The hole in the wall is the cafeteria in our old embassy. Our diplomats are deceased. A lavish neighborhood for us, the wretched, in the heart of the capital, to the right of Porta Pia. During the day we live together on other people's pity. Someone brings us milk, someone brings us bread. We listen to a radio program in our language. And everyone makes fun of me because I hold on to a camera roll that I don't want to develop. The night comes and we take shelter in the basement. So dark and humid like a well, in the Earth's stomach, so dreary that we call it *Saddam's hole*.

"Induku, but have you ever tried to get a job?"

Was I supposed to stay in Saddam's hole? Kept around from month to month, interrupted sleep, not even the decency of work for someone asking for refuge?

I got off the boat in Bari and was welcomed with a prisoner's life. But at least there was food and a bed. Then spit out again on the street, a loiterer. The police say: *leave!* But go where? To Rome, maybe, that's the capital. But even the metropolis doesn't want me.

I take a train to Holland and cross France and Belgium. In Holland a

break, some change scraped together thanks to distant relatives. I leave again, for England, passing through France. They stop me in France and send me back to Holland.

Five days later, I have nothing to lose, I try again. I get as far as England this time, but they stop me anyway and send me back to France. I've got no money left, I head back to Holland by train, my relatives scrape up more money.

I leave, by car, for Norway. They find me a shelter, in a camp, in the countryside, then they find out. They find out about the fingerprints. And they tell me, Go back there. But where is there? In Italy, where I got off the boat? No one wants me.

I run away from the camp. I get to Oslo, the capital. I won't go back to Italy, no. I try to take a flight to England, but once again they throw me in jail. Then they set me free, I take a ship from Norway, a ship. I arrive in Denmark. At the Copenhagen airport I try to take a flight to Ireland. In Dublin they get me again.

Finally, so lost and disoriented, I accept that destiny is pushing me back here, to Italy, to Rome.

The man that brought me here. I told you, we were friends. Close to dawn he would buy two hot croissants, one for me and one for him, and he would sit down in front of me. We hadn't seen much of each other since he started driving the bigger trucks. He would stand on the back and hook the dumpsters onto the lift. Then a pulley would take them up and dump them upside down until nothing was left inside, everything mashed up. This way no one would know what was inside of the bags. Just a shapeless mass of waste.

As I was saying, on this night it was raining and a strong wind was blowing in the rectangular-shaped square. Lots of leaves were blowing around, up, real high. Many nights had passed since I last saw my friend. His voice—or even just his croissant—calmed a little that live fire from the desert.

So, I was saying, tonight. It was raining and windy. My friend always looks inside the dumpsters before hooking them on. He told me once that he does that to check that there's nothing valuable inside, something that would get lost, in the shapeless mass.

So, I was saying, he looked inside. Night eyes, kuulla eyes.

It was raining, and I didn't want to get wet. That dumpster is always like this, practically empty. Then I heard his voice from above: "Induku, what happened, have you gone crazy?"

My friend, it had been a while since I last saw him. He was afraid that I wanted to kill myself, that's why he brought me here, to the Regina Elena Hospital.

But I was there, in the dumpster's womb, just to get some shelter from the wind.