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A Lagoa do Cacimbo

Heather Jordan

Rui sat at a long dinner table glittering with candles and many wine glasses. A waiter rolled down clear plastic sheeting that was typically meant to protect the restaurant's verandah from rain, though it was not raining. When Rui asked why the verandah had been closed up in this way, the waiter smiled and hugged himself. "Frio," he said, chattering his teeth. But it is not cold, Rui thought. And now the smoke from his friends' cigarettes would be trapped inside the plastic, swirling around and around, without escape.

That very day the cacimbo had moved in over the city as a white haze hanging low in the sky. Rui regretted that he had not taken his girl to the beach one last time before the weather changed. Now the beach would be misty, humid, and abandoned.

"How can it be the dry season, when there is so much moisture in the air?" asked the German colleague sitting to his right.

"That is why they call it the cacimbo, after the cacimba: the mist in the air. If we call it the dry season, it is only because it does not rain," Rui explained.

"But it feels like it could rain at any moment. The air feels so *heavy*," his colleague marveled.

"It won't rain again for many months. Neither will the sun come out. It is a season in between, friend," Rui warned.

"This is a strange part of the world," the man said. Rui would have felt offended if it weren't that he disliked the cacimbo himself. He knew that many Angolans enjoyed the turn in the weather; they liked to pull out the fancy coats they had purchased in Europe, and to close up all their windows and shiver. But he would miss the beach, and he would miss the sight of Neusa wading into the ocean.

The South African man sitting to his left made a comment about it being the right time to stay at a lodge.

"I know of a lovely place out in Bengo, with little cabins all around a lake. It's only a few hours from here, but it feels like another world. If you're lucky you might see an elephant walking about."

“Elephants? That can’t be true,” Rui said with a laugh. The South African shrugged. Elephants or not, the lodge did sound like a good idea. He imagined himself enjoying a cozy dinner with Neusa next to a warm fire, overlooking the lake.

His brother, Mário, would want to go. There was no telling him that he could not. So, on a Friday afternoon Rui left work early and roused Mário from where he was sleeping on the sofa at their parents’ home. Together they packed Rui’s Rav4 with a cooler full of beer and fetched Neusa from her job at the mobile phone store. There was some tension when Rui told Mário to sit in the back so that Neusa could sit next to him, but within a few blocks Mário was lightly snoring, his black-rimmed glasses slipping off his face, and it was all forgotten.

As they turned onto the highway leaving the city, they immediately encountered a wall of traffic. The road was filled with trucks carrying crates of beer and Coca-Cola, blue and white *candongueiros*¹ recklessly winding in and out of poorly defined lanes. A young woman sat on the back of a drifting motorcycle, one arm wrapped around the driver’s waist, the other arm cradling her nursing baby. The police had lined the busy road with rolls of barbed wire to keep the people from crossing on foot, but the wire had been cut and pushed aside in many places. Young vendors wandered between stalled vehicles hawking drinks, batteries, cashews, and adaptors. Neusa bought herself a stick of grilled corn and a magazine.

Mário stirred sleepily. “We haven’t even left Viana² yet?” He opened a can of beer and reached from the back seat to turn on the radio.

“Why don’t these people use the bridge?” Rui wondered angrily, looking up at the massive metal pedestrian bridge that had been built over the road.

“It’s out of their way,” Neusa said, between bites of corn. “It would take them ages to cross the road that way.” It was true, the pedestrian bridges were so sparsely spaced and the staircases so steeply stacked that it would take, as Neusa said, ages to get to the other side.

The *candongueiro* before them suddenly sped up. Just as Rui began to accelerate, he had to hit the brakes as a trio of *zungueiras*³ ran out in front of the Rav4, basins of avocados balanced on their wrapped heads, babies asleep on their backs. Neusa was thrust forward and hit her head on the dashboard. She winced and held her hand to her forehead.

“Angel! Are you alright?” Rui asked, slipping the car into park. One of the women pounded her fist on the hood of the vehicle and spouted off *Kimbundu*⁴ curses he did not understand.

“I think so,” Neusa whispered, rubbing her head.

¹ Private minibus that serves as public transportation.

² Neighborhood in Eastern Luanda.

³ Female street vendor.

⁴ Major Bantu language group in Angola.

The Rav4 remained still for a long time. An accident involving several vehicles turned out to be the cause of the bottleneck. There was a crowd of women wailing. A boy selling packets of cookies told them there were several bodies. Neusa saw the feet of a dead woman sticking out from under a bus, wearing the same white plastic sandals Neusa herself was wearing. She crossed her ankles and tucked them away.

