

The section for women and their babies

Ange is one month old: she was born here. I met her as she leaned her head against her mother, a woman with cream-caramel coloured eyes that seemed not that much older than her new-born daughter. She is gentle and tranquil. The two are beautiful. I exit her shadowy cell and meet Daniel, Marcelline and Tommy, aged between nine and thirteen months. They, too, were born here.

I want to take them in my arms, these '*miracle babies*' that neither malaria nor childhood illnesses have managed to overcome. But they shy away, untrusting, unaccustomed to seeing white skin. They fall, get back up again, walking among the stools, the jute bags and the smoke. I watch them and am struck by them.

Now they are sitting in the sun, on the overheated concrete, which doesn't appear to be a problem for them. They babble and start playing, like children the world over. But what is playing, without the most meagre doll or the simplest rattle, without a sandpit or a playground, without the shade of a tree or an animal. Without music, except the hymns of Sunday mass. Without a thing to their names, not even a plastic page to fascinate them.

Their tentative first steps are made in the midst of the usual hustle and bustle of the prison. Thankfully, they are not hungry. The prisoners show solidarity on this – they are treated like *all babies on the world* are treated. But what does that mean here? The babies of the world cry. The babies of the world laugh. Not them. Or not much. There are no tears in the eyes that are always watery due to the smoke.

Francis' huge eyes. Those eyes that have never seen a countryside beyond these prison walls: grey concrete, gradually getting black as one gets closer to the kitchen. In the kitchen, two giant jars murmur quietly. They are balanced on bricks, working as a makeshift trestle, under a hole bored in a concrete slab. Crammed into that hole are various plastic bits and pieces, painted wood, plantain peelers, coloured boxes, bones of dried fish. Everything which is flammable is used as a fuel. The fire is kept going day and night because it is here that food is prepared for all of the women and also for the diseased, the mentally ill and the little shop selling cassava doughnuts that some use to scrape together a living.

There is a constant throng around the jars, which are the origin of a thick and sticky smoke, smoke which grasps towards the sky, but its route is blocked. There is no chimney to allow the dark spires to escape. They are imprisoned in the cracks in the walls, flooding towards the cells and the yard. They soak into everything before finally finding an outlet – the walls, clothes, objects. It also invades the eyes, the mouth and the lungs. The women have eye complaints, complaints which start with blurred vision and a burning feeling. They then see less and less clearly. Their sensitivity to light becomes more and more severe.

They start by blaming the strength of the sun, and its reflection off the concrete. Then they start developing respiratory problems, coughing and asthma for those who have been imprisoned the longest. These symptoms are much worse in the babies. Even if it is not immediately obvious, they are already suffering before it is noticed. It is essential to take action quickly, otherwise the effects are irreversible – leukaemia, cancer and lung problems multiply.

"Sometimes the women argue so much that it is possible to hear them from our wing," the male prisoners tell me. I look at them, baffled: their wing is number 8. It is on the other side of the medical centre, on the other side of the central yard, behind metal gates several metres high. How on earth can they hear the women from their cells? Is it possible that their voices can break through what escape attempts have never managed to get through? The women, so silent and discreet when the men are present. The violence – eliminated during the day – which reigns among them is clear through their children, whose faces are their most eloquent representatives. Every days represents a subtle balance – an infinite number of chance happenings and little miracles that allows one day to end and another to begin.

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