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Fear had been part of him for so long that he no longer recognised it as fear. It was in his careful, almost skulking manner of walk; in his restless, mistrustful eyes, in his unusually soft voice; in his oft stammering manner of talking.

He seldom still reminded himself that he had to be careful, had to keep his eyes peeled. It had long been habit that he would rather not meet strangers, that he only go to Caipemba if it was absolutely essential. The noise and frivolity of bars irritated him. Strangers bored him. People tired him out. But he no longer related any one of these things to fear.

So he had not been thinking of Ritter that afternoon when the girl suddenly spoke to him. He only knew that he wanted to get rid of her; because someone, he thought – anyone – must be careful of a girl who accosts you in the street. Even if she barely looks sixteen. Even if she looks innocent and very unsure of herself.

He was way ahead of his shadow heading back to the river. The boat would leave in a quarter of an hour. The afternoon was sharp and hot and his shirt clung wetly to his back. Then he saw her jump down from the veranda of a shop and head for him, between the flies and the blacks' fruit baskets. She was skinny and quite short, a little forlorn in her sweaty dress. Her shoulders were naked and brown from the sun and her hair, cut short, tied behind her head with a ribbon.

“Senhor,” she said, “do you know when the boat leaves?”

“The packet?” he asked and stood expectantly.

“Faz favor.”

“In quarter of an hour.”

They both stared at the boat momentarily where it rested two

hundred paces away against the river bank, behind the green and quivering corrugated iron sheds. Then she asked, without looking at him: "Do you know how much it costs?"

"Till where?"

"To the third stop."

That's when he got a fright. And the fear made him irritatingly aware of the flies around his hot face and of the prickly sun. He wanted to shake her off and get on to the boat and get a seat behind the gauze, in the shade.

"Twenty-four escudos," he said and began walking.

"Senhor," she said urgently behind him. "Faz favor..."

He stood, but didn't look at her.

The third stop was his stop. And only he had ever got off there. Only he and sometimes, very seldom, someone from the coffee farm. But she was a stranger.

She came to stand beside him again and he could see how she took a handkerchief out of the front of her dress and held it out to him. "My money was in here. I lost it."

He was tired and there were flies in the sun around her face. There were flies everywhere. The afternoon was a listless and monotonous buzzing of flies and bees and the air smelt of brown mango blossoms and the sweet stench of fermenting palm fronds.

She was carrying a black leather bag. It was hanging at her hip on a strap that crossed over her shoulder. The strap cut a furrow between her small round breasts, from left to right. She put her hand into the bag and briefly scratched around in it. "I don't have much here, senhor," she said, "but if you help me, you can have this bag. It's a new bag. I'll take all the stuff out."

Rodrigues stood in the cool shade of the gangplank, but his eyes moved towards the girl and stayed with her.

"I'll pay for the two of us, Rodrigues," Delpont said.

The girl's bag swung somewhat self-consciously at her knees while he counted the money out.

He hoped she would go and sit somewhere else, but she followed him right into the corner and sat next to him against the wire gauze, her bag on her lap. She was wet from sweat and there were large stains under her arms.

Being in the shade was good. But outside the ilala palms

reverberated against the grey air and Delport closed his eyes and listened to the racket of the cluster of ducks on the top deck and the blacks talking loudly out in the white heat and Rodrigues standing lazily and counting change. On the wire-gauze enclosed deck it was cooler and he felt the boat rocking slightly in the current, and somewhere the anchor rope creaked and he was glad to know the day was over. He would be able to sit and sleep until the third halt and by then the sun would already have set and he would walk home up the incline, between the mango trees and the banana plants, and he would drink his whisky outside on the veranda and smell the night.

It was always good to be back on the boat after a day like that and to listen to Rodrigues and to head downstream into the afternoon, through the green bush, to welcome the night, with the blacks on the top deck chatting and laughing and sometimes singing unaccompanied, with the smell of goat dung and coconuts and garlic, and Rodrigues picking his teeth and calmly sitting and talking and smelling of brandy. And a goat intermittently bleating on the top deck, and the monotonous thud of the engine that sometimes became a double beat as the bank neared and the sound bounced back over the green water.

