

Dan Pope

THE BEACH PEDDLER

Prada. Gucci. Louis Vuitton. A dozen handbags, leather and vinyl. Kojo loops them around a wooden pole, which he carries across his shoulders. He follows the low hard sand, moving like a spider with an unwieldy burden.

“Ciao, bella,” he says, coming to rest next to a beach umbrella. “*Vuoi comprare?* Do you buy?”

A topless girl with oblong brown breasts examines two or three bags. He waits on one knee, watching the reflections on the sea.

“No,” she says, then reclines on the towel and closes her eyes.

He speaks Italian with a French accent. He also knows some English and Spanish, the words that a foreigner learns before being put on a plane and sent away. Hello goodbye thank you how much fuck you I am sorry you are very beautiful may I use the bathroom would you spend the night with me where is the train station may I have a glass a water please I cause no trouble.

He calls every woman *bellissima*, young or old, beautiful or otherwise. There are shopowners from Rome tugging little mutts on short tethers, without husbands, who haggle for ten minutes; women who sunbathe in bikini bottoms all afternoon while their aged mothers sit in beachchairs beside them, handing over prosciutto and provolone sandwiches wrapped in oil paper; girls in string bikinis walking in pairs, arm in arm, swinging their hips.

“Feel the leather. Smells nice, yes?”

“Yes, but—”

“One-fifty. It is Gucci, signorina. It goes with your hair. What a beauty you are in the sun.”

“I have no money.”

“What do you mean, no money?”

He gestures at the neat rows of blue lounge chairs and umbrellas, the raked sand, the volleyball net. “Of course you have money. Take the bag. I come back tomorrow. If you don’t like, you give it back. Do you go to the dance clubs, signorina? Do you know *La Bussola*? You will find me there at midnight.”

It is his third summer in San Felice Circeo.

The town was built as a Papal outpost, on a hillside high above the sea. In the *piazzetta* stands a Templar tower, from which sentries once watched for Saracen sails. Now there are fruit vendors, newspaper huts, outdoor cafes with long turquoise awnings, boutiques, a souvenir shop.

He has lodgings within the walls of the old convent. His apartment is in the interior chambers, a first floor walk-up without ocean view—servants quarters at one time, without direct sunlight in the morning or afternoon. There are two rooms, cold stone walls, and one narrow window that overlooks the rear courtyard, where summer people double-park on the cobblestones and stray cats sniff overfilled garbage cans.

The landlady lives on the upper floors, a widow in a town of widows, stooped and craggy-faced, black-clad. She walks with a cane and beats the floor with it whenever he plays music. She also beats the floor whenever he cooks. The smoke from frying meat wafts into her bedroom. Meat and onions. It makes her ill, she complains. She continues beating until the sounds, or cooking smells, cease.

At dinnertime young men come to see him. They sit on the floor, eating with their hands from the same large bowl. They cook and eat, speaking in French or Wolof, while the landlady beats the stick. Some work the fields, stoop laborers. Others are beach peddlers. They live in broken-down farmhouses, miles from the shore, next to fields of browsing buffalo cows. Twenty, sometimes thirty, share a few rooms, sleeping on cots partitioned by rag-curtains, snoring, coughing, dreaming of thieves and drug-dealer riches.

He tells the young men, "Do not betray the Camorra."

He tells them, "Walk alone."

He tells them, "Send money to your family every month."

The noise from the *piazzetta* ceases late at night. The revelers go home, footsteps trailing off.

The wind comes to him and speaks in Maimouna's voice:

I have left the village. I have gone to the city. When will you come for me?

Morning. The *carabinieri* arrive before breakfast. Three fat men, all wearing white shirts with different grades of epaulets on their shoulders.

"We must address a matter of paper. Documents. Beach permits."

In his nervousness Kojo is slow to find the words in Italian.

"Do we not have . . . an arrangement?"

The brigadiere sighs and shakes his head.

There are so many people to pay off, Kojo nearly loses count. He crosses their property each day in his trek along the long beach, five kilometers down, five kilometers back: the managers of the beach clubs; bar owners; private security guards. There are military officials; local *polizia*; and the *carabinieri*, who are the most difficult. The *carabinieri* have pretensions toward legitimate law enforcement, which means that he must pay them more than the others.

