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Sunset

The newspapers were heaped up on a low bench, the kind pupils use in the private classes of eccentric schoolmarms. Damata sat reading placidly and without haste. Engrossed in the news, he didn't notice the maids singing in the kitchen or the kids playing noisy games of hide-and-seek. Each time he sat forward to grab another paper his deck chair groaned like ship's rigging. The noise was driving him mad. He was sick of telling Bia to get it seen to and she just retorting: "Man, that chair's fine, Damata." Such pig-headedness! They'd lived together for years, had a few kids – yet that stubborn way of hers was still an obstacle to their getting properly married. All the same, no good house in Mindelo closed its doors to her, for Nhô Damata was an upstanding man and had recognised their children.

From his waistcoat pocket he removed a silver-edged snuffbox. With a sharp tap, he knocked the contents forward before taking a pinch between thumb and forefinger.

Good stuff this. He took his snort and felt the pungency of ground toasted tobacco warm his nostrils. Stretching out in his chair, he settled down to enjoy the afternoon.

He took another pinch and held the newsprint up again by the top corner. Papers from the metropole. Fresh news he consumed with all the avid interest of someone far removed from events.

A gust of air rustled the pages, leaving them exactly as they were before.

He retrieved a fallen page before a new draught made him look up and over towards the door.

At that moment, Bia stuck her head in, glancing round before finally entering. "Ah, there you are, Damata. Good, good. You know what? Just as I was leaving church, I saw people running down Rua da Estação," she said, leaning back against the sewing machine table. "I was pretty surprised because…"

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“You went to church, Bia?” her man cut in, peering at her over his glasses, the paper forgotten on his lap.

“Pff, Damata. I said I’d go to the litany,” she replied with a frown.

“Sit down, Bia. You look tired. What’s up with that sewing machine?” Now he was looking at the machine’s unlocked crank handle.

“Guida the ironing lady was passing, so I asked if there was news. No, there’s nothing wrong. It’s just unlocked.” She clicked the handle back in. “She laughed and said, ‘Didn’t you know Cadinho and Senhor Muntel have just got back?’”

She bent over his stool and grabbed a paper to fan herself with.

“What’s that? They’ve been released?” Her man almost jumped out of his chair, which moaned in pain. “Dammit, we’ve got to get Nhô Cirilo to fix this bloody creaking. It’s doing my head in, Bia.”

“By Rua da Estação I heard fireworks, one after the other. Seemed to be coming from over by Candinho’s.”

Damata forgot all about his squeaky chair and quizzed his wife, “Who said they’ve come ashore?” He held her gaze and insisted. “But are you positive they’ve been released, Bia? Ah, I’ve got to go and welcome Candinho back.”

He got up and grabbed his coat, which hung from the side of his chair.

“As if I’d make something like that up. Huh? Off already Damata? What about supper?” she went on a moment later, seeing him put on his hat.

Her man finished buttoning his jacket and pulled the hippo-hide whip down from the coat stand.

“Damata, you’d better have your broth before you leave. You know how those things are. There’s always greetings and speeches and what not first. No, I’m going to call Adelaide to fetch that cachupa broth.” She moved to the door and yelled for her.

“Don’t be silly, Bia. I’ll be back in no time. I just want to welcome Candinho home.”

She was still yelling as Damata slunk away down the back corridor, went out into the garden, crossed through into the street. He slammed the gate behind him. The latch fell neatly into its

curved metal slot. Pigeons fluttered down from the wall above his head and hopped about in the street, which was deserted at that time of the afternoon.

Two lads sauntered past, shirt collars unbuttoned, and joked, “Chicken soup on the menu soon, Nhô Damata.”

Off he moved along the street. Stopping at the corner, he looked up past the low, yellow-painted houses. His gaze was fixed on a chocolate-brown second floor as he rounded another corner, twirling his whip in a characteristic gesture.

Nhô Lelona’s rackety blue car came lurching along the street on its way from Pé da Rocha. Spluttering angrily, it finally rattled to a brash halt up ahead. Nhô Lelona turned in his seat and waved Damata over.

“No so fast, man,” his hand raised, Damata tried to hurry. “I’ve got such a callus on my big toe I can barely take two steps.”

He leant in over the car door. “You off to see Candinho? I only just got the news now, from Bia, when she got home from church.”

“Of course I am, man. Came ashore about four o’clock I heard. Must have a full house by now. Jump in, we can still make it.”

The car shuddered, before jolting off with a few backfires, leaving behind an acrid cloud of smoke. Damata held onto his hat. Nhô Lelona kept the soft top down all year round. As wind whipped through his thinning hair, he had to shout over the deafening engine to make himself heard. “Can’t think why Chinhabonga had them released. First he dispatches a telegram ordering their arrest, packs them off quick smart, and then, just like that, sends them home again without a trial or anything. Doesn’t make a blind bit of sense to me, I swear. They hid those sacks of corn and everyone knows it!”

“Are you so sure?” Damata objected.

“Look, I’ve no idea, man. The day Sergeant Silva went to fetch them, happened I was at the door enjoying the fresh morning when they were taken to the docks. Senhor Muntel even waved to me, but Candinho,” and here Nhô Lelona stabbed a finger in the air, “must have had something on his

conscience. His eyes were glued to his feet, his back all hunched over. Boy, you can't imagine how guilty he looked."

