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Notebook of Colonial Memories by Isabela Figueiredo is one of the novels featured in the summer 2019 Portuguese reading group run by And Other Stories.

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Caderno de Memórias Coloniais (Notebook of Colonial Memories)

Isabela Figueiredo

Translated by Victor Meadowcroft

From chapters 9, 15, 32 and 49

9

The mangos weighed down the trees, in bunches, hanging from green threads. They were heavy when plump and pink, causing the branches to touch the ground. From the place where each mango met the stalk sustaining it there ran sticky drops of transparent resin.

The black women sold mangos on the ground, in rows, at the Lourenço Marques market. Black women sold everything on the ground, anywhere; they spread an old *capulana* and formed small mounds of tomatoes, yams, mangoes and peanuts.

Everything the black women sold had come from the land they cultivated, but which did not belong to them, and everything was good to eat. The black women sold things in order to feed themselves, their children and their men – who never belonged to anyone.

A black and a white didn't just belong to different races. The distance

between whites and blacks was equivalent to that existing between different species. They were blacks, animals. We were whites, people, rational beings. They worked for the moment, for the sugarcane liquor of 'today'; we, to be able to afford the best urn, the best ceremony on the day of our funeral.

A white woman didn't sell mangos, except in bulk to other whites who distributed them. A white woman didn't sell mangos on the ground, on her doorstep. But I was a little black colonist, a child of whites. A little blonde Negress. And, little black colonist that I was, I sold small mounds of mangos outside the gate to our farm. Three mangos, with one more perched on top. Four mangoes: five hundred Escudos. I knew it was cheap, but I had to win over the mistrust of the Negroes walking by, returning from a day's labour and finding the little colonist sitting on the ground, cross-legged, managing her modest mango stall, which rested upon an overturned box acting as shop counter. The price had to be very attractive for them to overcome their fear and approach this girl who was white, yet black like they were. 'How much?' they asked from a distance. 'Five hundred!' I replied. And then they came over, hesitant, surprised, but smiling. I remember the big smiles of the Negroes. The full smile, with teeth that were bright white from chewing branches. And they bought. They were the best mangos from my mango orchard, plump with juice and flesh, all shades of pink and salmon. For just five hundred. Four.

Selling mangos at the gate, hidden from my mother, was a disobedience I didn't understand or resist engaging in.

It was being as I was born.

Ernesto hadn't been to work for three days. He was black and the blacks were lazy. They just wanted to spend all day sprawled out on a mat drinking beer and cashew wine, while their women worked the land, planted peanuts in the sun, sweating with their children on their backs, at their breasts, the hoe rising and falling. The black man was a bad sort. He lived off his woman. He didn't think about life, the future or his children. He just wanted to relax, take long naps, dance, sing, drink, eat and live the good life.

It was absolutely essential to teach black men to work, for their own good. So they could evolve through understanding the value of work. Through work, they could earn money, and with money they could prosper – as long as they did so as Negroes. They could stop living in huts and build houses of bricks and mortar with zinc roofs. They could wear shoes and send their children to school to learn a trade that might prove more useful to the whites. There was a lot you had to do for the black man, whose animal nature had to be nullified – for his own good.

This meant that, occasionally, on Saturday afternoons, my father had to go to the slum to look for Ernesto.

The slum was over near Xipamanine, or the airport, or far, far away. It was like the Minotaur's labyrinth, and my father was the Minotaur who went in and out whenever he pleased, to exercise justice.

The slum was carved up by narrow paths, crenelated with entrances to clusters of huts where women could be found talking, children crying or playing, mangy dogs sleeping, kids grazing, mortars pounding corn, raised voices, tins of food smouldering over coals; life. The slum was constructed of old reed, already grey, or fresh reed, the light colour of milky coffee.

My father led me by the hand, and I felt as portable as a light knapsack; I was almost lifted into the air. The earth was red and there was a layer of pink dust over everything. Sometimes my father stopped to ask, where does Ernesto so-and-so live? Ah, it was further up ahead, next to a big tree, an old canteen, a crossing with a newly-built hut, and then go, go, go and you'd find it. My father continued asking, with me behind him, flying over the red earth,

peering through notches in the slum's partitions behind which the life of the Negro hid, the lives of those who shared my land, but who couldn't be like me. They were black. That was the crime. Being black. Then my father found the place. Is this where Ernesto lives? Where is that layabout? His wife pointed to the hut. My father released my hand and went in. I waited outside, hugging my chest, amidst the chickens, the black man's barefoot children, the black woman, and all the other blacks in the neighbourhood who'd seen the white man and come to look.

