

**10 March 2007**

*En route to Paris*

I had a sleepless night after leaving Africa. Sitting with a ray of sun pushing through the window, unable to read, to reflect, only just able to write. My heart low, I chew my lip demanding what tomorrow will bring. In my head, there is a succession of people, Allane offering his hand to Alex, JP, Simo, Emma, Aimé. The Minister. Followed by the doctor from the hospital ("digestive surgery": him, proud, me wondering what's going on). For each of my trips here, I realize that I will have more people to love. Agnès, Arlette, Poupina. Mischievous Thomas, virile Gaston and radiant Patrick.

Aimé, her gentleness, her pain, her nobility.

Simo, head bowed: like a naughty child when I comment on his behaviour. The women. So gentle, so moving. So cruel among themselves, sometimes. So silent. So discreet and submissive in public, discreet and submissive in front of the various faces of authority. And when they finally decide to, they scold with a ferocity that leaves me speechless.

Agnès says goodbye telling me "*I will keep you in my heart and I look forward to your return*". Me, I will keep your beautiful eyes, your half-moon smile. Your look, when it becomes distant and you talk about your fellow prisoners, "*at the beginning, it is important to be strong. There is a lot of pressure from the men. The women that have been here a bit longer are left in peace*". I see her, so beautiful and I see her reality. During these two weeks, I haven't thought of anything but them. They flow through my veins. I love them. All of them. I told them that all I am no longer a woman who once visited a prison: I'm a daughter, a mother. I am sister, friend, confidant, boss, guide, teacher, manager. Not a woman. Not an accomplice. Never.

Loving them like this allows me to sometimes shake them by their arms, sometimes to tickle their necks. To kiss their cheeks on the last day. To keep them in my heart like children, when they silently ask for help. That is what they are too... children. I feel Simo's head against my shoulder again. So soft, so fragile when he's emotional.

Its only when I'm leaving that I realise that this time is the first time that he told me a story of when he was outside. He never talks about life before prison. Sometimes about after, but never before. It's like there's a barrier in the way, the here and now. It's like a nerve severed by detention. Nothing will ever be *like before*. Neither for us, nor for them.