

# THE REAL LIFE OF DOMINGOS XAVIER

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*A novel of Angola*

### CHAPTER 8

The late afternoon of that Saturday was marked by an incident which had occurred so often as to become commonplace for the inhabitants of that township around the Post prison and the other one, with its high walls, of the new police. It was not the first or the second time that a woman, or man, came out weeping loudly or in silent grief. And, without further explanation, the great iron-clad door slammed in the face of the unhappy person who came out to lament sorrow or anger through the townships.

From the time when in the morning the prisoner, the tall, thin one, had arrived, Grandad Petelo had instructed his grandson: "You keep a look out, child. You play all the time near the prison, we need to know what happens."

And each morning he reminded young Zito of his daily task. The child went out, *with catapult round his neck, and he and the other children played in that locality at cowboys and indians or at close-fought games of rag football. Sometimes*

they moved away a little to the shade of the trees on the big unmade-up road, and for a few minutes were lost in fantasy as they played 'Bags I'; each child claiming for himself before the others the passing cars they spotted. But it was in playing marbles, in the shade of the cashew tree, that the afternoons were passed. And with fights over the cheats whose marbles were put in the 'trap' and the players who would not agree and ran off. Zito was an expert at marbles and it was difficult to escape his 'slaughter'.

So they were playing that quiet Saturday afternoon when the silence is at its greatest in the township. Many people did not have to work in the afternoon; some were sleeping and others went to the kiosks to talk quietly of life and its difficulties. As the wine was well watered, it would only be much later towards night that some would try to get up and talk foolishly. Soft-hearted mothers were pressing trousers for their sons, because, after all, Saturday is dance night. And as

soon as the bad times hit the townships, there would always be a dance in some spot, any excuse would do, as life will always triumph over death.

Young Zito, watched by Jacky and Kamabuindo, very deliberately was steering Toneco's marble towards the 'trap'. It was bad luck for Toneco because he had already gained three hand-spans, was on the way to a 'slaughter' and was already very close to the first hole. But Zito was pitiless. He meticulously measured out three hand-spans, tensed his middle finger and zap! One more shot would carry the little round marble into the perilous hole. But at that precise moment a woman with a baby in her arms appeared and came slowly towards them. Zito stopped his movement and watched inquisitively. The women did not come at that time of day, but only on Sunday mornings when visits were sometimes permitted. The woman went by without stopping and went to the big door where she rang the bell. It was Maria, with her baby Basty, who had come to look for Domingos.

After leaving the police station and after the big storm, Maria wanted to spend a day in the house. Her mind was full of confusion and her hopes had fled. Mama Terry could make little headway against her friend's tears and words of despair. But she did not give up; the people's friendship is like that. She let the girl rest for a day, because sleep always does you good. Next day, very early, she sent her own children out very early to allow her friend to spend all morning playing baby Basty. So it happened. And as Saturday was a beautiful day, with a clear sky and a brilliant sun bathing the little huts spread through the townships, Maria was diverted by her friend's chatter as she went about the household chores. A feel-

ing of hope began to build up again. At three in the afternoon Mr Cardoso arrived and, as he was not working that afternoon, he sat down to play with baby Basty and to say to his friend:

"Just listen, Maria! You can't give up and don't look for your husband, this is just what the police want — for no one to bother them. But if you keep going there with the baby, they'll have to give you an answer ..."

Maria agreed, but when she thought of her *companheiro* and the time for which she had not seen him, and of the story told by the *cipao* at the Administration in the town, the hope instilled by her friends' confidence slipped away again. But Mr Cardoso did not give up: he talked on, played with baby Basty, changed the topic of conversation, and by five o'clock Maria put on clean cloths, picked up the baby and, as she already knew the way, she did what her friends were advising. She made her way to the prison of the new police, which was, as the police station had told her, next door to the townships' Post.

Afternoon was ending quietly, the wind was rustling in the fig tree leaves and in the cassava plants. Children were playing games on the red earth and the older people were just looking on, mothers and daughters were washing or ironing, fathers were leaning on the walls and engaging in meditative talk about life. This late Saturday afternoon peace even reached Maria, who was talking to baby Basty until she saw the children playing in front of the prison walls.

When young Zito saw the woman ring the bell, he muffed the third flick which was going to put Toneco's marble in the 'trap'. The other child jumped up, shouting with joy, and began his turn:

"Now you'll see Zito! I'm going to make a 'slaughter' and clean you out!"

"It wasn't worth taking a rest!" commented Kamabuindo.

But Zito went on staring at the woman and did not answer. The door opened after an exchange of words inside with the *cipaio* who had peered out, and Maria, with Basty in her arms, went through the gate and entered. Then Zito grabbed his marble and ran to his grandfather's hut. While the child ran off into the township, Toneco, Jacky and Kamabuindo were hurling insults:

"Cowardly! Running when you're beaten. Cheat!"