Inside, my father was yelling and, with shoving, brought the man out, the pair of them looking shaken. Monday, you're coming to work, you hear me? Monday, you're beside the pumps at seven. You're going to work for your wife and your children, you lazy bastard. What are you trying to make of your life? Shove. Thump. And the wife and the children and the whole neighbourhood, and me, were all there, immobile, paralysed with fear of the white man.

His job done, the white man puts a banknote into the black woman's hand and says, get some food for your children; then he lifts me up in the air behind him, imprisoned by his wrist, as he yells at the black man, Monday, beside the pumps, or else.

And we both fly out of the slum. Emerging from all sides are people, dogs, chickens, frightened goats. Now there's an excited young boy inside the slum: the white man went inside, he beat the daylights out of Ernesto, now he's leaving, the white man brought the little girl, she's the white man's daughter.

And the white man who's leading me flying by the hand crosses the slum quickly, looks for the Bedford parked outside, sits down, starts the engine, drives, looks at me, then, are you tired, do you want a Coca-Cola? Would you like to try a sip of my *penalti*? I look at him. I don't reply. That man is not my father.

November, 1975. TAP flights booked up for months, to any destination.

In the preceding days there had been a whirlwind of activity. Suitcases. False-bottom bags. The *La Finesse* trousers – lettuce-green and canary-yellow – for the Portuguese winters, so grey and brown and dark blue.

Socks. Pants. Bras. *Modess* sanitary towels. Long sleeved shirts. A heavy light-green wool coat, out of fashion, done up quickly.

Lourenço Marques had been emptying of whites, both rich and poor, since long before independence.

We'd stayed until the end. My father still believed in a turnaround, a white Africa in which the Negroes would have to assimilate, put on shoes, go to school and to work.

The Negroes would have to smile at us, always, and thank us for what we'd done for their lands – I mean, our lands – and serve us, obviously, because they were Negroes, and we were whites, and that was the natural order of things. Is it not normal to accustom a dog to the collar and lead, or to slaughter a goat and roast it? Well this was just the world order.

My father believed in a white movement, in another white movement, following the 7th of September. One that would actually triumph, and would be financed by South Africa or Rhodesia. We needed to expel black power from the city and send it back to the bush, where it had come from, where it belonged, and then tame it or slaughter it. One or the other, as was deserved. An Africa for whites, yes, an Africa for whites, we repeated.

Because that land, you see, belonged to my father. My father was the entire Mozambican people. He lived it with a ferocious passion. He would continue to rant and rave until his final days, refusing to lower his voice before any Negro, to show them his documents, his travel papers, address them respectfully, shake their hands to demonstrate his acceptance of their authority. With or without independence, a black was a black, and my father was a colonist to the day he died.

On the eve of his death, when he could no longer eat or drink, he dreamt he'd got the blacks to install some cables and they'd done a shoddy

job, so he was yelling at them. He was completely caught up in the dream. Suffering. I asked him, 'do you still remember much about Somersfield?'

He did; he knew the names of all the streets by heart, the locations of the buildings, what each shop traded in, on every corner, as well as the given name and surname of the builder in charge of every site. He remembered every one of his favourite blacks: Samuel, Ninhanbaka . . .

'We'd have turned that place into America . . . if those guys . . . and these ones . . .' And he'd shake his head, groan, close his eyes, shrug his shoulders, shudder as if trying to rid himself of bad thoughts: 'Bloody blacks.'

In 1975 there was no longer any building happening in Lourenço Marques. Everything stopped. There were no more constructions in which to stick electrical cables, and even if there had been, they would have been entrusted to Soviet allies, to Cubans, or guys from the Baltics, not to some untrustworthy colonist with a bad reputation, a tainted past, hanging by a thread.

Little by little, my father's Negroes disappeared back into the slum, because there was no longer any work. Not one stayed on. I never saw my father's blacks again.

At school, the French teacher was black. *Il était du Sénégal. Noir. Le français au noir!*

History lessons were about those who reigned before King Gungunhana, that lineage, and the others, which were many. The wars they waged. The Bantu, the Shona, the Mutapa Empire. The Nguni, and then the Zulus.

The whites laughed. This was black history! The blacks thought they had a history! 'The history of monkeys.'

