

In the heat of the night

Ted's night was long and tormented. From the dim silence of his gloomy room, he could hear the monotonous, excruciating barking of a stray dog in heat, and the occasional fracas of late drunkards mixing up with the conflicting dying sounds of worn out dance parties at some distance.

The poorly maintained and unwelcoming, bare first-floor apartment of the white three-story building where Ted lived, was surrounded by other taller, run-down and dusty, green, brown and grey filthy Portuguese buildings from the 1960 and the 70s, and by the mushrooming shacks and the homeless people's pallets, and dusty empty wooden huts of grilled chicken vendors, piles of sand and mounds of rotting garbage, with broken bottles and thriving rats, and mud and dung around the potholes and craters of the wrecked road filled with stagnant dirty water, moss and mildew.

In the cemented parking under Ted's window, Ivo, the security guard, a demobilized member of the military, dressed in the grey security company's uniform and foul Brazilian slippers, was drunker than ever, sleeping in the open, recklessly abandoned on a half-broken plastic chair bending on the big metal gate, snoring with apparent self-satisfaction.

From the evening before, the whole neighbourhood was in a blackout. They had had no electricity for many hours. Ted's old power generator had also exhaled its last breath several days before, and without air conditioning or even a fan in the stifling night, the heat and the humidity in the apartment had become simply intolerable.

All the holes in the ragged mosquito net made the buzz of the hateful insects and their burning stings an inescapable torture on the sweaty, naked skins of the dwellers. Ted was nervous and eager, and knackered, unable to sleep. He couldn't wait for the morning light to have a reason to get out of bed and get rid of the company of the mosquitoes.

Ted could feel the smell of ashes and see microscopic dust grains floating through the air, transported by that night's full moon rays filtering through the roller shutters. By his side, Mariana laid indifferent, quietly sleeping, without sharing Ted's personal agony in any way.

Looking at her full, soft breasts gently blossoming at regular intervals under the moon ray, as she calmly breathed, Ted thought with sudden amazement and disputable envy at how life habits can build resilience and acceptance in people; but apparently, that was not yet his case.

Maybe he had not yet lived long enough in Africa, or maybe he just had always been so lucky to take life from the upper hand. He had only been, so far, a mere witness of the lower side of life, but without ever really feeling its bitter taste in his own mouth. And after all, should he feel guilty for that?

Was it maybe his fault if God and nature were clement enough to have spared him, at least for the moment, the pain of the poor and the sick, the torture of the fatherless and the motherless, and the exploitation of the slave and the naked one?

In the end, Ted said to himself, we all will suffer. That day comes for everyone, and I won't escape it either, because man was made to suffer, and woman was born to feel the pain. So, what should have I done in the meantime? Follow Saint Francis?

Well, in the meantime, Ted thought, my night is fucked anyway, and Mariana... look at her, she could not care less about it.

* * *

In the only other room of the small apartment, someone else was trying to survive the heat of the night, a Belgian technician who had been sent by the company to fix some equipment only a few days before, and who found himself in Africa for the first time in his life.

His name was Gus: a strange mix of young and old, he was not too tall and a little overweight. Under his quite long, greasy curly hair, that faded from grey to white, behind his round thick Gandhi-style glasses covering his clear brown eyes, and all around his fat red lips, his flabby mangy cheeks, shoulders and back were covered with always mature yellow pimples.

His hands were also chubby, and roundly mobile when he talked, and he had a curious distinction: a fake grey front tooth in the very middle of his friendly smile of smoker teeth, that he had the habit to remove occasionally in front of people to show the humid cavity and create shock and amusement.

Gus' initial attitude towards the grimy standards at home and the overall terrible conditions of the city had been quite sportsmanlike, to be honest. He had quite easily adjusted to the smell of the open sewage, to the incredibly deep, gaping potholes filled with muddy rain, given the season, and to the draining traffic jams around the potholes that made every route a much distressing and frustrating experience, so that everyone tried to move around the city just for the most inescapable reasons.

But Gus did not seem to worry much about it, as he took advantage of every halt to get his shoes shined by children from the car door, or do business with street vendors through the window, buying and eating grilled chicken with onion salad, and drinking beer cans and 20 CL whisky plastic bags in the middle of the jams, listening to the radio and smoking heavy unfiltered French cigarettes to add to the general stench.

And that night, Gus was totally mindless of humidity and mosquitoes: he was in a state of trance from the very moment he had met Jurema the evening before.

Jurema was a friend Mariana had invited to come over for drinks and maybe find Gus some company during his stay. When the bell rang, Ted opened the door. And there was Jurema: a super perfumed and curvy coloured sex bomb.

Wow, that's a bit too much for a guy like Gus, that's for sure, Ted immediately thought.

Pleasure to meet you! Jurema said cordially, shaking Ted's hand with a beautiful smile. Her black eyes stared straight at Ted's eyes with a kind of enjoyed and childish malice.

Without saying a word, Ted just stood still for a second, then he moved his eyes down to her shining white teeth and red lips. He looked at her glowing neck and chest.

He felt her hand abandoned for a perturbing moment in his own. It was soft and warm, and they were standing close, too close.

Suddenly Ted realized Mariana was there. He stepped back.

Jurema immediately walked in, shaking her long naked arm beyond Ted's shoulders at Mariana for a fraction of a second. She turned to Ted again. I like your eyes, she said. So blue! You know I would love my children to have fair hair and blue eyes one day!

Mariana intervened: Jurema, so good to see you, very good that you came! Meet Ted, my husband.

Ted turned his face away from Jurema. He was blushing, although he knew he had done absolutely nothing wrong. From the moment he had opened the door, he did not even say a single word. Eventually he uttered, hello Jurema, nice to meet you!

