

# THE NAMES THEY CUT

A NOVEL

DIOP

## **The Names They Cut**

A novel by Diop

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## *Dedication*

For the people who kept names alive when paper betrayed them.

# Prologue

The rain came sideways through Saint-Louis that April, worrying the shutters and freckling the clerk's cuffs with rust-colored drops from the iron balcony above his desk. In the governor's offices the ceiling fans turned with a slow municipal patience, moving heat from one corner to another. Files swelled in their boxes. Paste loosened. Ink feathered where careless hands had left papers near open windows.

Etienne Morel pressed blotting paper against the index card and lifted it too soon.

The name bled.

He cursed under his breath, not loudly enough for the typists in the next room to hear. They were laughing at something, a joke passing in French and Wolof and Pulaar, then falling into that bright silence people kept when a European officer crossed a corridor. The offices had been full of that silence all week. Independence had entered the building before the date itself, before the flags and photographs, before the ministers came to take inventory of rooms whose keys were still in French pockets.

On Morel's desk lay three trays labeled in his own hand: Fisheries, Labor, Native Affairs. Under Native Affairs, because there had been no tray for shame, sat thirty-seven index cards copied from a register that was no longer supposed to exist.

The register had arrived from the warehouse by the river at noon in a sack meant for spoiled flour. The guard who brought it had not asked for a receipt. He had stood dripping at the threshold and said, "Monsieur, this is from the lower room."

"Which lower room?"

The guard had looked at the floor.

Morel had known then. Everyone in the building knew the lower room. It was not on the new floor plan. It held files from concessions, punitive expeditions, tax seizures, forced labor lists, repatriations, surveys conducted by men who believed a village became real when a Frenchman wrote it down. For weeks senior officers had ordered materials sorted for transfer, destruction, or retention under diplomatic seal. The word destruction was never said in the presence of Africans, though Africans carried the boxes to the furnace.

Morel was twenty-six. He had come from Nantes with bad lungs, good handwriting, and a mother who told neighbors her son worked in administration overseas. He was not important. He had no talent for cruelty, which was not the same as innocence. He had stamped papers that sent men to roads in the north. He had recopied crop estimates he knew were lies. He had watched officers laugh over photographs of men chained at the ankle, and he had eaten beside them because the alternative was eating alone.

The register in the flour sack had a warped leather cover and a spine rubbed almost white. Its title page was missing. The first

leaves were brittle from damp. In the middle, in a column headed Displacements, were names he recognized because he had typed them before into clean summary sheets where the names had become numbers.

Women.

Children.

Men marked unfit for recruitment, then recruited anyway.

Villages listed under old spellings, then crossed out and assigned to concessions as if land could be made empty by a clerk's pen.

Morel had taken the register to the window. Outside, the Senegal River moved brown and muscular past the quay. Two boys pushed a cart through rain with a coffin balanced under oilcloth. A woman shouted at them to mind the puddle. The coffin dipped, steadied, moved on.

He turned the pages until he found the index: a separate gathering stitched into the back, arranged not by village or district but by names of witnesses. Beside each witness were page numbers, map references, and initials. Some initials belonged to men whose portraits hung upstairs.

He sat for a long time with his wet hands open on the desk.

At three, Chief Administrator Renaud entered without knocking. He smelled of tobacco and violet water. His shoes were clean despite the rain. He carried a folder tied in green tape.

"Morel," he said. "You received a delivery."

"Yes, monsieur."

"From the warehouse."

"Yes."

Renaud stood beside the desk and looked not at the register but at Morel. "The warehouse staff are confused. There are rumors. Men imagine that every old paper has value."

"Some do."

Renaud smiled. "You are young enough to believe value is a moral category."

Morel said nothing. His pulse made a small hard knock in his throat.

"This office is transferring only materials relevant to continuity of administration. Tax rolls, cadastral summaries, public health records, railway accounts. The rest is debris. Duplicates. Drafts. Errors."

"This register is not a duplicate."

"Then it is an error."

The typists had stopped laughing.

Renaud placed the green folder on the desk. "You will prepare a destruction certificate for items listed here. You will use yesterday's date. The furnace is being repaired, so the boxes will be transported to the military yard."

"A destruction certificate for a transfer?"

"Do not become clever in your final month."

Morel heard rain hit the balcony, the gutter, the sill. He saw a bead of water run down the leather cover and gather at the corner, fat and trembling.

"May I ask why the military yard needs errors?"

