

Prologue

Voice of the author

[The girl said goodbye to her friend and went down the road. She still had the remains of a farewell smile on her lips when she stopped suddenly, startled by the black car. The car's halt was also sudden. Its driver saw her smile disappear. He took in, at a glance, the swell of her pointed breasts, straining to tear her short dress. Considerately, he waited while she recovered from her fright and continued on her way. She hesitated, but then nodded acknowledgement with a vague smile at the car's dark windows and ran in front of it, displaying a body half-girl half-woman, shaped by the tight dress. A gazelle, a goat with a fluffy tail, thought the driver, feeling the compulsive appetite of the hunter. The car pulled off towards the end of the Island.

On his way back, coming towards the city, the driver saw the girl still waiting at the bus stop for a candonga taxi. It was a public holiday and taxis were rare, and buses were not even worth mentioning. He quickly stopped, opened the tinted-glass window on the right-hand side, and motioned to her to get in. She smiled in agreement, remembering the friendly gesture from a while earlier. When she sat in the car, her short skirt did little to hide her very young thighs. The driver pulled off, furtively eyeing the girl's beautiful body. Straight ahead, the enormous sun sank majestically beyond the coconut palms of Mussolo. The sea was calm, as if preparing to welcome the arrival of that closest of stars. Is this what the girl was thinking, watching the sunset?]

Book of the First Narrator

In which, at the speed of a tortoise or of fierce quissonde soldier ants on the march, certain mysteries are uncovered and an intriguing investigator appears. Also in which a dark character is revealed.

1 – The Amazing Jaime Bunda

Jaime Bunda was seated in the big room set aside for detectives. There were three desks, at which a few other investigators struggled with obsolete computers. There were also some chairs lined up against the wall. It was on one of these, the one at the end, that Jaime had settled his abundant arse, out of all proportion to the rest of his body, and which physical characteristic had led to his name. His real name was long – two surnames of illustrious families in Luanda circles. But it was in a physical education (more precisely volleyball) class that the nickname arose. Well into the class, the teacher, irritated by his clumsiness and lack of enthusiasm, shouted:

“Jaime, jump. Jump with that *bunda*, dammit!”

From then on he remained Jaime Bunda for his entire school career. In fact, while his buttocks were exaggerated he was plump all over, even his eyes bulged in front of the mirror as he practised scary faces. His mother didn't appreciate it at all when she heard his colleagues treating him this way, you're chubby, don't you want them to stop calling you horrible names, but he shrugged, my *bunda* really is big, what can I do about it?

The nickname even came to benefit him, because the physical education teacher considered him a lost cause for the country's sporting endeavours and never again bothered forcing him to do something for which he showed not the slightest inclination. Most of the time Jaime sat in the shade while his colleagues exhausted themselves running back and forth or jumping in supposedly synchronised movements. He just ate his lunch, noting the idiosyncrasies of others. And enjoyed his deficiencies. He was very observant, not a single gesture of ridicule escaped him, no matter how tiny.

Because of this he laughed to himself to see his colleague Isidro punching the computer keyboard, two forefingers stretched out, tongue stuck out from between his teeth, moving to the rhythm of the slow punching. The gold rings which Investigator Isidro wore on his two forefingers glittered. Not even aristocrats could match that, thought Jaime Bunda, the money Isidro earns he spends on gold. Rings, bracelets, thick gold chains like those worn by the 100-metre North American athletes...all that's missing is a gold Rolex. He looks like one of those *nouveau-riche* who often gather around there...that must be it, he wants to appear like one of the *nouveau-riche*, he who doesn't even have a place to fall down dead in. Although...he knew of some of Isidro's schemes, but perhaps it was not these that made him rich. It was during such cogitations that the messenger entered the room, and approached:

“The chief wants you. He said you must run.”