“Signora Leoni says that you owe two weeks rent. She says that you kill dogs and cook them? Is that true?”

“No, brigadiere. The rent is due, that much is true.”

The brigadiere removes his cap and places it on the countertop. He says, “We have not had so many foreigners since the fall of the Roman empire. Unfortunately, our country is not geared for it. If people want street sellers, they will go to Casablanca, no?”

Kojo tries to smile.

“Life has not changed in this town for a long time. You live within a twelfth century convent, did you know that? You sleep in a room with the ghosts of virgins. They once had nightmares of demons like you—Moors, Saracens, Tunisians—who came by ship to rape and pillage, taking girls from their mothers’ arms, never to be seen again. Those were the days, yes?”

Kojo says nothing.

“Five hundred per week,” says the brigadiere. “That is our arrangement.”

“It is not possible—”

“Until your papers arrive, of course.”

The brigadiere lifts some handbags from the pile on the floor and passes them to his companions. They take an armload and file out.

“We are partners, you and I.”

He tries to hold the brigadiere’s stare, but cannot. It would lead to blows, to murder, his own probably.

The brigadiere slaps his stomach and places his cap on his head. Going down the stairs he calls out, “You should try pasta, my friend. Ravioli. Lasagna. Pasta *alla marinara*. Beats the hell out of dog.”

Noon.

He stops to wipe his face. He has walked nearly half his route and made two sales, but for little profit. Everyone haggles. With so many beach ped-

dlers bearing the same merchandise, the women have grown accustomed to the procedure, and they have lost their sympathy.

He turns toward the mountain, following its jagged rise from the sea, the red and white-roofed villas cleaved into the slope, terraces covered in lush vegetation. A noiseless wind ruffles the tree-covered crest. There are no houses on the summit, only an astronomical observatory. The ridge of the mountain forms the profile of a woman with a long crooked nose. You can see it from miles away. It is said to be the image of the temptress Circe, who turned men into swine, who gave the town its name.

“Are you angry with me, witch?” he asks. “Have you no luck for me today?”

As if in answer to his question, a voice rings out:

“*Gelati! Bibite, granite!*”

Kojo turns to see the ice cream boy, lugging two metal buckets, his sneakers sinking into the deep sand. He is wearing wrap-around mirror-sunglasses, so that Kojo sees his own face approaching him above the boy’s jutting teeth and smiling lips.

“*Cocco! Cocco bello!*”

The boy puts down the buckets and tosses Kojo a coconut slice.

“Nice catch, Vu Compra.”

The boy calls him that name to annoy him. “Vu Compra” is what the Italians call the African vendors, derived from the way many mispronounce the words *Vuoi comprare*. It means that you are an ignorant foreigner, no better than a beggar.

“You should play in NBA,” the boy says in English. He has a heavy accent, not Russian, but something like it. “How tall you are, Vu Compra? As tall as Michael Jordan?”

“Taller,” says Kojo.

“As tall as Shaquille, eh?” The boy pantomimes a slam-dunk, then a post-dunk strut. “I like Vlade Divac because he is stronger than anyone. But I love Magic Johnson. He smile like an angel. When he smile, you smile too. Even the other players, they must smile. The great Magic Johnson will never play again. Listen, Vu Compra. I fart in stereo.”

He points his ass, making a high-pitched squeal.

“You have been eating too many coconuts,” says Kojo.

“I fart on the policeman. They say I steal but it is not true. Because I am Serb, that is why they take me to jail. It is not true in America, eh? That is

where I go someday. Have you been to New York, Vu Compra?"

Kojo says, "They take you to jail because you are a thieving little faggot."

"The whole country is faggots. I suck their dick, yes. Yet it is they who have the hard dick. They put lipstick on me, they put their finger in my ass hole. You see, it is a lie. It takes two to be a faggot."

"There are many ways to make money."

"Why speak of money, Vu Compra, unless you want to pay me?"

"I have no money for you, boy."

"Vu Compra, you are rich. You are the black that lives among the whites."