Renaud's face did not change, which frightened Morel more than anger would have. "Because errors have a way of becoming

accusations when left to amateurs."

He left the room with the green folder still on the desk.

At five the typists went home under umbrellas made from newspaper and rice sacks. The night watchman lit the corridor lamps. Morel pretended to finish payroll summaries until the building settled into its after-hours noises: fans, pipes, rain in buckets, a rat in the wall behind the map cabinet.

He locked the door.

He removed the index gathering from the register with a bone folder used for lifting seals. The thread gave with tiny wet sighs. He copied three pages by hand, then stopped. There were too many names. Copying would take all night, and by morning someone would come. He needed the thing itself to survive.

From the supply cupboard he took two sheets of marbled endpaper imported for ceremonial bindings, a roll of linen tape, a ledger cover from a fisheries account, and a tin of paste. He worked with the care of a man repairing a lie for the sake of a truth. He split the fisheries cover along the board, slid the index into the hollow, and pasted the marbled sheet over it. The wet board bowed. He placed it under the weight of three volumes of customs law.

Then he did something foolish. He wrote a card.

Not a confession. Not enough for a court. Only a direction. He wrote in a hand smaller than his usual script: See false fisheries, 1932-46. Ask who cut the names.

He stared at the sentence.

Ask whom, his schoolmaster would have said.

He crossed out whom before it existed in his mind. Let the future have bad grammar if it also had nerve.

In the corridor, a floorboard complained.

Morel blew out the lamp.

Through the frosted glass he saw the night watchman's lantern move and halt. Another shadow stood beside it, taller, hat brim lowered.

"Monsieur Morel?" the watchman called. "Administrator Renaud asks if you are still working."

Morel slid the card into the drawer with the outgoing catalog slips. The fisheries cover was still damp under the law books. He could not move it without leaving fingerprints in paste.

"One moment," he called.

He put the damaged register back in the flour sack. From the green folder he took the destruction list and folded it into his inside pocket. The paper touched his shirt where sweat had gone cold.

When he opened the door, Renaud looked past him into the room.

"Late work," Renaud said.

"Payroll."

"How loyal."

The night watchman held his lantern low. His name was Samba Ndiaye. He had six children, a laugh like a cracked bell, and a habit of singing under his breath when he swept the stair. He did not look at Morel. He looked at the floor, where a thread from the register lay near the threshold.

Renaud stepped inside.

Morel thought of the coffin in the rain, the boys holding it steady. He thought of his mother in Nantes telling neighbors that

administration was respectable work. He thought of all the names reduced to freight.

Then Samba Ndiaye coughed, bent, and covered the thread with his shoe.

Renaud opened drawers. He lifted blotters. He untied the flour sack, glanced at the register, and ran a finger over the damaged spine.

"You see?" he said. "Debris."

"Yes, monsieur."

"Bring it."

Morel picked up the sack. The register seemed lighter without its index, as if the dead had climbed out of it and were hiding in the boards under customs law.

At the stair, Samba slipped on the wet stone. His lantern swung. Renaud cursed and grabbed the rail. In that second Morel felt a hand at his pocket, quick and practiced, taking the folded destruction list. Samba straightened and apologized until Renaud told him to shut up.

They walked to the yard in rain.

By morning the register was gone. The destruction certificate existed with yesterday's date and Morel's signature, though he had not signed it. The fisheries account, 1932-46, was shelved among salt invoices in a room that would be boxed, shipped, stored, moved, flooded, dried, forgotten, and miscatalogued for sixty-seven years.

Three days later Morel was found at the river steps with one shoe missing.

The report called it drink.

Samba Ndiaye left the offices before independence and took work on the railway. He told no one about the folded list until his own son asked why French paper sometimes smelled like smoke even when it had not burned.

By then, the boy had learned how to listen without looking at the door.

# Chapter 1

The ceiling leaked over Labor.

Awa Sarr had placed a blue plastic basin under the drip at dawn, then a second basin when the first filled faster than the sky should have allowed. By ten the basins were answering each other across the reading room, plink, plink-plink, plink, like two clerks arguing in code.

"Madame Sarr," called Binta from the front desk, "the Ministry says the truck is still coming."

"The Ministry says many things."

"They asked if we can receive the shipment in the courtyard."

Awa looked at the window. Rain flattened the hibiscus along the wall. In the courtyard, three goats had taken shelter under the broken awning beside the generator. The smallest goat chewed an official notice about revised opening hours.