But without a sound, having completely forgotten Ted, Jurema had already made herself at ease on the sofa, continuing to merrily smile, controlling her eye make-up in a little mirror she had taken out of her handbag.

For a few seconds, a car radio sang from the street:

*Cry, cry,
Cry, cry night and day
Looking for Prima Zita
Who from nowhere went away*

*Achy, achy,
It's pain, it's pain,
It's pain and suffering papa*

*And her face, her face like nothing happened,
She married with another,
And she parades in the middle of our friends
And on top of that, she married Primo Zezito!
Zezito, Zezito, you once were my friend!
Zezito, Zezito, you ruined my life!*

Mariana proposed Jurema a drink. As she headed to the kitchen to prepare caipirinha, Gus, who had heard from his room the voices in the *salle à manger*, hesitantly and with a suspicious air walked out to see who was there.

You come at the right moment! Mariana said. Jurema, this is Gus. Gus, meet my friend Jurema who came over for a drink!

Jurema, always perfectly in her element, graciously levitated from the sofa with her most lovely smile, bending her neck to the side and placing her soft hand for a long moment into Gus' inert hand. Hello Gus, she started after a silent instant, how nice to meet you. She clung to his hand tighter. Mariana told me about you! So, this is your first time in Africa? I'm sure you'll love it, you only need a guide to find the best places! She tweeted, now holding Gus by both hands and getting really close.

After Ted, Gus too moved from red to purple. He stood smiling, embarrassed like a teen, not knowing exactly whether to look at Jurema's eyes or at indulge on her young generous breasts not really well hidden under the tight beige dress.

The combination of Jurema's erotic witchcraft and her intense bodily fragrance seemed to immediately get to Gus' head. They sat next to each other on the sofa. Jurema continued to hypnotise the speechless Gus with her most innocent doe eyes framed by long eyelashes: Oh I'm so happy we met, oh you are so interesting, I want to know all about you! She kept asking questions to get him into some more confidence.

Mariana came back with the caipirinhas. She archly smiled at Ted as she was having fun at the scene under their eyes. Ted looked perplexed, never saying a word.

As the cocktail made its way through Gus' bowels, with a clumsy grimace, he attempted a compliment. Answering Jurema's questions, he said, I love Africa and the Africans, I love the food and the music... and you ladies are so beautiful... huummm... I mean you are so pretty and nice... hheemm... he gurgled.

Jurema got even closer. Her hands inadvertently placed on Gus' thighs, she gave him what was meant to be a virginal kiss on his cheek, then she stood almost lips to lips with Gus and said: you too are very handsome, boy. You really are!

Gus stuttered: ooohhh really? You-you think so?

Baby don't be silly, said Jurema, you know you are handsome! Do you have a wife back in Europe?

Well... no, said Gus, I live with my old mother and my two cats!

Jurema looked triumphant. So pretty... you know I really like you honey? You know you're really sweet? I love your eyes, and your smile!

Suddenly Gus became thoughtful like if for a short moment he had managed to break the spell of the song of that mermaid. He put both his hands in his mouth and, after handling inside for a bit, he took out his middle front tooth, trickling spittle; and with a big grotesque twinkle he asked: and like this, do you still like me like this? as he opened his mouth and arms wide.

Jurema suffered the blow, and for the first time from the moment of her arrival, no more than 10 minutes earlier, she briefly lost her composure and imperceptibly jumped back and gasped! But courageously, she did not release Gus' hands and mastered herself in front of his wide-open dark cavity. Hhhuuummmm... she mumbled... yeah, yes, sure baby, of course I still like you, this is very minor... huummm... it's funny, actually... hi hi hi...

Jurema finished her caipirinha, shared phone numbers with Gus and stood up. Ohhh, my dear, said caressing his arm and shoulder, I am so sorry, I really have to go for tonight, you know, my girlfriend Paula just broke with her boyfriend and I promised her I would spend the night with her... poor thing!

But I want to see you again so much! Even if you men make us suffer us women so much! You will not forget to call me Gus, will you?

Saying this, she gave Gus, who meanwhile had put back his fake tooth, a last inspired gaze, and lightly pecked his round lips. Oh, my dear, I am so sorry! I would have so much loved to stay on with you, but I have to rush! We keep talking, yes?

And without even waiting for Gus' answer, Jurema stood up, hugged and kissed everyone, and walked out, less than twenty minutes after the moment she had stormed into the apartment.

Gus was speechless and looked like he had taken a strong dose of LSD. Mariana, who was dying laughing, asked him: hey Gus, how did you like Jurema? She's the friend of a friend of mine. I just saw her a couple of times before, but she's pretty, hum? Pity that she could not stay on!

Gus only said again: Jurema...

Mariana laughed again and turned to Ted too, maliciously: she's pretty, isn't she? Ted blushed again without making a sound.

Gus finally whispered: yes, Jurema... she is beautiful... she is really beautiful... Jurema... he repeated.

Gus, said Ted eventually, yes, she is beautiful, but you better be cautious with this girl.

Gus: what do you mean, Ted?

She's not the kind of girl for you, said Ted.

What do you mean Ted? Insisted Gus, waking up all of a sudden. Why do you say Jurema is not the kind of girl for me? Why don't you think about your wife instead? You're not my father, Ted, to tell me what's the kind of girl for me!

Luckily or unluckily, the blackout came right on time to cut the story short. I didn't mean to discuss, Gus, Ted said. Just forget about it! He went into his room. Mariana smiled at Gus and followed Ted. A painful night was just beginning.

Uncertain, Gus remained sitting on the couch in the dark for another minute, then he moved back to his room. He laid in a fever; his head was spinning.

Jurema... he mumbled.

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