

**25 février 2007**

We went there this morning. Their eyes a patchwork of black marble. Waiting with a certain intensity. They intimidate me, make me lower my eyes. A human tide washes towards me, rushing and bustling. I force myself to look at them and not to rush. Not to push them aside when they grab my sleeve. I leave this to the prisoners who are with me, who do it with calmness and without aggression. Their relaxed approach changes and calms the atmosphere.

The first day in prison, it's the first day of classes: it's important to create a good first impression. A first day that has the unique characteristic of repeating itself every morning. I immediately set to work - because there is so much to do and because it is the only way of gaining my composure. The youngsters, the newborns, prisoners ravaged by disease. The tuberculosis that I hear from those that need to stay in the sun. The mentally ill, they are even more striking than the prisoners on death row - their intensity stained by the absence in their eyes. Feeling their gaze go from my blonde hair to my blouse, curiously touching my arms.

"Kosovo", the word is thrown around like a hot potato. They are frequently on the point of a riot in there. I hesitate for a second before going in. I stop. Not today, it will be necessary to get used to the whole thing first. In "Kosovo," you need to move forward, to speak without breathing. Move forward without stumbling among the bodies lying indifferently in the sun, without jumping when one of them starts screaming next to you, ignoring the cockroaches, not blushing faced with nakedness. Learning to recognize an explosive situation and get out quickly - a far from unusual experience. And they all speak at the same time, some venerating me, some rejecting me, some flooding my ears with tales of what they would do to me if they got me away from my "gorillas". No, certainly, Kosovo will be for another day. I move forward and the pockets of my blouse fill quickly - the same hands that displayed disinterest now fill my hands with letters of complaint. I will read them outside.

So, there we are, never less than five or six hours at a stretch, without a break, without a glass of water. The hands of the prisoners like latex gloves. I silently lose patience with their sweaty fingers that turn their hands into something akin to plungers after an hour. The heat, the concrete, the heavy air, the cries, the smell, the rapid movement of the crowd. We need to be careful not to touch our faces, which will lead to infections. It's just a question of habit. One quickly develops careful reflexes here. I feel Nkaya can't cope with much more. It's his "baptism" in this country, in this prison. I remember my first day, my first time here. I smile at him: human beings adapt so quickly to so many things.

When the time comes to leave, my heart tightens: not already! I again want so much to stay with them, to listen to them, to talk to them. Tossing the hair of the youngest, dreaming of a better future for them. Smiling at the older ones that call me *mother* : it's daft, I still tingle with joy every time.

When I remove my blouse, I shake off the dust and already count the minutes and the hours that separate me from tomorrow, from 8.30, the time I will go back through the gates.