But the child heard none of what the friends were saying. He raced like the wind to the little hut where Grandad, smoking his pipe as usual, was seated at the doorway to catch the last rays of afternoon sun.

"Grandad, come quickly! There's a woman with a baby! She went in, into the prison."

Blinking his tired eyes, Grandad Petelo stook up and, letting his grandson lead him, went through the houses. He put away his pipe and was bombarding the child with questions. But Zito had not seen the woman clearly, although he would swear she was carrying a baby bundled up. As for the rest, her face, he had not seen, he had been distracted by the marbles.

"So, child! I tell you to keep watch ..."

"Eh! So didn't I? I'm telling you, Grandad, wait until she comes out."

"And suppose she doesn't come out?"

Zito was still arguing with his grandfather when they reached the open space in front of the huts, then Zito met the insults of his friends who had already given

up the fame:

"Cowardly, cowardly custard!"

"Aren't you ashamed! When you're winning, you stay. When you're losing, you split. If I get hold of you I'll smash you ..."

The child bent down quickly and skimmed a stone at them. Toneco, Jacky and Kamabuindo scampered across the rubbish filled grass and should back in mocking tones:

"Old one-bum! One-bu-u-u-um!"

Old Petelo in an obscene gesture stretched out his middle finger and shouted as loud as he could:

"Your mothers', your mothers'!"

When the children had vanished in the direction of Bairro Indigena, Zito sat his grandfather on a rock and stayed making drawings in the dust, while the old man, taking his inseparable pipe from his pocket, directed his feeble gaze towards the prison gate.

They had not long to wait. The sun moved a little in the organe sky by the sea and the wind began to blow more strongly, warning of the night which was approaching at its gentle pace. Suddenly the prison door opened and Maria came out crying, her baby Basty was still in her arms but her cloths were loose and dragging on the ground. She yelled so that all the township could hear and with hands to her hear she sobbed. Baby Basty, frightened by Maria's tears falling down on his face, added his childish wailing. Maria groaned and wept, letting the wind lift her loose cloths. Then she knelt down beating the red sand with her fists and letting her tears fall there, while baby Basty, suddenly let loose from the cloth, rolled on the ground, crying more loudly all the time. Mothers and children, many of the people, began to appear behind the

huts, some just looking on in fright, others already running towards the unfortunate woman. Maria yelled tearfully:

"Oooch, ooh, my husband! Ooh, they've killed him, I'm certain. Ooh, ooh, I want to die! I want to die too. They've killed him, I know! ."

Beating her head on the ground, she stayed weeping and saying these words over and over again. Zito was in the midst of the people who surrounded the woman and helped her to stand up, all stained with sand. A little girl picked up baby Basty and wiped the baby's face with the corner of her cloth. Everyone tried to soothe the grief of the unknown woman, whose sad suffering was so plain to see. But Maria, her eyes staring, gazed and saw no one. So many people, friendly hands holding her, voices in her ears, but her grief was greater than anyone could know. Ooh, her husband, her *companheiro*, Domingos Xavier, so fond of baby Basty. No one like him, no one! They had killed him, she was certain, her heart told her.

"But, *mana*, how have they killed him? How do you know? He could still be alive ..."

"Oooh! They told me he went to Port Alexander, but I don't believe it. The *cipaio* didn't want to say anything, even he was ashamed. I know, my heart tells me. They've killed him."

And she wept and cried out. The friendly voices of the old women were saying that Port Alexander was far away, but was better than the prison, with luck she could even manage to go there, to see her husband. Some smiles appeared in the hope of drawing a smile from Maria.

"Leave off, *mana*, leave off. You'll see your husband."

"Impossible! Ooh, they've killed him, I know! Or why didn't the *cipaio* want to speak to me? I saw it in his eyes, they've killed my husband! "

Many voices fell silent, as judgement was suspended, and only the mothers' went on insisting. They brushed down her cloths, helped her tie her baby on her back, and stayed talking sadly about the sister who had come out on to the sand to sob and grieve for her husband, her *companheiro*. Old Petelo, from conversation with the women who had spoken to the poor woman, learned the name of the young prisoner who had arrived in the blue truck, and did not need anything else to understand. The prisoner, the tall, thin man who had arrived the other morning, tied by his feet, hands and neck, had died. They had killed him!

He took Zito's hand and whispered some words in his ears. The women slowly dispersed, talking and grieving for the other woman — these times today; no one knows when they will come and take him. Night fell swiftly over the city, and Grandad Petelo with Zito hurried across the broad, colourless expanse of sand to Prenda, a township far away on the other side of the city perched above Maianga — Prenda showed the lights of its lamps shining through the electric light in the whites' houses, which threateningly on all sides are climbing the hill where the township resists.

To Be Continued in the Next Issue.