



DAVE EGGERS

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THE PARADE

A NOVEL

PENGUIN BOOKS

## The Parade

'It partakes of a complex of anxieties about America's role as an affluent superpower of dubious virtue' *Financial Times*

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'A heartbreaker and a mindbender. It is a novel of ideas that packs an emotional punch that left me reeling. With clear, unadorned prose, Eggers lays bare the costs of war, and of peace'  
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'A parable of progress, as told by J. M. Coetzee to Philip K. Dick'  
Richard Flanagan, author of *Gould's Book of Fish* and  
*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

'In *The Parade*, the anxiety grows with every page and every mile to reach an ending that turns everything upside down and sends us into the heart of darkness. A minimalistic, merciless novel.

A powerful allegory and a painfully concrete contemporary story – Eggers is a true virtuoso of that synthesis'  
Georgi Gospodinov, author of *The Physics of Sorrow*

'In an unnamed country, two unnamed employees of a foreign road-building corporation arrive for a twelve-day assignment. Eggers differentiates between Four and Nine solely through their reactions to the post-civil-war devastation around them. How this setup reduces the two men to their willingness – or refusal – to see others is striking . . . Parable-like . . . The final scene of the novel contains such ferocity'  
Idra Novey, *The New York Times Book Review*

‘Two men go on a journey: flat, direct and more dangerous than either will admit. The narrative is deliberately unbranded, unspecific. The enthusiastic, inexperienced partner goes by Nine. This pushes the narrative into an allegorical space, even as we are up close and personal with the two on their trip from south to north. Eggers has been writing fiction that tells a story of America in our present moment, and often that moment is characterized by decline. To environmental devastation, violence, the power of social media, the loss of the middle class, we can now add Americans abroad, over their heads. Darkly funny’ *Los Angeles Times*

‘The ever-incisive, worldly-wise, compassionate and imaginative Eggers maintains the tension of a cocked crossbow in this magnetizing, stealthily wry and increasingly chilling tale’ *Booklist*

‘Eggers may be the only living American writer for whom the term “Hemingway-esque” meaningfully applies. Eggers ably weaves in a host of ethical questions over one man’s responsibility to the other, what makes help transactional versus simply kind. An unassuming but deceptively complex morality play, as Eggers distils his ongoing concerns into ever tighter prose’ *Kirkus*

‘A testament to Eggers’s expert skill at point of view. *The Parade* is a deeply felt book that defies easy labels. This is a book you can finish in a single sitting. And you will’  
Tony Romano, *New York Journal of Books*

‘An eye-opening political fiction. Eggers’s tense and intricate storytelling reveals complex moral and ethical issues’  
*Christian Science Monitor*

‘Eggers is able to see the world as it is, while also holding on to his vision of how the world should be’  
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Eggers is the author of many books, including *The Captain and the Glory*; *The Monk of Mokha*; *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*, shortlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award; *A Hologram for the King*, a finalist for the National Book Award; and *What is the What*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and winner of France's Prix Médicis Étranger. He is the founder of McSweeney's Publishing and the co-founder of Voice of Witness, a book series that uses oral history to illuminate human rights crises. In 2002 he co-founded 826 Valencia, a youth writing centre with a pirate-supply storefront, which has inspired similar programmes around the world. ScholarMatch, now ten years old, connects donors with students to make college possible for all. In 2018 Dave Eggers co-founded the International Congress of Youth Voices, a global gathering of writers and activists under twenty. He is a winner of the Dayton Literary Peace Prize and the Muhammad Ali Humanitarian Award, and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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# THE PARADE



## I

IN THE MORNING'S platinum light he raised his leaden head. He was lying on a plastic mattress, in a converted shipping container, below a tiny fan that circulated the room's tepid air.

He washed himself with packaged towelettes and put on his uniform, a black jumpsuit of synthetic fiber. Under a quickly rising sun he walked across the hotel's gravel courtyard to his partner's room. They had never met. He knocked on the corrugated steel door. There was no answer. He knocked louder.

After some shuffling from within, a lithesome man answered, naked but for a pair of white boxers. He had dark eyes, a cleft chin and a wide mouth ringed with full, womanly lips. A swirl of black hair rakishly obscured his left eye.

"Pick a number."

“Nine,” the man at the door said, smiling slyly.

“Okay. You know how the company handles names. I don’t know yours, you don’t know mine. For the next two weeks, you’re Nine. Call me Four.”

“You’re Four?”

“You will call me Four. I’ll call you Nine. Got it?”

For reasons of security, the company insisted on simple pseudonyms, usually numerical.

“Got it,” Nine said, and swept his hair from his face and threw it back.

They had arrived without passports. Passports were complications and liabilities in such a place, a nation recovering from years of civil war, riddled with corruption and burdened now by a new and lawless government. Four and Nine had been flown in under assumed names on a private charter. In the past, in other nations, the company’s employees had been ransomed and killed. The kidnappers went first for their quarry’s company, then family, then nation. But without passports or names, men like Four and Nine were anonymous and of little value. Their machine, the RS-80, was almost impossible to trace. It bore no company name, no serial number and had no national registry. No one but their clients, the northern government in the capital, would know anything about them, their origins or employer.

“You ready to eat?” Four asked. “We have forty minutes till we begin. The crew is making a final check on the machine.”

“Soon,” Nine said, a smile overtaking his expansive mouth. Nine stepped out of the doorway and tilted his head toward the bed behind him.

