

David Machado

The commandant's twice-lived night

As he opened the door to the block of flats, he came face to face with the gloomy shadows on the stairway and shivered with fear. Swiftly, he reached behind his back for the place in his belt where many years before he used to keep the revolver they had given him in Moscow. Finding it empty, he struggled for breath, sure now they were going to kill him. He groped his way along the walls and tried the light switch several times before realizing it was not working. Then, summoning up the old guerrillero's instinct, he kept quite still, controlled his breathing and peered fearlessly into the darkness. He coughed twice and shouted so that he could be heard all over the building:

I won't see you kill me, you bastards. But you won't see me die either.

He moved forward, one arm protecting his face, the other hand raised in a fist, ready for an enemy to appear in front of him. Taking the steps one at a time, as if each were the last, he climbed slowly up to the second floor landing and banged on the door with the flat of his hand, in a sudden attack of rage. The door was locked, just as he had left it the day before. As the darkness and silence began to tighten like a vice around his chest, somewhere, deep inside himself, he found the courage to fit the key into the lock and turn it. He opened the door, went in, closed it behind him, and paused, staring into the darkness, waiting for the first shot from the past to tear into his flesh. He stood motionless for a couple of minutes but as nothing happened, he dropped the keys onto the table, took his

coat off, threw it onto the back of a chair and, without bothering to switch on the lights, crossed the corridor to the living room and slumped into an armchair covered with tribal rugs, blustering disdainfully:

I'll be here all night. You can come and get me any time you want.

His name was António Ferraz and he was a nurse at the San José Hospital. Because of successive shifts he had had no sleep for over thirty-six hours. And, as it happened, there was no one there to kill him. He was so exhausted that he no longer knew whether it was morning or afternoon and had no recollection of walking home over the hills, nor of the fierce luminosity of nightfall at eight o'clock, which was the time when he reached Bairro Alto, where he lived, and also the time when he emerged from his lethargic state. In fact, there were reasons for him to be on his guard long before he opened the door of the building and confronted the foreboding darkness of the stairway. For as he crossed the narrow streets of the still quiet quarter, he remarked upon the rows of black soldiers saluting him solemnly from the other side of his remote anxiety. And at one point, an unshaven officer with eyes like frosted glass came up to him and said: 'Commandant, we're moving out into the bush as soon as the moon rises.' He said nothing and signalled with his hand that he did not want to be bothered again for the rest of his life.

Sitting at home in the armchair, trying to blot out his memories with the help of menthol cigarettes, he heard the soldiers set off on their march northwards, then a choir of voices singing a rebita, and finally the same officer calling out to him from the scrub at the edge of the jungle 'Goodbye Commandant, we'll meet you on the northern bank of the river,

in two days' time.' And then he listened to the impossible silence of the African hills, on whose slopes the blood of the last battle still flowed. Until the telephone rang, in Lisbon.

It was his mother's voice at the other end and he realized with a start that it was already Sunday, the day she always called. She explained to him that it was not Sunday and that at eighty-two, she did not need a special day of the week to talk to the only creature in the world who was close to her. António said nothing else and waited. His mother took a deep breath and then told him she had been feeling bitterly upset, without knowing why, since first thing that morning and anxious, for some reason, to talk to him. Prey to her fertile imagination, her thoughts had been wandering to and fro, bobbing up and down on a sea of palpitations, certain that something awful was about to happen. Finally, it dawned upon her that the dreadful thing that was about to happen had already happened and that the turmoil she felt inside herself was no more than a distant echo of times gone by.

It'll be twenty-three years, tomorrow morning, since you called me in tears – she said – You were in Angola, lost in the middle of the war and me here in Coimbra, just the same as always, unable to help you. First I thought you'd been wounded, but soon afterwards I remembered I hadn't heard you cry since you were two and I understood it had been something more serious than a gunshot wound.

She paused, waiting for her son to say something, but António remained silent and she started again.

It's just a memory, I know, she said – But take care of yourself anyway.

Laconically, he said goodbye to his mother and put the telephone down. And at that very instant, he saw Captain Elias Vieira emerging from the shadows of the room, face covered in sweat, his arm in a sling because of the piece of shrapnel from the landmine that had almost killed him; chewing on the same lump of tobacco as he had thirty years before. He crossed the floor, limping on his left leg, just as António Ferraz had always known him to do and tripping over everything in his path, with a look of astonishment on his face at finding a living room set up in the midst of the Angolan plateau. Even in the dark, it was impossible to mistake him for someone else.