“I imagine some idiot was running across the street and caused all of this,” Rui said, gesturing at the scene.

“Don’t say that,” Neusa sighed sadly. “Poor souls.”

When they finally put the city behind them, Rui began to drive very fast. The white cloud of the cacimbo followed them into the bush, pressing down on the hills of dry grass that would have wavered in a breeze, had there been one. Imbondeiro trees stood crooked against the horizon. Neusa looked up from her magazine and watched the land race past her window. Sometimes they passed a string of women carrying wood or water on their heads. The women would step off the highway and disappear into the tall grass as the car sped past them. Neusa would watch for them in the mirror, waiting for them to reappear on the road.

Around a bend, they came across a rusted tank, beached on the roadside. Mário clutched at Rui’s shoulder and demanded he stop. “I want to take a photo.” Rui stopped the car and reversed. Mário got out and inspected the tank. The metal was a swirl of the colors of oxidation: white, rust, green mold.

“Don’t touch it. Don’t be stupid.” Neusa warned. Mário handed her his phone and asked her to take a picture of him posing in front of it. Ignoring her protests, he climbed on top of the tank and asked her to take a few more pictures. Rui leaned against the Rav4, his arms crossed. He looked disapproving but when Mário had finished and come down, Rui took Neusa by the hand and they posed in front of the tank too. He stood behind her and wrapped his arms so tightly around her he could touch his own elbows. She pulled her hand away when he tried to climb on top. “I’m scared, Rui. They used to put mines all around them.”

The sun began to set behind the haze—a perfect red sphere lying low on the white horizon. It was nearly dark before they spotted a sign for the lodge. It was a large, hand-painted sign promising comfortable cabins on a lake, with a pool and a restaurant. It cheered them.

The road to the lodge was narrow and unpaved. They drove for a very long time without seeing anyone or anything related to a lodge. The air was thick with the smoke of cooking fires and it made their throats itch. Yet they saw no houses or people.

As they slipped under the darkness, their headlights fell upon the body of an old woman, walking alone along the road, a bundle of firewood on her head. Rui drove up next to her.

“Mamá, is this the road to the lodge?” he asked. But the woman did not respond. She did not stop walking or even turn to look at the car.

“Maybe she doesn’t speak Portuguese.” Neusa suggested. “Speak to her in dialect.”

“No, it’s like she doesn’t even see me,” he said, waving his hand out the window, trying to catch her attention. “Strange. Maybe she’s crazy.” When they passed the old woman, Neusa looked for her in the rear view mirror, but there was only darkness behind them.

At last they came upon the entrance to the lodge. A guard sat on an overturned bucket, the amber light of his cigarette glowing in his mouth. Rui leaned out from his window and called out to him.

“Mais Velho,⁵ good evening. We are here to stay at the lodge. Can you open the gate?”

“The lodge is closed,” the guard said, without standing up.

“But there is a sign on the highway that says you are open.”

“Eh, that sign is very old,” he said with a groan, his hand beating the air before him. “The lodge has been closed for a long time now.”

“Why don’t you take the sign down then? Why do you let people drive all the way out here just to learn it has closed?” Rui threw up his hands in frustration.

“Calm down, love,” Neusa said, lightly touching his arm.

The guard shrugged.

“Is there anywhere else we can go?” Rui asked. “It’s late and we’ve been driving for hours. We need somewhere to sleep.”

“You can sleep here,” the guard said.

“But you said it was closed.”

“Oh, but you can sleep here,” the guard said, standing up to open the gate.

The lodge was dark, but they could see a low light bleeding out from the office. There they found a young woman behind the desk, a small kerosene lamp illuminating her round face.

“Can we have a room?” Rui asked.

“The lodge is closed,” she said.

“The guard told us we could sleep here. Just for one night. We’ll leave first thing in the morning.” Rui pulled out a few bills and laid them on the desk. The young woman took a key off the wall and slid it across the desk with lowered eyes.

“Is the restaurant closed too?” Mário asked.

“Yes.”

“Is there any food? We’ve just come from the city and we’re hungry.”

“I don’t know.” She appeared discomfited by their presence.

“You don’t know if you have any food?”

“I don’t know. I will have to ask.”

“Well, where is the owner? Could I talk to him?”

“We haven’t seen the owner in a very long time. I will see what I can find.”

“Thank you, you’ve been kind,” Neusa said, even though the girl hadn’t really been so kind.

⁵ Term of respect.

