

Loose Ties

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| Angola |

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The guard wakes up startled with the light beam. He stands. It takes him a while to steady his step. He succeeds. Trying to understand what is happening, he runs to the street.

“Tinoni, do we pay you to sleep?” asks Katila knowing the answer.

“ I’m sorry.”

“When I come back, if you’re sleeping I’ll tell,” threatens Katila, closing the car window.

Tinoni, afraid and humiliated, lowers his head.

We get into the jeep. A rapper with a soft voice and sharp tongue plays loudly on the speakers, *Top dollar with the gold flea collar, Dippin' in my blue Impala...*

We exchange introductions. Ricardo drives and Edson is in the front passenger seat. They complain about the delay, but without losing their cool.

We enter Luanda's waterfront. The debauchery of lights from the lighting of the bay and the government buildings contrasts with the darkness of the residences. The palm trees and the water borrow the look of a city in the tropics. The roads and sidewalks are clear. The chaos has retired for the night. This is not its stage.

"At night, Luanda is beautiful" I think. I'm delighted looking at it. The trip is short. They park the car on a downtown street, near a small, whitewashed church with a yellow frame all around. Two twin towers protect the arched entrance. It is a church that could be placed in any small Portuguese village. Nádia and Katila lean against the boys. Their high heels don't fit the ruins of the tortuous Portuguese sidewalk. Not far behind, I follow alone. Nadia calls me and gives me her arm.

Along the way, kids run after us scaring me several times. Katila laughs.

"Where's my boy Tonho?" asks Katila to the group of kids.

"I'll go get him," says one of them before running off. We keep walking for another hundred meters until we reach the door of the bar.

"Godmother, Godmother. I'm here."

"What's up? Give me two Marlboro reds."

Tonho isn't even thirteen years old yet he sells cigarettes after hours.

It's a hip-hop music video set. The light is warm and enveloping. You smoke inside. The bar is crowded, but I move easily. All males are united by the basketball cap, T-shirt, baggy jeans, and Air Jordan sneakers. The height of the heels and the skimpy clothes stifle the

female competition. The group disperses. Each one going to their tribe.

Nadia seeing that I'm feeling lost, comes to get me. She takes me with her to the bar counter. She greets the barman with two kisses on the cheek and one on the mouth. He is a tall mulatto man with androgynous features. He offers us shots of Gold Strike. We chug them down.

"What do you want to drink?" Nadia asks me.

"Malibu cola."

While we wait for our drinks, boys and girls approach and greet Nádia. I'm introduced and quickly forgotten. They share hugs, kiss and make high fives in the air. I get the feeling that everyone knows each other in that bar.

The music plays loud. The boys, shake their shoulders, raise their arms and clap their hands. Sometimes they close their eyes and proclaim the gospel of hip-hop. They have their hands on their waists. With their feet slightly apart and knees bent, they rotate their hips forward, sideways, backward, and then the other way around. The moves follow the beat of the music *Now give it to me. Gimme that funk, that sweet, that nasty, that gushi stuff...*

The dancing only stops when the DJ stops playing music. I look at my watch, it is three thirty in the morning. Suddenly, the lights are turned on as bright as spotlights at a soccer stadium. They hurt their eyes. We all start running away from the light and leave the bar. We are the last ones to leave.

We walk the same hundred yards back to the car. More kids show up. They follow us. They are not selling cigarettes. With their hand massaging their belly, they ask for money. No one notices them. We get in the car. The doors are locked hurriedly. We continue on the tour of the night.

The road we take is jammed with cars. Suddenly, the driver's black Mercedes ML is

surrounded. Fearlessly, they throw themselves in front of the wheels of the car. Ricardo doesn't swerve. I guess he thinks it shouldn't be the car to have to dodge the people. He is certain in his driving and drives straight ahead.

We stop. We get out of the car.

Edson yells at an emaciated little boy, "Get the fuck out of here."

I get scared. The kid doesn't leave and continues to follow us. From his pants pocket, Ricardo takes out one bank note and hands it over ordering, "Now get the fuck out."

"Don't trust him. At the first opportunity, you'll lose your wallet and your mobile," Katila warns, irritated.

"Drug addicts! They should be in school," says Edson, not sure if he's criticizing the kids or the war and the government, or all three at once.

I don't see any little girls. I don't see any girls. I don't see women. I don't see the other corners where they might be. I see the police. They guard the nightclub.

There is a huge line of men waiting on the other side of the rope, which is only opened at the bouncer's discretion. The rope is the border between those who are welcome and the renegades. Whites walk in straight away. Mulattos are chosen and blacks have to wait. Maybe the bouncer's discretion is based on capitalism. For the bouncer, a white man in Luanda is likely to have more dollars to spend than others.

We walk to the side door. There are no lines. We are VIP. We are about to enter when a black man, almost a dwarf, appears. He wears a trilby hat, impeccably white. His muscles stick to his shirt. Wherever he goes, everyone greets him.

We decide not to go inside.

“Great Poet Little Betinho, are you cool?” says Nádia.

“I’m cool.”

“Do some verses to shake up the people,” Edson requests. Betinho runs his hand through the crown of his hat and, in a circular motion, smoothes his fingers along the felt brim. Gently, he pulls the creases in his pants down to his knees and shakes them. He opens his arms and, as if announcing the beginning of a show, he sings:

Brothas and sistas, good morning to you all!

The audience comes closer.

Betinho moistens his lips, clears his throat, and recites:

*It is Great
Babe Lives in
faith
Loves us all
she rocks
Day comes
It is a problemma
joy is gone
life is a dilemma
Luanda my kamba
Uau é!
Luanda my babe
you rock!
Brothas and sistas
It's a feeling
insane rymes
In this moment!*

This babe rocks!
Luanda my kamba
Uau é!

The audience, overwhelmed by Betinho's emotion, clap their hands and shout enthusiastically, "*Olaré!*"

Voices in the background ask everyone to be quiet.

"Quit those illusions," mocks Katila, with her hand on her waist.

"Betinho is in the area. The family is complicated, but it's ours," jokes Betinho, passing his hat around, asking for contributions.

A white man tries to throw one bank note into Betinho's hat. Politely, Betinho refuses, and finishes, "You only buy what is for sale. My poetry is a gift for my people."