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Debaixo da nossa pele (Under Our Skin)

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Translated by Jethro Soutar

From Chapter 1

Then a hand goes up in the middle of the auditorium and a woman with silver hair makes a spirited intervention. Introducing herself as a *retired secondary school teacher*, she speaks of historical questions, what might even be called the underlying issues, with rare candour and resolve. Her voice is smooth as porcelain and she is direct in that way only women of a certain age can be, blessed of enough charm to skip the formalities and express things in their most straightforward terms.

I'm at Belmonte Palace in Lisbon, on the top of the hill by the castle, where writers and academics have gathered for an international conference on the city and its history. Some have come from far-flung corners of Europe, abandoning the cold that still grips their hometowns to bask in the first days of Lisbon's spring. Today's topic of discussion is the presence of black slaves in the city, going back through the centuries and identifying traces in the toponymy of today. An image of the 'Chafariz d'El Rei' painting is projected onto a wall behind the stage. The enigma of miscegenation in Portugal captivates the delegates, some of whom, according to the programme, are French writers of considerable renown.

The woman with the silver hair, who I will come to know as Leopoldina, talks about the people in the painting as if they're old acquaintances: blacks, slaves, Moors; men and women, names and dates. She even speculates on how one ought to pronounce sixteenth-century Portuguese and what the period's most common insults and curses would have been. She has a brown shawl draped over her white knitted cardigan, denim jeans with a square-buckled belt and brown cowboy boots, all very neo-hippie I think later, when I see her flicking through a book on rice cultivation in the palace library.

A few days earlier I'd received an unexpected phone call. To complement the university experts and distinguished men and women of letters, the conference organisers thought they ought to invite someone to represent the ethnic minorities of this predominantly white city. Much to my surprise, that someone was me, a native of Cape Verde, the Sahelian islands of the Atlantic Ocean.

They weren't to know it, but the person they'd invited had recently returned to his adopted homeland with a profound sense of guilt for having abandoned the small country of his birth. I'd become preoccupied with matters of ancestral lineage and my background, a Cape Verdean immigrant family saga like many others. And yet in some abstract way – perhaps that sense of melancholy we Portuguese speakers call *saudade* – my story harked back to the journey taken by those Africans who arrived in the south of Portugal by boat many years ago, with shackles on their feet.

But that's another story.

The conference breaks for lunch. Speakers and delegates go off for food, but I take the printout of the painting and head down the hill to Alfama. I want to see what remains of the Chafariz d'El Rei, the 'King's Fountain', portrayed in the historic painting.

As I walk, I try to get a sense of the people depicted in the painting, people who had no idea they were being reproduced on canvas, indeed people who'd have been hard pressed to imagine anyone even noticing their insignificant existence. I try to imagine what the painter felt, an anonymous artist who, at some point between 1570 and 1580, chose to record a street scene in a manner

typical of northern European painting at the time, and who thus produced a picture of unparalleled documentary value, preserving the movements and mannerisms of these (in)visible people for ever:

The mediocre quality of the painting – there can be no doubting the painter had more enthusiasm than talent – is more than compensated for by its role of historic record. It confirms the existence of a population that might otherwise have been condemned to vanish with the sands of time, for of the 136 people depicted in the painting – yes, I took the trouble of counting them – 79 of them are black, among them seven children, caught up in the hustle and bustle of adult life. At first glance there is nothing to confirm these people are captives, indeed I'd say considerable effort is made to disguise this fateful fact, or at least to ignore it in the daily business of queueing up for water, filling as many vessels as could be carried, and indulging in a little conversation and laughter, exclaiming or grimacing in protest or in solidarity with other men and women in the same condition, perhaps discussing the next-to-nothing the world had to offer people like them back then, black people, men and women – and slaves, besides.

It doesn't take too much imagination to hear the cacophony of their voices and laughter, to smell the odours of their bodies wrapped awkwardly in European clothes; Balanta, Papel, Manjak, Mandinga, Fulani, Beafada, Serer, Soninke and Mende people dragged away from the tropics and converted into new Lisboners. The water girls look sensual in their bright, long skirts, with pitchers on their heads, quite possibly the detail that most caught the painter's eye. Never would the artist have seen so many black people gathered together – noisily, festively, lewdly – in a public space before. Sixteenth-century Lisbon was like nowhere else in Europe, populous but with wide open spaces, a city that had nourished and reinvented itself upon the arrival of spices from new worlds. Little wonder the foreign artist felt compelled to record its strangeness for prosperity.

The Chafariz d'El Rei itself occupies the right-hand side of the painting, the artist being primarily concerned with the world that revolved around its six spouts, each one painted white and shaped like a horse's head. Above them, three arched vaults are supported by two pillars, likewise painted white, creating an atrium sixty feet long and thirty feet deep. The pillars and the vaults, along with the terrace above the arches – where plants are seen growing, lillies perhaps – are

adorned with carvings and decorative flourishes in a Moorish style. The middle arch features the royal coat of arms at its centre and the two side arches bear the heads of animals of some kind.