They took their bags and the cooler and walked to the cabin. Though the night sky was clouded over, moonlight glowed all around them. Neusa and Rui could see their shadowy figures walking hand in hand down the sandy path. Mário walked ahead to unlock the door.

“It’s so empty,” Neusa whispered with a shiver

The cabin was dark. Rui held out his phone for light and looked for candles in the small desk by the door. There were none. Neusa sighed and dropped onto one of the sagging beds.

“No service.” Rui looked sadly at his phone. “I’m so sorry love, this is not how I imagined the weekend would go.” he sighed.

“It’s all right. It isn’t your fault. Look, the moon came out.”

“Let’s sit outside and have a beer?” Mário suggested.

The room opened onto a narrow verandah from which they could view the small lake and the long white reflection of the moon running across the water as the clouds cleared away. They drank slowly. Rui sighed and sunk deeply into his seat.

“The lake makes me think of a story my grandmother told me, a long time ago,” Neusa said softly.

“Tell me,” he said, placing an arm around her and pressing her head against his chest.

“There was a lake near my grandmother’s house. No one would take water or fish from it, even in a long dry season. Even when everyone was hungry. The story was that long ago there had been a village there. One night a beggar came and knocked on the door of each home, asking for water. He wore rags and had sores all over his body. People were so frightened of him that no one would help him. Only one family gave him water, out of pity. Later in the night, the beggar returned to that house and warned the family that they should leave, right away. That something terrible was about to happen. So they fled. When the family returned in the morning, the entire village was under water, a lake in its place. No one will drink or fish from the lake because beneath it there is a drowned village.” Neusa shivered in his arms. Rui held her tighter. “They say the lake moves around. One day it will be in the valley, the next day up near the road.”

“That sounds like a church story, about how you should never mistreat beggars, because they might be Jesus in disguise.”

“Don’t be stupid Rui. The beggar wasn’t Jesus,” Mário laughed.

“No,” Neusa said firmly. “It is not a church story. The beggar was a water demon. No one would give him water because they knew it would make him powerful. The family was foolish. They caused their village to flood by giving the demon what he asked for.”

“Ah, grandmothers and their stories from the bush,” Mário clucked his tongue, overturning his empty beer can. A rustling at the front door startled them. Rui jumped up and Neusa clutched his arm.

“Be careful!” she said as Mário opened the door.

It was only the girl from the front office, laying a tray of food at the door. She seemed unhappy that they had seen her and she was in a hurry to leave.

“Sorry!” Rui said, “We didn’t know it was you.” The girl didn’t say anything, but slowly backed away.

“Wait!” Mário called. “Tell us about the lake. Does anyone go swimming in it? Do they fish?”

“Are there crocodiles?” Rui chuckled.

“You must ask the soba⁶ before you swim.”

“The soba? And where can we find him?”

“He lives on the other side,” she said, pointing towards the lake with her chin. She turned to go.

“Good night, rest well,” Neusa called after her. But she did not turn around and did not return the good wishes.

The next day, Rui went to pay the bill, but the girl was nowhere to be found. The lake was misting in the early morning warmth. As the fog cleared away, the blue water seemed to invite them in.

“Mário, go ask the soba if we can swim,” Rui said.

“The soba? You care what the soba says?”

“Please, Mário. Go ask him for me,” Neusa chimed.

“I don’t understand. If you want to swim, go swim. What do you think the soba will do? Chase after us with his stick?”

“He could hex us,” Neusa whispered with a smile.

“Rui, what is she talking about? We don’t believe in fetiço⁷.”

“Maybe we don’t. But I don’t want to make an old man angry when I’m swimming in his lake. Go ask him, Mário. Then come back and we can all go for a swim.”

The couple watched Mário walk down the path that wrapped around the water. When he was out of sight, they turned to each other and bolted to the bed.

At the shore there was an old wooden dock. The dry planks shifted under their feet as they walked to the end. The lake was a brilliant blue from the cabin, but from the dock the swirling water was green and milky. They pretended not to care. Neusa stood at the end of the dock, poised to dive in head first. She had been on the swim team at the Portuguese School of Luanda and took her swimming very seriously. Even in the gray light she was strikingly beautiful. She wore a white, one-piece bathing-suit that promised to be slightly transparent when wet against her dark skin. Rui wanted to capture this beauty of hers. He ran back to the cabin for his phone so that he could take a photo. Neusa did not wait for him.

“What did the old man say?” she called out to Mário before diving in.

“He wanted five hundred kwanzas⁸,” he laughed.

