

## CHAPTER 4

Lídia liked telling stories about her childhood. There was one that struck me particularly, because it was not possible. Later I was amazed to discover various references to the case in the newspapers of the day. It all began on the ~~island~~-Island, one Saturday afternoon, at Ermelinda's bar. Lídia and her grandfather were eating slow lupine seeds when Eduardo Ferreira Viana appeared panting with excitement. He was a powerful, restless creature, who seemed permanently on the edge of a nervous breakdown. He stopped beside Carmo Ferreira and dropped onto the floor a woman's hand. The old man was startled:

*"Sundu ya mamaena !!"*

A circle of astonishment formed around the table. Fat Ermelinda, an angel-faced mulatta, allowed herself to faint with a gentle cry into the convenient arms of the poet Vieira da Cruz. The dog ran off, did a lap of the house and immediately returned carrying a whole arm in its teeth. He barked, ran to the door, and barked again. The men looked at one another, and then followed him. Some hundred metres away, beside a little forest of acacia trees, the sand had been turned up and you could see – partly eaten away and half-buried – a human cadaver.

They found the bodies of seven women in that place, some of them already badly come ~~apart~~ **apart**, transformed into slime and mud and boiling with ~~a~~ necrophagic life – tiny, pale and nervous. All were "horribly mutilated", as the reporter from the *Província de Angola* would write the next day. To be more precise, the bodies were cut through right across the belly.

The mystery fed the conversations of Luandans over the weeks that followed. Luanda was a city of calm and mild crimes, and even these were ~~unusual~~-infrequent, almost always anonymous. A week later the editor of *A Glória de Angola*, Vitorino Espírito Santo, was celebrating the discovery, writing that it was "the proof that, counter to some people's incorrect arguments, Angola is finally entering the great club of civilised nations." It's a good example of the acidic Luandan sense of humour: *A Glória de Angola* was then what remained of a once powerful nativist press, which the growing colonial offensive was practically suffocating.

Almost everyone agreed that what they were dealing with was a sexual crime. However, the suspects varied and the theories for explaining the case varied even more. Some colonials, particularly those lately arrived, recalled the "cannibalistic practices, the savage orgies of the bushland blacks", many of whom had reached the capital and were seen wandering aimlessly through the dust of the streets, "offending the eyes of our virgins with their shameless outfits". I took these curious statements from a small article in the *Província de Angola*. Its author, one A.D. Ventura – possibly a pseudonym – suggested the creation of European neighbourhoods that were kept rigorously separate from the African neighbourhoods and watched over by a special police corps: "~~only~~ **Only** in this way," the writer of the article concluded, "will it be possible to guarantee the security of our wives and daughters. Yesterday they were ~~just~~ **only** black women, but tomorrow, who knows, perhaps the tragedy will come knocking on our own doors."

Vitorino Espírito Santo, in a later article, wrote that "a crime that is so refined, so imaginative, so filled with mystery and seduction, cannot honestly be imputed to the common herd. The people, the barbarous black man, kills simple beasts simply: he strikes

a blow, he buries the blade and he flees. Some resorted to magic, ~~but~~. **But** none of them had the inspiration to carry out something of this kind and on this scale. A crime of this nature requires the learning of an educated man and the sensibility of an English Lord. I know the name of the guilty man and can reveal it to you now: Jack, the Ripper.” The article must have caused considerable scandal, because the issue in which it appears would be the last published in the series.

The other newspapers I consulted didn't solve the mystery. But Lídia claimed to remember the sudden outcome very clearly. According to her, a few months after the discovery of the body, the killer handed himself over to the police to escape the people's fury. He was a fisherman from the Algarve, an insignificant sort of man, with sharp protruding bones, and a hare lip. “A real genetic disaster,” in Lídia's words. He had been deported to Angola for the crime of murder and having bought himself a little boat had spent the latter years of his life settled among the Luanda island fishermen. Without much luck at sea, one day he nevertheless began to appear with his barge laden with a new kind of fish. The people found it odd, especially the fact that the man from the Algarve only ever brought the scaly things' tails to land; (quite big tails judging by accounts), on the grounds that they were the tastiest part of that new species. Shortly after the bodies were discovered, the man confessed: they were mermaids! The wretch had been killing them and then cutting their human appearance away, burying these pieces in big common ditches. The tails, rejected by the people of Luanda, would be salted and sold to bushland traders from the interior, who would then sell them on as though they were salt-cod.

The man was released after a few weeks. Lídia heard that he'd fled from Luanda hidden in the hold of a trawler and that he had later set himself up in Moçâmedes, where he'd opened a funeral parlour.