"Below them. Not among."

He lifts the handbags and moves toward the next beach.

The boy hurries to keep up, hauling the buckets.

"Hey, Vu Compra. Let me do you blow job. *Un piccolo bocchino*. We go into the sea and I do beneath the water. I fart bubbles like champagne. Vu Compra, you can watch the bubbles while you shoot. Then you buy me beer, okay?"

Ordinarily he would tell him, or any other vendor, to move away. It is not good to compete for a sale. But the boy is boisterous and his ice cream and coconuts make the women and children smile.

To the sound of a gentle surf, they climb a concrete barrier and enter a private beach, nearly vacant. There is a break wall of long flat rocks, shaped like a T, which extends some thirty meters into the sea. Men and boys stand on the rocks, fishing, the poles wedged into the cracks, while others swim around the sides, wearing snorkels, searching for crabs.

The beautiful girl is lying on the outermost rock. He crosses the beach, then follows the wall until he is standing over her. She has her back to the sun, the straps of her bikini top undone, her mouth half-open. Beside her lies a large sleeping dog.

He whispers, "This is an angel who fell from the sky for me."

She opens her eyes, a green flash of annoyance.

"What did you say?"

"I—"

"I heard you. What do you want?"

"I have Gucci."

"This is a private beach, don't you know that?"

She sits up, clutching the bikini top. He notices the pale, taut underside of one of her breasts.

“You walk by everyday with the same shitty bags. Jesus. How many times do I have to say no?”

“I go, Signorina.”

“My girlfriend said the straps fell off the day after she bought it. Gucci, eh?”

A low snarl comes from beside her. The dog leaps to its feet, studying him with avid black eyes, a spatter of froth dripping from its mouth. It leans forward, as if ready to spring.

“Signorina—”

“You have upset my dog. Here, Tiberio.”

The dog crouches.

He raises his hands in a consoling gesture. He considers jumping into the water—it is only a few meters deep—but the bags might be damaged. As he backs away, the dog juts its head forward and emits a single tremendous bark.

“No Tiberio!” she yells.

The dog whimpers, but does nothing.

“Good Tiberio,” she says.

The boy empties the buckets, splashing purple and orange mush onto the sand.

They walk together to the vacant property. It is a large beachfront lot, overgrown with burnt yellow grass, bordered by high plaster walls on all sides except the seaside, which is fenced with chain-link. Cans, bottles, and stray paper are scattered everywhere. The land slopes inland, so that they cannot be seen at the rear of the lot. Kojo looks both directions before pressing through the narrow opening in the fence.

“Vu Compra, what will you buy me?”

“Nothing.”

“For nothing I do nothing.”

“You do what I tell you.”

The boy does not remove the mirror-sunglasses. It is a kind of show, with Kojo watching in the reflection. Those jutting, yellow teeth.

A helicopter passes overhead, the *whack whack whack* of the blades.

The boy gets to his feet.

“Vu Compra, you are the Shaquille O’Neal of faggots.”

Kojo gestures for him to go.

“You buy me beer, yes?”

“Leave me, boy.”

“No, Vu Comprá. It was a deal. You buy beer or I kill you.”

“Don’t make me laugh. Go.”

Walking off, the boy begins banging the buckets together. They make a dull metallic thud, like a broken churchbell. He clangs them all the way across the lot. At the fence he turns:

“Vu Comprá, I fart on you. Do you hear?”

Kojo lays back in the tall grass and closes his eyes.

After a while the helicopter passes again.

Whack whack whack. . . .

Long ago, in another life, he travelled with his father to the city and returned with his face covered by sores. He collapsed into fever. They took him to the marabout, who whipped his face with a panther’s tail. The next day the sores turned to scabs. “You are cured,” said the marabout, and he was.

Go home, a voice is telling him.

But where is home when you have been away a lifetime?

Maimouna comes to him, her bright smile. Nights he crept out of the hut to meet her by the riverbank, beneath a fringe of palm trees. They clutched each other while monkeys and hyenas screeched and a persistent bird squawked over and again the same call. They lay in the tall spiky grass, sweating, covered by burrs, wrapped in the cloths of her *boubou*. In the moonlight, while she slept, he braided her hair. . . .