⁶ Traditional village leader.

⁷ Witchcraft.

⁸ Angolan currency, named for the Kwanza River.

She took a gasp of air and jumped. The green water swallowed her whole.

When Rui returned with his phone, Mário was just emerging from the water. “Rui! Rui!” he called, “She’s gone! She’s disappeared!” He had already searched under the dock, along the sandy bed. There was no rock, no object on which she could have hit her head. She had simply jumped in and never come up for air. Rui too dived in and searched for her. Then they decided to go for help.

The girl at the front desk was unmoved. “I told you to ask the soba first,” she said, lightly waving her finger at them.

“But we did!”

“No, I think that you did not. If you want that girl’s body, you must talk to the soba. Only he can make her reappear.”

“What kind of nonsense is this? Help us find her! Call the police!” She remained unmoved.

The brothers set off to find the soba. As they walked around the edge of the lake, the wind whipped the water so that it seemed to boil with devilment. And yet, they remained hopeful. Mário imagined that they might gather some of the men in the village and together they would spread a large fishing net into the water and walk into the depths. He imagined her body, twisted and wet, caught like a mermaid in the ropes. He did not imagine her alive. But Rui did.

“Mário, tell me exactly what the old man said this morning.” The wind off the water raced past them and into the village before them, lifting swirls of dust up, into the white sky.

“Rui.”

“What?”

“I did not talk to the soba this morning.”

Rui halted in his shoes. “You said what?”

“I just walked around the lake. I didn’t see him. I didn’t see anyone over here.”

Rui pulled his brother in by the chest. “You have caused this!”

“No! No, Rui! The soba cannot make her drown.”

“She knows how to swim. She is a strong swimmer.”

“He cannot make her drown.”

“You yourself said she simply disappeared.”

“And he cannot make her reappear. We do not *believe* in this.”

Rui pulled at the collar of Mário’s shirt and hit the back of his brother’s head. Tears filled his eyes.

They approached the dusty village on the other side of the lake. While they saw no one, they certainly felt eyes watching from behind rusty metal doors and between cracks in mud walls. The soba’s house was marked by the tattered flag of the Party, flying high over a thatched roof. Rui hesitantly knocked on the flimsy metal door.

The old man emerged from the hovel. He wore his military cap lightly atop his head. Two strings of white beads crisscrossed his puffy chest.

“Mais Velho, please help us. My wife has drowned in the lake. They say that only you can bring her back.”

The old man stared back at them with a vague smile and cloudy, red-rimmed eyes. For a moment Rui doubted the man spoke Portuguese and struggled to remember even a single word of Kimbundu. He thought of his grandmother’s face, mouthing words to him as a child. How he wished he had listened to her then. He couldn’t remember even the sound of her voice.

A deep laugh. “I am hungry. Didn’t you bring an old man something to eat? I would very much like a chicken.”

“A chicken?”

“Yes, bring me a chicken and we can talk about the girl.”

The brothers looked behind them at the empty village. There were no signs of life; not from people, not from chickens.

“Please, help us.”

“A very fat chicken.”

“You are hiding her!” Rui shouted. Mario pressed his hand lightly on his brother’s shoulders.

“Come, come. Let’s get the car. Let’s find some help.”

“We can’t just leave her here!”

Mário looked out onto the lake and shook his head. He did not believe the soba could help them even if he wanted to, which he clearly did not. Neusa’s body floated somewhere between the silver reflection of the clouds and a green film of algae. He worried now for his brother, who was holding too firmly onto the hope that he might again see her alive.

The brothers ran to the Rav4 on the other side of the lake. Rui drove with emotion, spraying mud in all directions, the wheels sliding down the road and into a frustrated halt before the closed gate.

“Are you leaving?” the guard asked.

“Let us out!”

“Is this about the girl?”

“Yes, my wife has gone missing. We are looking for help. Are you opening the gate or not, chefe⁹?”

“You should have talked to the soba,” he said, waving his finger as they drove away.

The road was empty. They saw no other cars, no villages, no animals. They had never seen their country so desolate, so void of people or even signs of people. Not a beer can on the ground. The clouds thickened and the red sun followed them, whichever direction the road turned.

“Mário look - chicken!”

“What about it?”

“The soba wanted a chicken,” Rui stopped the car. “Mário, get out.”

“No.”

“Get out. We need that chicken.”

⁹ Boss, informal term of respect.

“I thought we were looking for the police.”

“Get that damned chicken or I will leave you here in the middle of the bush.”