They had known each other since Elias was still a slave on the farm which belonged to António's father and they became friends one afternoon when he was sentenced to fifteen lashes by the headman for handing out revolutionary propaganda to the other slaves. At that time António Ferraz's innocence prevented him from distinguishing the rebels from other people except by the colour of their skin, but, even so, the punishment seemed to be too much for one man and he had stepped in to defend him and a few days later the black man showed his gratitude by leaving two books outside his room that changed his life: Karl Marx's *Capital* and a collection of Lenin's speeches. Several years later, when António Ferraz returned to Luanda after spending some time as a volunteer in the Soviet Union – where he learned to fly and was taught the more sophisticated aspects of the art of setting up a revolution – he bumped into Elias Vieira, and the first thing he said was: 'I'm back,

comrade, the whip is about to change hands.' Elias Vieira turned a blind eye to the light-coloured skin of his former boss, set aside four centuries of tyranny and took him on campaign through jungles from one end of the country to the other. Everywhere they went he was introduced to the soldiers as Commandant Ferraz, just back from Moscow with a doctorate in military operations and a proper grounding in the original communist doctrine. From then on Elias became his right-hand man, his most loyal protector on the battlefield and, at times, a steadfast confidant. Until the day of the Commandant's surreptitious and solitary desertion. Because after that they had never met again, except in dreams.

It's not time for us to sit down yet, Commandant – said the Captain Elias Vieira he had involuntarily summoned – There are only four of us here and the two of us have the first watch tonight.

António Ferraz lit up another menthol cigarette and glanced at his old friend.

I was on duty at the hospital for forty hours – he snapped – And I haven't set foot in Africa for twenty years. I want peace.

And what are we going to do about this war, then, Commandant?

What war, Elias? The war's over.

The captain stirred amongst the shadows of the room and crouched down next to António Ferraz, with a smile on his face.

Commandant, you know perfectly well that this war goes on for ever – he said. And then he added calmly: I'll be waiting for you behind the bluff. Don't forget your weapon.

Then he rose and disappeared into the mists of the corridor. It was almost ten o'clock and António Ferraz turned in the armchair to try to catch up on some sleep, knowing quite well, however, that he would not succeed, for although it had rained all day on the plateau, the evening air was becoming warm and thick like a woollen blanket and the mosquitoes had started biting mercilessly. Far away, down towards the kitchen, he heard the gravelly voices of two soldiers who were eating their dinner. The strong smell of boiled chickpeas and the sweetish fumes of brandy brought some cheer to him. He felt an urgent need to get up from the chair and join them round the fire, but he waved the impulse away with his hand. He knew them both well. Their names were Inácio Montenegro and Zeca Baião; they were from Benguela and had joined the guerrilla group three months before. A year later, during the last battle he fought before escaping through the jungle to the Congo, he would see them die, not far from each other, killed by two deadly enemy shots.

Yet he heard them quite clearly, talking in the kitchen as they ate and later on he heard them tuning up their guitars and playing isolated chords until finally even he was unable to resist that crazy nostalgia any longer and he called out:

Zeca!

Yes, Commandant.

Play one by Sofia Rosa.

And they played. And Commandant António Ferraz finally relaxed, if only for a few moments. He dreamed of the patients at the hospital, coming in through one door alive and leaving by another dead, until round midnight, shaken gently by Captain Elias Vieira's hand, he awoke from the soothing effects of the endless song.

Three soldiers have arrived with one prisoner, Commandant, the captain told him.

António Ferraz looked at the other man across time and answered from the depths of his disturbed soul.

The prisoner here is me – he said – Leave me in peace.

Captain Elias Vieira explained that there was nothing else he would rather do than leave him in peace, but there was nothing to be done because the orders had come directly from the President and it was urgent to carry them out. The message that had come with the prisoner was so short and clear that António Ferraz would remember it for the rest of his life: with no other justification but the President's signature, the prisoner was to be shot at dawn. The captain was about to say the name of the man who had been brought there to die, but the Commandant stopped him in time.

I forbid you to say the name of that man again – he shouted – I've known it for twenty years.

Very well, Commandant. But there's still the other business.

Then António Ferraz stretched out his arm and switched on the lamp on the small table next to the armchair, a pale light spread around the room, and the horizon of the Angolan night glowed brightly. He rose to his feet, carrying one of the tribal rugs from the armchair to protect himself from the invincible winds of the plateau. He took a step forward so his eyes were only a hand's breadth away from Captain Elias Vieira's face.

There is no other business – he said with a deep sigh. I know what you're going to say next, and I'm telling you now that when it's six forty-two in the morning, I will not fire another shot into the head of that poor bastard who has already died once.

Captain Elias Vieira placed his hand on the Commandant's shoulder and squeezed it with affection.

I know how hard it is, Commandant – he replied – But there's no one else.

António Ferraz knew as well as the captain that there was no one else. The three men who had brought the prisoner were going to eat what remained of the boiled chickpeas from dinner and then return to the town on the other side of the valley; Inácio Montenegro and Zeca Baião were

too wet behind the ears to be given those ghastly orders; and Captain Elias Vieira's wounded hand prevented him from firing a weapon with the grim accuracy that the task required. It was not the first time he had killed a man; he had taken part in enough battles to know that at least one of the bullets he had fired must have hit someone. But it was the first time he had killed a defenceless man. He remembered the rosary of prayers about the revolution he had learned in Moscow so many years ago, and felt his heart palpitating as he recalled the recommendations regarding the execution of traitors, enemy targets and other obstacles to the implantation of the doctrine.