He is awakened by footsteps in the grass.

It is the boy, coming toward him. The glare of the high sun shields him. He appears to be reaching for something.

There is a sudden flash of gray, and his ear explodes in pain, a white rush of air, like a plane taking off.

The bucket bounces off his head and falls to the ground beside him.

“Vu Comprá, fuck you. Fuck you, I say.”

The words come to Kojo from a great expanse, as if echoing down a concrete corridor. The boy is yelling something incomprehensible in his own language, short sharp syllables which turn to darkness.

It is later. Perhaps a minute. Perhaps an hour. His ear aches. His jaw is sore. The side of his face is sticky with blood. He opens and closes his mouth many times.

The handbags are gone.

He reaches into his pockets. The money is gone.

He rises and leaves the lot.

The beach is crowded. Families sitting under large green umbrellas pass fruit to each other. Men in beachchairs study newspapers beside their reclined wives. An old man performs gymnastics near the rocks.

Kojo looks in each direction but there is no sign of the boy. He goes down to the sea and splashes water onto his head. He feels the gash, above his ear. The saltwater makes him wince and causes the blood to start anew. He takes off his shirt and ties it around his head. He is aware of the sunbathers watching him, their dark glasses raised.

Each step requires an unusual effort. Walking on the sand feels peculiar without the pole strung across his shoulders, the familiar weight. Without the merchandise, he feels naked, an interloper.

He walks along the boardwalk. A wave of dizziness takes him. For a moment he finds it difficult to stand.

When the wooden planks turn into one of the private residences, he hesitates for a moment, then follows the path onto the paved road.

He passes some children, who are singing.

A motorscooter whirls.

Music comes from a patio.

He hears the sounds as echoes amidst the clamor inside his head. Some part of him marvels at the serenity of the place, the whitewashed villas, the covered patios, the neat hedges and burgeoning gardens.

If he can cut across the residence to the main road, perhaps someone will give him a ride. A truck driver. Or another peddler.

But it is like a maze, without any path out. There are medians decorated with flowers and side streets that lead to turn-arounds and sudden dead-ends of stucco walls.

A caretaker tending to a hedge looks at him and drops his clippers. The man raises his arm and points. Kojo nods and heads in that direction. He does not know whether it leads back to the beach or to the main road.

Finally, the road straightens and he sees the gate, which crosses the entranceway on a track, six feet in height, parallel metal bars a few inches apart.

It is a land of barriers, this Italy. Everything is fenced off—houses, garages, shopfronts, apartment buildings, cemeteries, gardens, ancient ruins. The highways are open but they lead only to walled towns high on hilltops, built to withstand invasion from barbarians.

He sits on the curb and waits.

After a few minutes some children arrive.

“Hello,” says Kojo.

They study him.

“We’re going to the store to buy ice cream,” a boy tells him.

“Do you like ice cream?” asks Kojo, rising.

“Yes.”

“I do too,” says another child.

“Are you a giant?” asks the first boy.

“Yes,” says Kojo.

“A good giant or a bad giant?”

Kojo says, “All giants are good.”

“No they’re not,” says the boy.

He takes a remote control device from his pocket and presses the button. The gate screeches and begins moving across the track. When there is room, the children go through, and Kojo follows.

He stands by the side of the road and watches them cross, then begins walking back toward town.

Midnight. The discotheque is in darkness but for a chaos of lightning-like flashes—strobe whites, solar reds, neon blues. There is the throb of the bass and the high drone of revelers’ voices, like the ravings of schoolgirls.

He is wearing a bandanna wrapped around his head. Every now and then he touches it. The gash above his ear is dry, but the dizziness has returned.

He knows one of the men who works in the kitchen. He allows him to enter that way. On his break he brings Kojo a glass of warm champagne. They stand against the wall and drink champagne and watch the dancers.

Kojo yells over the music, “Have you seen the ice cream seller? The boy who walks the beach?”

“Are you looking for boys, Kojo?”

“I am looking for him.”