Mário chased the scrawny, white chicken around the vehicle a few times, a performance of futility, even when he had the creature trapped in his hands.

At last they came upon a checkpoint. The police would not listen to their story until they had printed and signed their names in the crumbling register book. They each noticed that the last traveler before them had passed through many years before.

“My wife, rather, my girlfriend, Neusa, she has gone missing, at the lake, by the lodge.”

“What lodge?”

“The lodge, up the road. The one with the sign that says it’s open, when it really isn’t. Please come! Just follow us, we will show you. The soba says he knows where she is, but he won’t help us,” Rui began to sob. “Until we bring him a chicken.”

“The soba, em? He took your girlfriend? You believe he is bewitching her?” The one officer looked at the other, and they both had a laugh. Rui’s sobs grew quiet, but his body continued to shake. Mário stepped forward.

“It’s not so funny. What my brother means to say is that she has drowned in the lake, and no one at the lodge or in the village will help us find her body. Could you come help us look?”

“And how do you know she has drowned?”

“She dove into the water and she never came up.”

“And where were you when this happened?” The officers looked towards Rui.

“I was in the cabin. I was getting my phone, I wanted to take a picture of her.”

They looked back towards Mário, “So, you were the last to see this girl alive?”

“Yes.”

“And you say she just dove into the water,” the thinner one made a diving motion with his left hand, “And never surfaced?” He did not bring the hand back up.

“Yes.”

“And you expect that we will believe you?”

“What?”

“Why should we believe what you say, when no one else has seen it?”

“Why would I lie?” Mário protested.

“Perhaps you were in love with this girl. Perhaps you were jealous and in a fit of passion.”

“No,” said Rui. “She disappeared because he refused to ask the soba for permission to swim in the lake.”

Both officers opened their mouths and sighed, “Ah.”

“So either way, it is this one’s fault,” the fatter one said.

“Yes, but which is it,” the thinner one asked. “Did you kill her with your own hands or did you kill her by letting the soba bewitch her?”

“We don’t believe in witchcraft,” Mário said feebly. “Our parents taught us not to believe in these things. I didn’t ask the soba because I didn’t believe it mattered and I didn’t want to walk all the way to the village.”

“So you killed her because you were too lazy to walk all the way to the village!”

“I never wanted this to happen. I *loved* Neusa,”

“You see! The brother loved her too! This was an act of jealousy,” the police laughed.

Rui, who had continued his trembling, again took Mário by the collar of his shirt and struck him several times in the head. The blows were muffled and quiet and were somehow more terrible because they made no sound.

The policemen separated the brothers. “Yes, young man, your brother has done this. But how? Perhaps we should go speak to the soba and ask him if he bewitched the girl or if your brother acted alone.”

Mário began to shout in his own defense as the two men encircled him. They placed a pair of rusty handcuffs around his wrists and led him outside. They all piled into the Rav4 and headed back towards the lodge, the lake, the village.

The soba was pleased to have a little crowd around his home. He looked on at the pair of brothers and the pair of policemen with amusement, as if he were watching a scene that he himself had composed.

“Where is my chicken?”

Rui held up the white chicken, which had sadly suffocated in the back seat. The soba clucked his tongue and sucked his teeth, but took the chicken from him anyway. The policemen and the soba held a conversation in Kimbundu, which Rui and Mário could not follow. Again, Rui saw his shriveled grandmother, leaning into him as she waved her finger at him and scolded him in a muted tongue.

“The old man says to leave your brother here with him and you will find the girl.”

“Leave him?” Rui looked over at his handcuffed brother. It seemed only fair. A body for a body. And Mário had betrayed him, only he couldn’t figure out just how.

“Leave him here with us. Go on, young man. You will find her, right where you left her.”

“Rui, don’t leave me here,” Mário wept softly. But he knew by his brother’s face that he was already forgotten. The air between them sliced in two. Mário watched his brother walk away, towards the lake, as if he were on a screen. With each step Rui took, the distance he put between himself and his brother grew exponentially wider so that with but a few quick strides he was already at the lakeside. Mário made a move to follow him, but the two policemen held him back, lightly pressing his shoulders.

“Calma,¹⁰” the soba said. “Where that one is going, you cannot follow.”

Rui walked over the rotting planks of the dock. The gray sky cast whiteness across the green water, so thick he could not believe that they had ever wanted to swim in it. He walked to the very edge and leaned over the water. He thought, at first, that it was his own face reflected on the surface. But the eyes were closed and beautiful and not his own.

¹⁰ Calm down.