All this was good after such a day, because it would be cooler and the sun would be gone, and all these things, all the smells and sounds, would mean that he would not see Caipemba again for at least four weeks.

The girl shuffled closer to him and he peered through slit eyes in the hope that he would see her walking away, but vaguely he saw her two brown knees and knew she was still sitting next to him. And she must have noticed his eyes opening, because she spoke again.

“Are you getting off before the third stop?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Where’re you getting off?”

He opened his eyes completely and looked up, but not at her, and said: “At the third stop.”

He closed his eyes again and leant his head back against the wire mesh and smelt the quay’s dust. He wanted to forget about this girl and make her understand it, but at the same time he

knew he would not be able to forget about her before he knew where she was going. It would be dark when they disembarked and the nearest roof, apart from the one he would be able to offer, was twelve kilometres from the river.

Then the boat's whistle sounded outside.

He could hear how the blacks began talking more animatedly and someone was busy dragging a white goat on a sisal rope up the gangplank. The goat's hooves scratched rowdily over the wood.

"How long does it take to get to the third stop?" she asked.

This time he looked at her. "Three hours."

Now he saw her face properly for the first time. There were fine droplets of sweat under her nose and on her forehead, and her eyes were a little too large. "It'll be dark," she said.

He nodded.

The whistle sounded again and Rodrigues was busy pulling the gangplank up. Then the boat suddenly began vibrating and a moment later the engine stuttered into life, gasped a few times and then found its rhythm.

All his attention was on the quay. He saw a row of black children waving and on the top deck some shouted their final messages to the shore. Pio was busy untying the anchor rope and the current began to catch. Then, very slowly, the corrugated iron buildings began to slide away and the row of black children's faces became smaller and were swinging away from him.

Then they were free in the current, drifting and on course and the engine's thud was deeper and suddenly regular.

Farewell Caipemba, he thought, and wondered when Rodrigues would be coming past. But Rodrigues was busy somewhere. He could hear him talking with the helmsman and the air was sweet with mango blossoms and dried fish and he thought again: Farewell.

The child would play: somewhere in the shade of the mango trees he would drive tins and cotton reels on roads he had scraped clear in the sand with a piece of wood, on one of the many roads that were everywhere in the backyard, from shadow to shadow, weaving roads that forked left and right over the wide plot and turned and doubled back and always somehow ended at the same place.

The child would play and An would sleep under the safety of her mosquito net in her musty room with the walls made of planks – walls from which the whitewash was flaking off, walls with blisters and cracks and fine brown dots of cockroach dung. Walls of riddles and silences and ecstasy.

An would sleep or lie and stare at the ceiling where geckos slept motionless against the cornice.

They would not miss him.

Behind the boat the churned up water lay like a ruffled fin and he could only just see the tops of Caipemba's palm trees and a row of white egrets coming over the bush and flying silently by.

Then he heard Rodrigues coming down the steps.

There was a matchstick between his teeth and his hands were black with dry oil. "Hi," he said and addressed himself to the girl. "My name is Rodrigues. Captain Rodrigues Pereira." She didn't mind his dirty hand offered in greeting; she was apparently relieved to find someone willing to talk.

"Mália Domingo," she said.

"Where are you heading?" He went to sit on the other side of her.

"I'm going as far as the third stop."

"Oh yes, you and Max are together." When she didn't immediately grasp it, he nodded towards Delport.

She shook her head. "No. I'm at a hunting camp next to Dois creek. My father and a friend of his came hunting and I'm looking after the camp."

"Big game?"

"They're looking for elephant and buffalo. But they've been gone for a week. They should have been back by now."

Rodrigues spat his matchstick out and took a new one out of his matchbox. "How did you get to Caipemba? You weren't on the boat on our way down yesterday?"