"Tell them yes," Awa said. "Tell them the goats will sign."

Binta's laugh came through the doorway, brief and grateful. The institute had been built in the last years of French rule as a

statistical annex, then renamed three times, then handed to the university, then forgotten by everyone except scholars too stubborn to work elsewhere and families looking for records no ministry admitted keeping. Its official name, the National Institute for Historical Systems and Material Memory, was too long for the signboard. Most taxi drivers knew it as the old paper hospital.

Awa preferred that.

She stood on a chair to adjust the tarp above the Labor shelves. The chair wobbled. Her left knee made the small gravelly sound it made before storms. On the shelf at eye level, a row of employment ledgers leaned against each other like tired men at a bus stop. Their labels had faded to ghosts: 1947 Rail, 1951 Wharf, 1954 Groundnuts. Her father's handwriting appeared on some of the later replacement tags, fine and compressed, never wasting space.

Mamadou Sarr had believed labels were promises.

He had disappeared when Awa was twelve, after refusing to certify that eight crates of colonial inventory were duplicate customs forms. Her mother had waited three years before calling him dead and another five before removing his shirts from the wardrobe. The shirts kept his smell longer than his employers kept his name.

The drip shifted. Cold water struck the back of Awa's wrist.

"Damn."

The chair rocked as she climbed down. Her phone vibrated on the table beside a stack of accession forms. Unknown number. She let it ring. Unknown numbers were usually journalists, cousins needing recommendations, or men from ministries who began sentences with "Sister" when they wanted unpaid labor.

Binta appeared in the doorway wearing a yellow raincoat and the expression she used for bad news.

"The truck is here."

"That was fast."

"It is not the Ministry truck."

The vehicle in the courtyard was a white refrigerated fish truck with a blue marlin painted on its side and no refrigeration unit running. Two men in football jerseys were unloading gray archival cartons into the rain. The cartons had been wrapped in black plastic bags, but the bags had split. Water ran off them in dirty ropes.

Awa stepped into the courtyard and shouted, "Stop."

The men stopped because her voice gave them no permission to do otherwise.

One carton sat already in a puddle.

"Who sent these?"

The driver, a narrow man with a silver tooth and a wool cap despite the heat, held out a clipboard. "Madame, I only transport."

"From where?"

"Port storage."

"Which port storage?"

He shrugged. "The wet one."

Binta crossed herself, though she was Muslim and did it only when the world became administrative.

Awa took the clipboard. The manifest had three stamps, none legible. The item description read: Misc. colonial holdings, damaged. Transfer for stabilization. No collection title. No box

count beyond "approximately forty." At the bottom, in a space for receiving officer, someone had typed her name wrong: Awa Saar.

"I did not request this."

"Madame, they said you did."

"Who is they?"

The silver tooth flashed. "The office."

"Which office?"

"The office with air-conditioning."

The smallest goat climbed onto the low wall and bleated as if giving testimony.

Awa looked at the cartons. Port storage flooded every rainy season. The institute received what other agencies wanted to stop smelling. Still, the boxes had come with plastic wrapping, however poor, and someone had paid for a truck. Neglect had signatures. So did panic.

"Bring them inside," she said. "Not on the floor. Binta, call Cheikh. Tell him to clear the map room. Tell him if he says his back hurts, I will remember his back when salary letters need stamping."

For twenty minutes they carried wet cartons through the corridor. Rainwater made the tiles slick. The fish truck had left a smell of diesel and old scales. Binta wrote numbers on a legal pad because the printed labels dissolved under her fingers.

In the map room, the air conditioner had been dead since February, but the ceiling did not leak. Awa set up fans, blotting paper, cotton gloves, masks. She opened the first box herself.

Mildew rose in a green breath.

Binta stepped back. "Ya Allah."

"Masks."

The first carton held customs receipts from Saint-Louis, 1930s, mostly salt and imported cloth. The second held census abstracts with corners eaten by silverfish. The third held a stack of ledgers bound in cracked brown cloth. Awa lifted one and felt the boards give under the weight of water. She placed it on a foam cradle.

On the cover, someone had pasted a replacement label in the 1970s: Maritime Produce, Fisheries, 1932-46.

"Fish," Binta said from behind her mask. "Again fish."

"Fish feed empires."

"I thought taxes did."

"Fish get taxed."

Binta made a face.