Above all, what he could not understand was why they were making him kill the same man again, twenty-three years later, rather than leaving him alone in peace with what life still remained to him.

He sat down in the armchair again, wrapped the rug around himself and switched off the feeble light of the table-lamp. In the darkness of the room he searched for the peace he had lost, but found only the catastrophic turmoil of his memories. He repeated the same lament:

Leave me in peace, Elias – he pleaded – I'm drifting around on this choppy sea and the only thing I want is to get to dry land. Let me sleep today's night, without memories of nights gone by.

Captain Elias Vieira's face appeared out of the gloom like a sorry angel.

I'd like that, António – he said – But we both know that you need to die to be still.

Then he disappeared once again into the shadows of the room, but António Ferraz heard him add some useless advice: 'Rest until dawn, Commandant. I'll do the watch by myself.'

The Commandant lit another cigarette, though he knew, deep down, that not even the sweet taste of menthol would be enough to lay the ghosts of the past, much less the certainty of what was going to happen in the first minutes of the morning. He spent the next few hours trying in vain to fall asleep, for every second was disturbed by the invisible sounds of the jungle, the distant thunder of the sky, or the noisy laughter of Inácio Montenegro and Zeca Baião. At three in the morning he saw a wild dog pass by in the shadows between the television and the wall, and soon afterwards clearly heard the voice of the prisoner reciting verses by Arlindo Barbeitos to the clouds over the plateau. He was about to say the final lines, himself, but realized that to do so would be to admit defeat to his disturbed recollections of that distant day. He got to his feet and shouted:

You can all stay there in the middle of the war. This time I am going to desert sooner.

He wandered around the apartment as if he did not recognize where he was, searching for a way out from that Angola of the past, but soon he realized that the doors were closed for good, until the following day. So he made his way to the bathroom, where the prisoner was finding solace in the words of the poet, determined to knock it down and free the man who

had already died once, so that he would not have to take his life again. Finding him in this state of restless anxiety, Captain Elias Vieira put his arm around him to calm him so that he could sleep, and from the depths of exasperation he answered that there was nothing he wanted more but the shot he was going to fire in a few hours time prevented him. The captain guided him carefully through the darkness, between the rocks of the plateau and the English-style furniture he had inherited from his uncle, sat him down again in the armchair and handed him the bottle of brandy which used to keep him company when he was on watch, so that he could recover from his torment. The Commandant drank without protest, feeling the same burning sensation in his throat he used to feel back in the old days, and pleaded once again:

Leave me in peace, comrade. Please.

The Captain nodded, got up and limped away into the darkness.

I'll wake you up when it's time – he said, before disappearing into thin air.

António Ferraz sat motionless in the African night of his apartment, struggling with his disturbed thoughts.

He was sitting in the same position, still awake, when at about six in the morning, Captain Elias Vieira appeared with a mug of coffee and a piece of dry bread. He took a small bite of the bread, two sips of coffee and then inconsolably threw the rest onto the beaten earth and boards below his feet. When he handed the empty mug back to the captain, he was

given the revolver in exchange, the same one he had been presented with in the Soviet capital, held up in both hands as if it were a thousand-yearold museum piece. He looked at the gun and felt suddenly afraid. But he picked it up nevertheless and rested it on his lap.

It's time, Commandant, the captain declared.

He looked at his old friend, too exhausted to continue struggling against this irresistible duplication of destiny and stood up with the revolver hanging loosely from his hand.

Let's go, he said. And moved forward in the darkness, followed by the captain.

Zeca Baião was waiting for them at the bathroom door, still dazed by the abruptness of the wake-up call, his stiff body position conveying a certain solemnness. As soon as he set eyes on him the Commandant put an end to any illusions he might have been harbouring.

There's no reason to stand there like that, as if you were a minister, he said – what's going to happen here is the affair of hyenas. Open the door.

The soldier said nothing, lowered his eyes, took the rusty key out of his pocket and used it to open the door. He freed the bolt from the chains and left the door wide open. Inside, the darkness was blacker still and the prisoner's presence could only be perceived by the sound of his voice murmuring Barbeitos' verses to the tiles. Zeca Baião went in. And a few

seconds later came out with a black man, well over six feet tall, his hands tied, bleeding from the brow. No one said a word and Captain Elias Vieira signalled for them to follow him, at the same time as the first rays of the new sun began to fill the plateau. They walked for about thirty yards and then stopped. The captain forced the prisoner to kneel on the ground. And on this side of time, harassed on every side by the onslaught of his memories, Commandant António Ferraz pointed his revolver at the man's right temple and killed him, for the second time in his life, with the shot that would destroy himself.

Then he sat down, trembling, in the armchair covered with tribal rugs in his living room in Lisbon, picked up the telephone and dialled his mother's number, in Coimbra. The tears were running down his cheeks.