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**from The Mermaid's Other Foot (*O Outro Pé da Sereia*)**

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An extract from Chapter Ten:

**A Clear Skies Woman**

*(Uma Mulher a Céu Aberto)*

Mozambique, December 2002

The visiting couple spent the next day apart. Benjamin went to take photos of the surrounding area with Casuarino and Matambira. Rosie stayed at home and got ready for her interview with Constança, a woman-to-woman talk.

The meeting was planned for late morning and would be held in the outside kitchen, set apart from the rest of the house and hidden away amongst the leafy branches of the mango tree. Constança had insisted that the conversation take place in the *launde*<sup>1</sup> as that's where she felt most at ease and best able to express herself.

“Jesustino's kitchen is inside the house. Mine's here outside, just as it always was back home.”

The outhouse consisted of a curved wall and a thatched roof. Only women ever entered. As Constança explained, the kitchen was a womb, somewhere to forget the trials of Life. Men stayed outside, didn't even come near the place. Why fan the flames?

“It was right here, on this very ground, that my daughters were born.”

“Weren't they born in hospital?” asked Rosie in surprise.

“Never. How can someone be happy if they're born in a place for the sick?”

Mwadia smiled and played along. She knew Constança was lying to avoid admitting she'd always had to ask permission from her husband, Edmundo Capitani, before she could go to hospital. He'd been a serviceman, forever away with work, but she dared not break the rules of tradition. That was the real reason Constança gave birth at home.

Constança had asked Mwadia to be around to help with the interview. Constança thought it all a pointless waste of time. As she had already told the visitors, nobody had ever asked her anything her whole life, so why start now, when she no longer knew how to answer?

Rosie struggled to squeeze her sizeable behind on to the small wooden bench. She watched how Constança spread herself out on a straw mat: legs crossed, bare feet side by side like Siamese twins, the fingers of her right hand scratching at the ground, as she said again:

“It was here they were born. It was here they took their first breath...”

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Rosie asked if she could tape-record the interview and took the device out of her rucksack without waiting for an answer. While untangling wires and adjusting sound levels, she gestured towards Mwadia and said:

“She's your youngest, isn't she?”

“You mean she's my...”

Only the unhappy ones stay and keep us company. The other ones, those children who brim with joy, end up heading off for a tender dance with Life. That's what Constança wanted to say, but she stopped before she'd even begun. The Brazilian lady wouldn't understand. She probably didn't even have children.

Rosie now had a pair of headphones on and her face adopted a serious, almost solemn expression, as she said:

“I'm a psychologist.”

Constança's face remained impassive, so Rosie felt encouraged to carry on explaining herself and her intentions. She had visited prisons in the US for many years, gathering stories from imprisoned blacks, truly horrifying testimonies. Criminals opened up to her and revealed the most intimate details of their dreams. In prison you sleep a lot and dreams substitute life. The only thing the system can't lock

up is your dreams. Having documented the subconscious images of blacks in America, she wanted to compare them with visions from blacks in African. She believed there were mysterious links between the opposite shores of the Atlantic, especially when it came to religious mythology.

“Their dreams evoke spirits that might come from here, from Africa.”

“Spirits don't come from anywhere. They're like water: they're inside us.”

“These spirits live here, in African rivers,” said Rosie persevering, “the prisoners think themselves the descendants of water spirits.”

“Why do they think that?”

“Because of their dreams.”

“Did you ever get these prisoners to dance?”

“I don't follow, Dona Constança.”

The best way to understand dreams is by dancing. A dancer's feet, skipping in the sand, best understands the language of dreams. That's what Dona Constança was saying.

Rosie seemed thrown, unable to recover the thread of the speech she'd prepared. Nevertheless, after a pause, she returned to the subject:

“I'd like you to tell me about your dreams, about people's dreams here in Vila Longe.”

Constança shrugged a shoulder, just the one, asymmetrically. She shook her head to give emphasis to her words.

“Nothing.”

“I'm sorry, what do you mean nothing?”

“We no longer dream here.”

“That's impossible, every person who lives dreams. It might be that you don't remember.”

“Remember what? Remember to live?”

Rosie switched off the tape recorder. She moved away to allow the interviewee to calm down. She let silence hover for a while before trying again, using a softer tone:

“I don't need you to tell me the intimate parts of your dreams, I only want...”

Constança started waving her arms about like an angry crab. Her daughter understood and hurried over to help her up. Once on her feet, Constança turned stern:

“Come now, Dona Rosie! Don't be bringing your talk of dreams and non-

dreams here.”

“All right, all right!”

“Dreams are like diseases.”

“I didn't mean to cause offence, Dona Constança.”

“It was dreaming that took my daughters away and into the outside world. And this one here,” she said pointing at Mwadia, “lives in a dream which has no end.”

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The interview had ended abruptly. Rosie was left sitting on her own in the yard. Mwadia came back out and excused her mother's manners:

“She's tired.”

“It's me who should be apologising. It was rude of me to be so insistent.”

Constança's voice was then heard, summoning the two women inside. Before her eyes had even adjusted to the half-light, Rosie said anxiously:

“I'd like to ask your forgiveness, Dona Constança.”