Awa opened the ledger to the first page and frowned. The paper inside did not match the label. It was not a fisheries account. It was a shipment ledger: columns for crate numbers, origin, destination, contents, condition, receiving authority. Some entries were ordinary enough. Medical tins. Survey instruments. Typewriter ribbons. Others used codes she had seen only in district correspondence: NA for Native Affairs, DC for disciplinary cases, AS for agricultural seizure.

The date on the first page was 1959.

Her neck tightened.

"Binta."

"Yes?"

"Close the door."

Binta closed it. The fans hummed. Outside, men argued with goats under the awning.

Awa turned pages slowly. The ledger had been wet, dried, wet again. Some leaves clung together at the edges. On page twenty-three she found a column where names should have been. Not missing pages. Not blank spaces. Names cut out with a narrow blade.

Each cut was precise, a small rectangular absence. The rest of the line remained: crate number, district, date, destination. Someone had removed only the names.

Binta leaned over her shoulder. "Rats?"

"Rats do not use rulers."

There were dozens. Then hundreds. The cuts varied slightly by hand pressure, but each name had been lifted away cleanly enough to leave the neighboring ink intact. Under magnification, Awa saw fibers raised along the edges. The cuts were old.

She turned another page and found a line uncensored because the blade had slipped. Three letters remained before the cut: Ndi.

Her father's voice came back without permission: When a name is cut from a page, it does not vanish. It makes two records. One of the page. One of the knife.

She had been ten, sitting under his desk at the railway archive while he argued with a man in a gray suit. She had thought the sentence beautiful because she did not yet know it was dangerous.

"Photograph every page," she said.

"Now?"

"Now."

"We do not have enough memory cards."

"Use my phone, your phone, Cheikh's phone, the institute camera if the battery is not pregnant."

Binta swallowed. "Should we call the director?"

Awa almost laughed. The director came twice a month to sign payroll and borrow the conference room for workshops funded by agencies with glossy banners. He did not like archives that produced obligations.

"Not yet."

Her phone vibrated again. Same unknown number. This time she answered.

"Awa Sarr."

There was traffic noise, then a man's voice in English. "Dr. Sarr? This is Malik Bashi. I'm at Blaise Diagne airport. The driver you arranged is holding a sign that says Malick Bassy, which is close enough for government work, but he says he needs cash for the toll before we leave. Is that true, or am I being welcomed traditionally?"

Awa closed her eyes.

She had forgotten the bookbinder.

Three months earlier, before the roof worsened and before the ministry froze the supply account, she had accepted a small restoration grant from a Brooklyn press that specialized in African diaspora print histories. The press was sending its owner, a binder named Malik Bashi, to help stabilize water-damaged ledgers. His emails were polite, overlong, and full of questions about humidity control the institute could not answer without lying.

"It is true," she said.

"Good to know. I didn't want my first act in Senegal to be insulting a man with my name on cardboard."

"Pay him."

"With what? The airport ATM has rejected me, my bank thinks Dakar is a philosophical concept, and I have twenty American dollars that he is looking at like I handed him a coupon."

Awa pinched the bridge of her nose. "Give him the dollars. Tell him I will pay the rest at the institute."

"You sound busy."

"I am standing in a room full of wet colonial crimes."

There was a pause. "That is more serious than my toll problem."

"Yes."

"Should I still come?"

"Unless you can repair paper from the airport."

"Not without making enemies at customs."

"Then come."

She hung up.

Binta was looking at her.

"The American?"

"Senegalese-American."

"Does he speak Wolof?"

"He says he is learning."

Binta winced with theatrical sympathy. "Then we must hide the aunties."

Awa returned to the ledger. Near the back, water had loosened the pastedown from the inside cover. Beneath it, the board had a slight bulge. She ran a gloved finger along the edge.

"Scalpel," she said.

Binta brought one.

Awa did not cut yet. Her training told her to stop, document, humidify, lift under controlled conditions. Her memory told her that controlled conditions were a luxury granted to documents nobody was trying to steal. The room smelled of mold and fish truck. Rain hammered the roof. Somewhere in the building, Cheikh shouted because a box had shed its bottom.

She slid the scalpel under the pastedown and eased it back.

The board had been split and resealed.

Inside lay a folded slip of card, brown at the edges, its ink faded but readable.

See false fisheries, 1932-46. Ask who cut the names.

Binta whispered, "Who wrote it?"

Awa did not answer. Her hands had gone very still.

On the floor beside the table, the basin under the ceiling leak overflowed. Water spread toward the stacks, slow and shining, carrying a dead moth like a little boat.