The fountain's entire portico, broad enough to shelter anyone who had to spend several hours queueing there, is tucked in between two towers left over from the ancient Cerca Moura city walls.

The fame of the Alfama's waters is also ancient. The Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius cites the city's eastern waters in Book 8 of his *De Architectura*, a volume dedicated to hydraulic constructions. Ibn Abd Al-Munin, the first Caliph of the Almohad Empire, wrote a 12th century description of Lisbon in which he highlighted the city's famous hot springs (*al-hamma*, in the Arabic, which gave the neighbourhood its name). Three centuries later, Damião de Góis, the Portuguese humanist philosopher, was equally impressed by the fountain, praising the admirable construction of its columns and arches and the soft taste of its water, so pure it was a great pleasure to drink.

As the painting shows, the fountain previously opened out into a rectangular space, a sort of town square built on slightly lower ground to the road. People linger and chat leisurely at the foot of two stone steps. Others seem to loiter with no intent other than to quench their thirst and catch the latest gossip. A man makes expressive gestures, as if calling out to someone. At centre stage, a black man and a white woman appear to be ahead of their time in dancing a sort of tango. Two men, new Christians perhaps, seem to be weighing up the risks of an ambitious commercial venture, befitting of Lisbon's glorious days of old.

On the right, three bearded men look on as a majestic black knight passes before them. The horseman is wearing a cloak of the Order of Santiago, as if to prove that irrespective of time or latitude, there's always more to things than meets the eye. The men's apparent curiosity and gnostic acceptance of this enigmatic figure is reflected in the painter's evident fascination. The loftiness of the knight's position and the elegance of his trotting horse – a sacred animal – give him a dignity above and beyond all the other people in the painting, thus undermining the entire social order the scene prescribes.

Who can he be, this chevalier, violating the established norms with his nobility? Can what these half-a-dozen brushstrokes suggest actually be true? Could a black man really become a knight of the Order of St James of the Sword?

A few days later, Leopoldina suggests we meet for lunch in Belém. As we walk past the Jerónimos Monastery, she asks me about my family and our immigrant story. We discuss the Cape Verdean families who arrived by the dozen in the 1960s, moving into derelict flats in Lisbon's city centre, and how their neighbours, some of whom had witnessed the birth of the Portuguese Republic in 1910, sneered at the new arrivals, no doubt suspecting them of being related to the rebels then fighting Portuguese soldiers in Salazar's colonial wars.

Leopoldina leads us towards the Tropical Botanical Gardens, formerly the Tropical Colonial Gardens, not far from the monastery. We pass through the iron gates and wander up a path lined with listless palm trees and alive with birdsong.

'This is one of the few places in the city where I feel happy and at peace,' she tells me.

Clouds of insects and dragonflies hover over a lake where white-feathered ducks with red beaks swim through the green water. After the palm trees come the horsetail trees, brought from Brazil and Argentina, followed by clumps of bamboo and Judas trees. Leopoldina introduces me to them like old friends. The heads of two black boys sit atop pillars at the approach to an old one-storey house with a red-tile roof, relics from the 1940 Portuguese World Exhibition.

'It's a shame they let the greenhouse go to ruin,' Leopoldina observes.

Much of the garden lives in the permanent shade of interconnecting trees; it's like being in a rainforest.

'*Melaleuca lanceolata (Myrtaceae)*,' says Leopoldina, pointing to a plaque beneath a tree. 'Isn't it a pretty name?'

She leads me over to a stone bench where we sit down. The intimacy of the moment brings back teenage memories of sharing benches with girls for the first time.

Directly in front of us is the largest tree trunk I've ever seen. The shadow created by the tree's crown must be at least two hundred feet in diameter, though the tree itself is less than a hundred feet tall. It has giant snakes for roots that slide over the ground for sixty feet before burying themselves in the ground. Every few seconds a piece of dried fruit falls from the tree and lands on the carpet of dead leaves with a thud.

'It's my favourite tree,' Leopoldina says, '*Ficus religiosa (Moraceae)*, from

the Asian tropics, better known as the sacred fig or peepal tree.'

We remain silent for a while, an odd couple listening to the beat of the falling fruit. Then Leopoldina tells me the real reason why she attended the conference at Belmonte Palace.

'My great-great-great grandmother, a woman named Catarina, was a slave in the First Count of Belmonte's house,' she says. 'His name was Dom Vasco Manuel de Figueiredo Cabral da Câmara, until Queen Dona Maria I made him a count in 1767. As a child I was told stories of how he mistreated Catarina to such an extent that the law had to intervene, and how his wife threatened to sell her to Maranhão, in Brazil, which must have hastened her decision to run away. The story of her escape was always being told over dinner, and was thus passed down through the generations. I've looked into it and she seems to have been born in Dom Fradique's Court, the house the count lived in before Belmonte Palace was built, just before the Freedom of Wombs Law, which the Marques de Pombal brought into effect in 1773. In any case, we know she was part of a group of black slaves that fled Lisbon one morning in the early 19th century, heading south and crossing the marshes of the Sado Valley, then settling on a hillside near the modern day village of São Romão, where I was born over a century later.'