“He is wrong in the head,” says the dishwasher. “He comes at closing time and takes coins from the floor. What do you want from him?”

“He took something from me.”

“You do not look well, Kojo. You should go home.”

“Home? No—”

He cuts himself off. Why talk of home with the dishwasher, who has his own troubles?

They stand against the wall and watch the whore dancing by herself. She holds her arms above her head and moves her hips, a slow grind.

He has seen her standing by the side of the highway, wearing silver spandex and spiked heels. In Dakar she had another name. Now she calls herself Serena.

The dishwasher yells, "Someone is always asking for him."

"The boy?"

"Yes. He is very popular."

Kojo moves onto the dancefloor. He takes hold of her hips, pulling her toward him.

She stands in the rest area, the same place every day. There is a field of sunflowers behind the parking lot. A blanket, a towel.

Some drive a regular route. She knows them by their trucks. There is Garbage Truck. Coca Cola. Fish Freezer. When Fish Freezer pulls over, she flees into the sunflower field.

It is too crowded to dance. They move with their feet in place, without reference to the beat.

She looks past him, to a place behind. Her eyes are like black glass, denoting nothing.

The music does not cease. One song moves into another, the same remorseless beat. She is drenched in sweat, nearly as much as him.

She brushes his face with her braids. He tastes rainwater, the murky fragrance of the river.

There is a quiet moment, high choral voices over a deep pulse.

It is a luxury to speak his own language.

"*Oo vas-tu?*"

She meets his eyes for the first time, a flicker of irritation.

"*Nulle part,*" she says.

She looks off into the crowd. But her eyes fasten onto something, a sudden concentration. Kojo looks in that direction. A group of men, standing by the bar. They are wearing white shirts, which glow an incandescent blue under the laser lights. His gaze nearly passes over them. Without the caps and epaulets they look like anyone else. But their posture is unmistakable, the air of disdain.

"Do you know them?" he asks.

“Of course.”

She regains an expression of disinterest, but their gaze has altered her dancing. She is aware of herself, her movements.

He asks, “How much do they want?”

“More than I can give.”

“That is the amount they always ask.”

He removes his hands from her hips.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

When he walks away she continues dancing by herself.

He goes out onto the patio, then follows the stone path to the beach. There is no moon. He discerns the presence of men and women, their passing voices. The sand is soiled with plastic cups and cigarette butts. He walks down the beach a short distance, away from the commotion.

The sea is black and seemingly motionless, the quiet surf opening and closing like a door. He sits atop a low rock wall and watches the lights of Terracina, some fifteen kilometers down shore, and beyond that, another distant blur of white and yellow, some place he has never been.

It is the last of August. In a few weeks he will move on. Rome or Florence—he has not decided which. The winters are easier in the south, as are the police. But there are so many street vendors, it is difficult to make a profit. He cannot leave town until the end of the season. To do so would break his agreement with the man from Naples, who gives him supplies and collects the money. He cannot leave, but the idea of leaving is enticing. To pack his duffel bag and set out tonight, under the moonless sky. To find himself at dawn on the train station platform, ticket in hand, like the morning he first left Dakar, the tracks leading straight and true, like riches, as far as the horizon.

After some time, the music dies down. A consonance of automobiles, motors starting. Voices shout an end to the night.

He sees a silver glint, like the scales of a jumping fish. He recognizes the spandex pants, her long legs. Two men accompany her, one on each side. One is gripping her elbow. She is walking in a jerky motion, her heels sinking sharply into the sand. Another man is pulling a lounge chair across the sand, away from the lights of the discotheque. Kojo watches their white shirts meld into the darkness.

He hears low voices, laughter. A slap rings out. Her voice follows, a muted cry.

He does not move.

Still, a man calls out to him:

“*Vai via, Africano.*”

He recognizes the voice.

He rises. To return to the discotheque he must pass them. He takes a few steps toward them.

The man calls again, harder this time.

“*Vai via, Africano.* Eh?”

He stops, then turns.

An emptiness lies before him, the same path he travels each day. The Italians call it *lungo mare*. The long beach. It leads away from his home, in the opposite direction. There is only darkness and the tide.

He begins walking.