In Portuguese class we wrote poems about colonialism, the exploitation of man by man, the armed struggle, the end of *lobolo* (bride price), of religion, of the smoking of *suruma*, of *candongá* (the black market); the denunciation of *xicinhocas* (enemies of the revolution); Frelimo as metaphysical salvation, and the saviours of the people: Samora Machel, Graça Simbine, Eduardo Mondlane, yes, the one 'who married a white woman, because he'd been educated in Europe; he wasn't even a proper black, he was more *mulato*' –

along with this there was 'he was incorruptible, that's why they assassinated him; it was Samora' – and Chissano, 'as false as Judas.'

In Visual Arts we created collective works: murals about the revolution, canvases about the revolution, posters about the revolution . . . But that wasn't school. It would be necessary, therefore, to send me somewhere else. I was white. 'I was a woman now. It was dangerous.'

Soon after the twentieth, they closed up my suitcases and bags, and I said nothing, because a daughter had 'neither will nor wit'; at the last possible moment, they chucked my luggage into the back of the Bedford, on top of the tubing, cables, male and female plug ends, switches, and other gadgets for measuring voltage that there was no longer any use for; my mother wrenched a comb through my hair, as always, and told me, 'wear this outfit today. You're going to the metropolis.'

I climbed into the van with instructions not to get myself dirty; even without these – I knew – I was never to get dirty. I had exhausted that prerogative at birth. Yet I always somehow managed to get myself very dirty, instantly, almost as a priority. In that, he and I were the same. We came with the land. We were wrapped up in it, resolutely.

Soon after the twentieth, the three of us climbed into the Bedford in silence – me, into the middle; them, one on either side – and they drove me to the airport, along the track that led out of Matola Nova: Bairro Salazar. My father still called it Bairro Salazar.

The speed at which the car was travelling raised a cloud of red dust that lined our throats. We were going fast. Running late.

I think it was the last time I found myself in the middle. Between them.

In that silence I reviewed the material once again.

I was the bearer of the message; I carried the truth with me. Theirs.

I also carried mine, but they couldn't imagine that I might have a truth all of my own, free from the shadow of their hands.

I reviewed the material once again.

The young man was standing in front of me in the queue, with a small supply of biscuits and chocolates. He was wearing a naval officer's uniform. A black suit with a white cap, very well turned out, very noble. Above the left sleeve of his jacket, raised, on a cloth patch bordered in gold, you could read the word *Moçambique*. My attention was locked on that young man. I had an urge to call out to him and say, hello, excuse me, I just wanted to tell you that I'm from Mozambique too. But I didn't. It would have been ridiculous. Why would he be interested in knowing that inside me there exists a land from which I am estranged? Then I thought perhaps it was just his surname. The boy might be called Tiago Moçambique the way others are called José Portugal. He headed up in the direction of Alfeite and I followed him, feeling proud of his noble bearing.

Desterrados are people who cannot return to their *terra* – the land where they were born; who have cut their official ties to it, not their emotional ones. They are undesirables in the place where they were born, because their presence brings back bad memories.

In the land where I was born I would be the daughter of a colonist. That mark would weigh upon me. The more than likely retaliation. But the land where I was born exists within me like the stain of a cashew fruit, impossible to disguise.

I follow naval officers who carry written on the sleeve of their jacket the word *Moçambique*!

Decades have passed over the girl who faced the half-dozen-year-old black children who came looking for work at our gate, barefoot, broken, starving, and whose mother called out to say there was nothing that needed doing. I knew there wasn't. All the same, I called to her. There was always the hope that there might suddenly be some grass to collect, or a coin, bread. Sometimes my mother was in a good mood. Sometimes she felt sorry for the children.

They and I did not speak the same language. Just a few stray words. I

looked at them often, and they at me. For example, at this moment I'm looking at them across time, and there's a perplexity in their eyes, an emptiness, a hunger, and in mine an impotence, an incomprehension that no reason can explain.

Mozambique is that frozen image of a girl in the sun, with braids of meticulously combed blonde hair, in front of the dusty black child, almost naked, starving, in a silence within which neither of them knows what to say, looking at each other from the same side and opposite sides of justice, of good and evil, of survival.

A *desterrado* is also a statue to guilt. And the guilt, the guilt, the guilt that we allow to grow and curl up inside us like a colourless creeper binds us to silence, to loneliness, to irresolvable exile.

The above extract was translated by Victor Meadowcroft

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