Leopoldina tells me that when they arrived, poor and with scant belongings, Catarina and her companions headed for the big house on the Herdade dos Frades estate. They started working in the paddy fields with families come from other regions. Blacks and whites lived side by side, though not always convivially. Most of the trouble came at church and the Archdiocese of Evora had to intervene, ordering the village chaplain to fine the black women five *tostões* each and throw them out if they ever disrespected the white women again.

Josefa, Leopoldina's great-great grandmother, was born in São Romão do Sado in 1820. What's known of her came from Leopoldina's grandmother, Eugénia, who had a prodigious memory and knew Josefa as a child. Josefa was an old lady by then, the latter years of the 19th century, and Eugénia was just a little girl, but Eugénia picked up further details from her own mother, Zulmira, Leopoldina's great grandmother. Eugénia passed these details on to Leopoldina through stories: how Josefa would help out weeding the rice fields from an early age; how she liked to wear a straw hat and tucked wild flowers into its black band;

how the family would clear the land from October to November and, once it was dry, Josefa would help build the seedbeds for the rice; how, when she wasn't working, she would make scarecrows to frighten the birds away and stop them eating the seed.

All the black people on the hill were poor, like most farmhands in the region. At the end of the weeding season the boss would give them a lamb and everyone would chip in to buy wine and there would be a communal meal, usually a big broth. Their hard toil was forgotten for a day and they ate and drank and sang the boss' praises. The black workers improvised drums out of bowls and called up ancestral chants. At the beginning of summer, after the harvest, the family would travel by horse and cart to see the saints festivals in the town of Alcácer do Sal.

Josefa was a typical country girl, by turns rugged, rebellious and sweet, and with a defenceless look forever on her face. When she was 15, she fell in love with a man named Domingos, who'd been a soldier in the Absolutist infantry. The Civil War had ended two years earlier, but he still went around with a pistol and a dagger under his coat. Josefa liked his tough guy image and was charmed by his sense of humour. They would meet at dusk by the well furthest from the village or under the cork trees on the other side of the hill. One day he told her he was going to join the armed uprising about to start in the Algarve mountains. He promised to come back and visit her whenever he could, asking her to trust in his return and saying he had a debt to honour with his former commander. Without further ado, he rode off into the autumnal evening light.

Weeks passed, and then months, without Josefa hearing word of him.

Josefa worked the fields to bury her anguish and sought comfort in the beauty of the estate's meadows. But time dragged on, the summer winds came, and still she had no news of him.

One day in Alcacer do Sal, Josefa heard people say several cities in the Algarve had been attacked and plundered by guerilla fighters loyal to Dom Miguel. A few nights later she sensed a presence outside her bedroom window and when she went out to look Domingos emerged from behind some bushes. They embraced as she frantically sought out signs of injury, but he was healthy and full of smiles. Things were going well, he said, the commander was smart and

Domingos was a good shot. They lay on the earth together until dawn, when he dried her tears, got back on his horse and vanished into the half-light.

She saw that a future with Domingos was still possible and that her life lay ahead of her, not behind her. She started to find any excuse to go into Alcacer do Sal to hear the latest news, accounts of sieges and battles. She heard that a group of rebels had crossed into the Alentejo and attacked the villages of Cercal and Vila Nova de Milfontes.

Domingos had promised that victory over the Liberals would make him a wealthy man, a landowner in the Lower Alentejo. But the Liberal government soon tired of the Absolutist's guerilla attacks. The Algarve's mountain inhabitants were ordered to take refuge in the cities, and to take their work tools with them, and a new cavalry regiment docked in Lagos, fresh and well-armed. A few days later Remexido, the rebel leader, was captured and shot with a group of loyalists. Josefa cried out when she heard the news, but calmed down when she learned there hadn't been a black man among them. Nevertheless, the trauma took its toll: the stress of waiting showed in her tired face and eyes, and she acquired the hardened look of someone who knew everything could be lost from one moment to the next.

But after further skirmishes with the army, the last rebel soldiers surrendered in exchange for a royal pardon. Domingos rode all through the night in order to collapse into Josefa's arms. They married soon after and Domingos became a farmer in the marshlands.

'My great-great grandfather was a very lucky man,' Leopoldina says in conclusion.

Josefa's and Domingos' children and grandchildren helped swell the region's black population. They mixed and mingled with the descendants of the white families who'd first come to the area to clear scrubland and work the remote Alentejo fields. Then when rice cultivation was introduced to the Sado area in the late 18th century, black slaves were found to be more resistant to the malaria fevers that plagued the marshlands.

The above extract was translated by Jethro Soutar

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