Beyond Nine’s naked torso Four could see the furrowed sheets of an unmade bed, and woven within them the muscular legs of a sleeping woman. Nine made no effort to hide her. Instead he smiled conspiratorially. Four had never met this man, and did not think himself capable of prophecy, but in an instant he knew Nine was an agent of chaos and would make the difficult work ahead far more so.

Now Nine yawned. “Can I meet you in a few minutes?”

Four closed the door and made his way across the courtyard, now baking in the day’s young heat, to the cafeteria. The room was humid with men bent over their food—men in suits, men in faded military uniforms, men in traditional dress. All spoke in low voices over the clacking of cheap tin silverware on plastic plates.

There were only a few foreigners in the makeshift dining hall attached to this new hotel, comprising two dozen

shipping containers arranged in an untidy semicircle. After waiting half an hour in the breakfast room, Four went to Nine's room again and knocked on the door.

"Coming!" Nine yelled, and the room burst with laughter.

Four returned to the cafeteria and drank bottled water. Ten minutes later Nine entered the room, having showered and dressed in his company-issued black jumpsuit. He had, though, declined to insert himself into the suit's upper half. He wore a white V-neck undershirt, the jumpsuit's sleeves dangling limply by his side, petting the other men's shoulders as he slipped around the tables on his way to Four.

"I didn't expect you here today," Nine said. "The planes in these parts aren't so punctual. That's why I had company last night. You married?"

"No," Four lied.

"You're not eating?" Nine asked.

"I already ate," Four said. In his room, he had finished a packet of dry oatmeal and powdered milk, a bag of almonds and a length of venison jerky—all of which he had brought with him. He had packed enough food for the twelve days the job was expected to take.

"You ate in your *room*?" Nine said, offended. "You can't do *that*. The food here's so good. Well, it's not so

good, but it's *intriguing*." His hair had fallen over his left eye and he flung it back with a flourish of his hand.

"I'll get to it," Nine said, and went to the buffet and chose half a grapefruit, a tall glass of mango juice, three boiled eggs and a few shards of animal bone covered in purple meat. On his way back to the table, Nine's lifeless sleeves again flailed amid the other diners. Four looked around the room to see if any of the local men, a mix of former rebel commanders and recent profiteers, had taken an interest in Four or Nine. None had. He and his new partner were obviously foreigners in a place where most visitors were aid workers and arms inspectors, and it was better if they remained unmemorable.

Nine set his plate down and allowed his hair to fall from his forehead like the tendrils of a willow. Eschewing the tin utensils, Nine used his fingers to bring the gamey bones to his mouth for gnawing and washed the meat down with sun-colored juice. The company had advised against eating regional fruit in whole or liquid form, and strongly suggested that eggs or meat could contain *E. coli*, salmonella or ringworm. But Nine was devouring it all with abandon, his greasy hair groping his plate obscenely. Four could not discern what the company saw in this man. He was a liability.

"You know what she cost?" Nine asked, his mouth

full. He did not wait for Four to answer. “Less than what we’re paying for breakfast. And she was fresher than this,” he said, jabbing his fork at the wet grapefruit before him.

“The machine’s waiting,” Four said. “The first pod is in place. How long until you’re ready?”

Nine looked at him, grinning. “Now I know why they call you the Clock.”

Four stood. “Be ready in ten minutes,” he said.

“You’re not serious. I just got in yesterday,” Nine said. “The schedule’s padded. This is a great town. Let’s spend a day here. Another night, more importantly.” He raised an eyebrow lewdly. “I’ll loan you my girl.”

Four pushed in his chair. “I’ll meet you out front in ten minutes. Bring all your gear.”

## II

“GET IN,” FOUR said. He was sitting in a taxi, waiting in the hotel roundabout. Nine had just left the lobby, carrying his duffel bag and wearing sandals, looking like a tourist embarking on a day’s excursion. He got in and the taxi took off.

“You’ll have to change your shoes,” Four said.

Nine opened his mouth, tilted his head like an animal and then smiled, as if deciding among many witty things he might say. He said nothing. Again he flung the hair back from his forehead.

Four knew this sort of man, a man amused by everything, most of all himself. He had grown his hair in such a way that it impeded his vision and had to be pushed out of the way a hundred times a day. It was nonsense. For a man so disposed, this job was an adventure, a lark.

But Four did not want to be here any longer than

was necessary. The humidity, even on the drive from the airport to the city, was an affliction. He knew that while suffering in this kind of heat he would be alternately cata-tonic and quick to anger. But inside the cab of the RS-80, there would be air-conditioning, and the assignment was simple. They were to pave and paint 230 kilometers of a two-lane roadway, uniting the country's rural south to the country's capital in the urban north.

The corridor had been cleared and the road had been graded and compacted. But the rainy season would come soon, and if the road went unpaved, all that work would quickly wash away. Four had studied the plans and had seen the road on the satellite pictures. He had never worked on a road so straight. It cut through scrub and desert and forests and villages, but all along there were no hills or mountains or cities. It was almost entirely unimpeded.

"So you've worked a lot of jobs," Nine said. He'd adopted a respectful, earnest tone, but the guise was ill fitting. Again the beginnings of a smile overtook his feminine mouth.

"This is my sixty-third assignment," Four said. He left it there. In eight years he had paved over seventy-five hundred kilometers on four continents.

"You seen any trouble?" Nine asked.