His three colleagues laughed, guffawed. Everyone knew that apprentice Jaime Bunda did not run, it was against his principles. He got up with great dignity, straightened his trousers, left the room without a word, not revealing his scorn for those inferior senior investigator scum.

“I have an important case for you,” said Chief Chiquinho Vieira. “I expect you'll do the best you can...”

Jaime's chest swelled. Finally, they were beginning to recognise his worth. It was not Isidro who had been handed this important case, it was him, until now always forgotten, discarded on one of the chairs in the detectives' room with nothing to do, just because he was from 'one of the families'. Chiquinho Vieira had once even told him that he only kept him in the service because he had received orders from the D.O., Director of Operations. But he was under no illusions, he would never go beyond being an apprentice. The D.O. was also from a prestigious family and had encouraged him to choose the profession of detective, you are very observant, nothing escapes you, you'll be an ace. The D.O. had ordered his recruitment, side-stepping the customary formalities. After being accepted, he completed tests and training, under the weight of a bureaucracy which impedes the efficient combating of crime. Chiquinho Vieira and the others, jealous of his relationship to the D.O., never gave him a chance to prove that he could be an ace, only ordering him to go and buy cigarettes. At the most he covered for a colleague on a risky assignment, but always in a subordinate role. He waited patiently in the room, sitting in the same chair, watching the

others writing reports on matters which they would or would not resolve, they said they resolved them but the streets teemed with criminals and the subversives conspired against the state, while he strained the chair with the weight of his arse. During all those months spent in that room, more than 20, he learnt to distinguish all the types of flies which came in and out through the windows.

“You can count on me, chief. What will I be dealing with then?”

“Murder. Rape and murder. A young girl of 14 years. The body was found close to Morro de Veados.”

“How was she killed?” Jaime Bunda asked.

“Strangled. It was probably done in a car and then the body was hidden among the mangroves.”

“And how many times was she raped?”

Chiquinho Vieira looked at his subordinate with a concerned expression.

“How should I know how many times she was raped? I wasn’t there to see. And the lab certainly doesn’t have the means to find that out. But tell me, is it significant if she was raped once, twice or more?”

“Very,” said Jaime. “Only a psychopath is capable of repeating a rape.”

The chief was staring at him, dumbfounded, not responding. This guy is more of an idiot than I thought. Or else he is not an idiot at all, but if he isn’t, then it’s all pretence.

“Ask those guys at the Interior Ministry. They’ve got the case in their hands.”

“And us?” asked Jaime.

“As always, we remain in the shadow. We only deal directly with certain matters, the most important ones. In this case, it’s the relevant Directorate at the Ministry which is investigating. But we’ll follow the case and interfere if necessary.”

“Ah, so I can interfere...”

“Of course. But with discretion. The Bunker doesn’t want any publicity...nor any trouble with those guys from Interior. But if you see that those guys are acting like asses, you can advise them, point them in the right direction, they are there to listen to you.”

“They’ll listen to me?”

“Of course. We come directly from the Bunker and they know that. They don’t like it, but they’ll listen.”

Jaime Bunda acknowledged this with a nod, ambiguously, with something between deference to a superior and the condescension of a

teacher towards a pupil who answers a question correctly. Chiquinho Vieira now seemed to have a different attitude to him, friendly, a comrade.

“Chief, can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“It’s a personal question...well, it’s not about work...”

Chiquinho Vieira looked at Jaime Bunda, as if he were a deadly poisonous snake. How can this tub of lard be asking me personal questions at a time like this? Chiquinho Vieira still doesn’t know why he allowed him to become an apprentice agent, sometimes his excessively generous spook’s heart did the talking, as his mother said.

“Go ahead.”

“Why are you using a black shoelace in one shoe and a brown one in the other?”

Chiquinho Vieira almost fell over backwards looking instinctively at his feet, hidden under his desk. He lifted one shoe and then the other. He said, unwillingly:

“You’re right, I hadn’t noticed. How do you think such a thing could have happened?”