Only then did Rosie make out the woman's body stretched out on the bed, fan in hand cooling herself.

“You're right, there is a dream that pursues me.”

“You don't have to tell me if you don't want to.”

“Well I am going to tell you, it might make me feel lighter. A weight off my shoulders. As you know, dear, I'm a clear skies woman.”

And then she explained herself: since the onset of menopause, she had been repeatedly visited by the same dream. She dreamed she had invited friends and family to a great party, under the pretext that they were celebrating the hot spells. The guests kept asking her: What hot spells are these? They all sat in silence around the old table, waiting for the reason for the celebration to be revealed. Constança then got up and did like the men: she stood upon her chair to address everyone. “Ladies and gentlemen, mothers and fathers of Vila Longe,” she pronounced in a powerful voice that nobody recognised.

“She could be Casuarino!” someone cut in.

Glass in one hand, Constança paused for effect, then announced:

“This party is to give thanks to God. Because as of today, I'm dry.”

Jesustino's eyes cut through the air like scissors. Constança watched her

husband's expression out of the corner of her eye, and then continued:

“That's right, my friends, my pollen has run out. I'm a dry woman. If ever I shed blood again, it won't be because of woman stuff.”

The guests were overcome with astonishment. This was heresy, an outrageous insult against the primary instinct of womanhood. What more noble a purpose could await the descendants of Eve? Reading everyone's thoughts, Dona Constança made matters even worse:

“Because I must confess: I envy the woman who never bled.”

General amazement was turning into outright indignation. Thunderstruck, the eldest of her daughters said:

“But mother, didn't you like having us?”

“I never had you. You're the ones who had me. You didn't just suckle at my bosom, you sucked away my enthusiasm for life.”

Constança would cross herself whenever she made mention of Edmundo, the late father of her children. If truth be told, no child ever weighed him down. Not in his belly, and not in life. She alone carried the weight of the living, and the weight of the dead. Such is a poor woman's fate: to be the last to go to bed, then not sleep for fear of not being the first to wake.

Other women cried when they looked down at their tummies. It was said the sky closed over for the menopausal woman. It was the opposite for her.

“Now I'm a clear skies woman!”

Constança turned to her husband: he'd shrunk in shame, humiliated by the revelations of this woman, who was so sweet and yet as prickly as a pineapple.

“Don't be like that, Jesustino. I may no longer burn, but I still shine for you, my husband.”

Jesustino removed his wife's hand from his sunken shoulder, which she'd placed there in an effort to console him. Constança kept on smiling and finished her speech:

“And now my friends, let's eat.”

Nobody picked up their cutlery. Paralysed, they stared at Constança as she put food in her mouth. An enigmatic tear appeared on her face as she chewed. Confronted by silence and a general lack of response, Constança cried as she ate. Having enough food for everyone: now that really was a miracle, that only ever happened in dreams.

We are born and we cry. Our mother tongue is not formed by words. Crying is

our first language. At that moment, it was the only language Constança was capable of.

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When Constança had finished recounting her dream, she nearly broke her own rule that forbid crying in the house. However, it was Mwadia who was most upset:

“How awful, mother. So ma'am dreamed she didn't want us? Us, her children?”

Constança, busy drying her nose and eyes, was incapable of response. What she really felt was anger at the great distance her children had put between them, but what was she, a native of Vila Longe, to do? Though Mwadia didn't know it, not a night went by when Constança didn't long for her absent daughters, for them to be newborns once more. Fighting her emotions, she struggled to regain her composure, and stuttered as she said:

“You daughters gave me the only life I had.”

Constança then shook her head, sat up straight and brushed herself down. She stood up and went over to the door, blocking off the light. She seemed driven by hidden courage as she asked Rosie:

“Have you pounded corn before?”

“Never.”

“Let's go back into the yard. *Tendene Kusinja.*”

Constança hurried out, barefoot, leaving Rosie dumbfounded. Without needing to be asked, Mwadia offered a translation:

“Mother said: let's pound!”

The three women gathered around the giant mortar, each one armed with a large wooden pestle. Mwadia got things started by beating the corn. Then Constança lifted her *msundi*<sup>2</sup> and let it fall, producing a hollow sound in the belly of the wood. Rosie waited for her turn, like in a children's game. It took them a while to get it right, to feel the beat and fall into a rhythm. It was like life: first God's turn, then Man's. Rosie smiled and laughter spread through her: it had been a long time since she'd given her soul over to such a simple task, grinding the powder, the to and fro of a feeling she was unaccustomed to.

After a while, Rosie understood: it was a kind of dance. She stepped away

from the others and began to circle the yard, keeping to the rhythm of the hammering at the mortar. Her steps quickened as she let herself become possessed by the dance. Was she doing a samba? Her unsteady feet were not acquainted with this whirling body. She soon entered a dream realm. She began to hear the prisoner's voices. They came not from the American cells, but from the Vila Longe shadows.

When she came round, she was lying prone on the yard tiles, exhausted with joy, her legs and breasts exposed, as if caught in an act of flagrant lovemaking.

“Please, don't say anything about this to Benjamin.”

<sup>1</sup>launde - a yard surrounding a house

<sup>2</sup>msundi - a wooden pestle

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