She hesitated for a moment. But only for a moment. And in that moment she looked at Delport. They looked each other straight in the eye and he could see the hesitation; then she turned her head away and looked again at Rodrigues. "Someone took me. One of the people from the coffee plantation."

"Do you know people there?" Rodrigues wanted to know.

“No.” She drew her leather bag closer to her chest. “We don’t know anyone.”

“I wish more people would come hunting here,” the captain said and laughed in Delpport’s direction. Then he looked again at the girl, the laughter still around his mouth, but his eyes unsure, in search of Mália Domingo’s reaction. “There’s no women around here. Two or three married ones in Caipemba. And two or three at CCG. And Max’s wife. Max is one of the lucky ones.”

Delpport waited on the next sentence, but it wouldn’t come. He had expected the captain to say: “I’ve never been married.” He often said it. Delpport had been around a hundred times before when he had said it. And it was always with exactly the same intonation in his voice and the same expression in his eyes. He always said it as someone would say: “I’ve got cancer.”

That first night, nine years ago, he had heard it for the first time. The night he had met Rodrigues Pereira. They had waited the entire afternoon in Caipemba, he and An, for the boat to depart. But they could only leave at ten o’clock, because they were still waiting for someone. It was ten o’clock at night and it was oppressive and they were on the move – without the one they had been waiting for. And Rodrigues came to sit with them and talked to them about the stars like an old friend talks about shared secrets. Rodrigues was a bit drunk that night and he had told them his whole life story. But what Delpport could remember most clearly was the way in which Rodrigues suddenly said: “I’ve never been married.”

“Are you from Beira?” the captain asked and the girl nodded. He took a half-smoked cheroot out of the top pocket of his uniform and, deep in thought, lit it. “Nice place. Beira. I was there for a while. At the docks. That was before I became captain here.”

The rank only existed in his imagination. And perhaps that’s why he was so attached to it. He always added the rank when he introduced himself to a stranger. And the threadbare uniform was, nevertheless, covered in medals that he got from who-knows-where – perhaps from the pawn shops in Beira and Porto Amélia.

Delpport sat and listened. He knew all the stories already – the stories of Rodrigues’s days in Beira, and of the girlfriend he had there, and how she was in a tragic accident one Sunday afternoon

in November. But it was good to hear him telling it again, these stories: with suitably comforting words from Gibran and the Rig Veda and the Song of Solomon.

He sat and listened to Rodrigues and thought about An who was apparently his wife, and about the child who would play alone in the yard and almost never slept at night.

“You remain a lodger,” he heard Rodrigues say. “You remain a lodger. As soon as you set foot here, it’s over for you. This here is Africa and Africa is merciless. Africa feels sorry for no one. Portugal was different.”

Pio called from the engine room, but Rodrigues first finished smoking his cheroot before he took notice of Pio. He sucked on his cheroot until it burnt down to his thumbnail, then stamped it out under his heel and stood up. “The blacks,” he said “can’t do anything unless you watch over them. The diesel’s probably leaking again.”

Then they were alone again. Delpont and the girl. All that remained of the captain was a brief puff of his cheroot smoke. But Delpont was already more relaxed, not so wary, and he waited for her to talk. He suddenly wanted her to start talking.

But she didn’t. Not immediately.

The thud of the engine was a hidden, but comforting noise somewhere beneath the surface of the water. He could feel the noise through the soles of his shoes. The sun was disappearing and behind them, on the horizon, the sky was grey and purple as if there might be rain that night.

On the top deck one of the black children cried and a woman’s voice drowsily admonished the child. The goats and poultry were calmer than usual, but now and again a white or grey down feather would waft right past Delpont’s face and float down to the water and settle on the current.

When he looked again, the girl was busy emptying her black leather bag. In front of her feet there was already a packet of sugar and a cake of soap, a tube of toothpaste, a new bottle of perfume, a tin of salt. He sat and watched how she unpacked what remained: a magazine, two paperbacks, and something wrapped up in newspaper that sounded like wood when she put it down.