Jaime Bunda got up from the chair in front of the chief’s desk and walked round to the other side, to stand next to him. He even bent down to get a closer look, and then straightened up with a triumphant smile.

“This is what I think happened, chief. Actually, both shoelaces are brown. Only one received some black polish, probably when you were shining your shoes. Did you do that yourself, chief? With one of those bottles with a little sponge at the tip?”

“Exactly,” responded Chiquinho Vieira, amazed.

“That’s the danger of those things. Now you must also paint the other shoelace and, there you go, they’ll be the same.”

Jaime Bunda went back to sit comfortably in front of his superior, who could not stop looking at his shoes and then at his subordinate, completely dumbfounded, his authority undermined.

“You said they have to listen to me, because I report directly to the Bunker. In case of difficulties, can I remind them of this? They should be damned scared of the Bunker...even I am.”

“You can remind them, but it won’t be necessary, they know it very well. Who isn’t scared of the Bunker?”

“Even you, chief?”

“Of course...” at that moment Chiquinho Vieira suddenly went silent, how could he indulge in such confidences with a subordinate,

above all one such as this abundantly-arsed ass. He got up, furious with himself.

“No, not fear. Respect. The respect they’re due. Okay...deal with this case. It’s vital.”

Jaime Bunda was reluctant to get up and leave. It was the first time he had been seated in front of the desk of Chief Chiquinho Vieira, a national authority and southern African expert in secret matters. Familiarity with such a person was a privilege that would not easily be forgotten.

“If you don’t mind, chief?”

“Yes?”

“I’ll need a car.”

“Of course. Speak to...leave it, I’ll give the order myself. You’ll have a car at your disposal with a driver, 24 hours a day.”

“I don’t need it that much.”

It was only then that Chiquinho Vieira realised the ridiculousness of his situation. He was standing up, behind his desk, while the abnormal one was relaxing in the visitor’s chair, almost putting his feet on the desk and reaching for a cigar. He made up his mind to push this backward cousin of the D.O. as far away as he could. That thing about the shoelaces...actually, Chiquinho Vieira was known for his elegance, only wearing the best suits from tailors in Paris or, in extreme situations, from the Chiado district of Lisbon. How could he have let himself walk around with shoelaces of different colours? And how is it that this abnormal one, sitting on the other side of the desk, found out? For the second time he asked himself, is this guy more of an ass than I thought or is he nothing of the sort? He sat down heavily, aiming to put right a humiliating and disadvantageous situation. But he spoke calmly:

“You can get to work. Go and see Inspector Kinanga, of the Interior, so that he can provide you with all the details of the investigation.”

Jaime Bunda had remained seated in the same position, looking with exaggerated interest and some curiosity at a painting on the wall, a still-life, so before the subordinate could definitively end the painting’s life or discover in it something else out of the ordinary, the chief repeated:

“You can go, you can go.”

How can it take such a young guy so much effort, with so much suffering, to get up out of a chair? The panting of Jaime Bunda might

be enough to break someone's heart, but not the heart of Chief Chiquinho, who only dreamt of getting him out of his office, of his department, of his city, of his world. Jaime finally got to his feet, nodded acknowledgement and said, in all seriousness:

“I really enjoyed our short time together, chief.”

He turned in slow motion towards the door and never, never before had Chief Chiquinho seen anyone take so long to reach a door, open it and disappear. He scratched his head, the movement untidying the tight curls of his religiously combed hair, returning his gaze to his shoes, now a cause for embarrassment. He had already begun to doubt whether the man he had chosen on the Bunker's recommendation was the right man for the job. When they had given him the order, he had guaranteed: “I have just the man.” Could that really be true?

[And could it actually be correct that I, the author, should allow the perhaps imprudent narrator to drop this phrase by Chief Chiquinho in here? Shouldn't it remain hidden until closer to the end? Doubts and more doubts, this life is ruled by them.]