"Well, Senhor Muntel is a Jew. Enough said. Wouldn't know shame if it bit him. Brass-necked and then some. But what the hell is it with this road? Bumping along like this plays havoc with my kidneys, Lelona."

"Just the other day I was talking to the mayor about exactly that. Instead of splashing out for a shark net in Matiota, it'd make more sense fixing up these streets. That's exactly what I told him."

The car jounced noisily across Rua de Lisboa.

"We've got good stone to pave with, Lelona," yelled his friend over the roar of the engine.

"And to break the mayor's head with. Not to mention those of all his yes-men, Julinho, João Silva and the rest of the gang."

"By the way, Julinho's been named administrator in Boa Vista. Had you heard? Jesus, Lelona, your car's really got ants in its pants."

"I had. Now, Nha Hortênsia's the one with a good quarry. Work with her stone's built to last. A stick of dynamite, a fuse and you're onto a winner. Just picture it! Roads fit for a king!"

"They say she's sold up to Senhor Muntel."

"Could be. Those Jews certainly have a nose for business. Well, he'll have a bit more sense in his head now. Dr Moreira told me all about it. Chinhabonga put the squeeze on them. Boy, a fine thing it was. Off to the henhouse for eight days in the end." Nhô Lalona let slip a knowing smile, eyes little more than slits, crow's feet at the corners. "It was just to show them who's boss. Chinhabonga doesn't give a damn about the rest of it."

A thick stream of exhaust belched from the old Ford onto the road. It dispersed as they climbed towards the Pelourinho, leaving behind them an unmistakable stench of burnt fuel.

"Know what, Lelona, if they did hide that corn, it was a bad business, no argument there." Damata raised an eyebrow, forehead a musical stave. "But giving decent folk like Candinho and Senhor Muntel a hard time seems disrespectful. Hell, if we keep on like that, who knows where we'll end up?"

The car stopped with a jolt and Lelona cursed out loud.

“Such language, boy! Been taking lessons from the young’uns or what?” his friend reproached him.

They ambled across the road and made their way up to the yellow building where Candinho lived.

There was an uncommon bustle out front. News of Candinho’s low-key arrival had spread like wildfire through the town. Some lyceum students were hanging around rather shyly. No surprise there, Nhô Candinho was old enough to be their father. But they girded their loins to enter and fell in behind Nhô Damata and Nhô Lelona.

The top of the stairs opened out onto a wide veranda where Candinho was receiving his friends, who took turns to embrace him and clap him enthusiastically on the back. They were dotted about the space higgledy-piggledy, some leaning against the balustrade while others sprawled contentedly in wicker chairs. Periodically, Candinho would move between them, fulfilling his duties as host, false teeth bobbing up and down as he made conversation. The occasional question cropped up, to which Candinho picked his answers with great relish. “What? Me with a pickaxe? Never!” He puffed himself out with the force of his rebuttal.

“What really got me,” he went on a moment later, “was having khaki boilersuits with numbers on the back, as if we were common criminals. Have you ever heard the like?”

He laid the details on thick, adding little touches, omitting other things too.

“But I pulled one over on them.” His teeth rose and fell. “The next day I wore mine inside out!”

The group laughed. Senhor Siqueira, a businessman like Candinho, was bouncing his leg as a nervous tic. Days before, he had been left shaken when news of his friend’s arrest had reached his shop. By the time he discovered what had happened, the prison tug had already crossed the bar and was chugging leeward to the southern islands. He thought about heading to the docks all the same, before deciding against it and returning flushed to his shop. Rushing back and forth with his two assistants, he placed all the sacks of corn and dried beans in clear sight. He positioned them next to the sugar bag, rolling down the openings until they gaped wide and sticking a wooden litre measure in one. That done, he set off, fearful and on edge, to find out more. At the corner of Marçal’s, he found a group gathered by the lamppost. Not that they could tell him much. They all

seemed blocked up somehow and afraid to discuss matters. He walked off down the road, hands in pockets, brooding, and found himself on the esplanade, right by the pedestal where the aviator Gago Coutinho's eagle was perched. He leant over the parapet. Two women and a boy were panning for coal. The sea broke on the small beach in low, playful waves. The figures slid their wicker baskets into the water side down, with the rim facing landwards, and waited. The waves swished over them, dissolved up ahead, drew back as a flat sheet of water, leaving half a dozen lumps of coal in the baskets. The boy took one of them, ran and tipped it into a bag in one corner of the beach, by the parapet, where their catch was left to dry. One of the women did likewise with the other. The pair then laid the baskets back in position for the waves, and with them, for the coal that fell from the company wharf.

Senhor Sequeira rested his eyes on the feet of the two women, all wrinkled from being so long in the water. He might find himself in some very serious shtook. If they happen to mention my name, I could really be for it. He tossed his cigarette away in annoyance. The boy tore over and snatched up the butt, which he quickly extinguished and stowed in the pocket of his shorts. The sun with its ruddy halo was sinking between Monte da Cara and the tip of Santo Antão Island, into the calm waters at the horizon. And there Senhor Sequeira remained, leaning on the parapet of the esplanade, filling his lungs with sea air.

Now though, back leant against a pillar on Candinho's veranda, he was chatting calmly with Nhô Adalberto from Customs, undisturbed by scruples. Snatches of conversation floated out from the house.

"Let's see if we can find a stiff drink inside somewhere."

He took Nhô Adalberto by the arm and guided him into the dining room.

The group around Candinho still babbled excitedly, swapping impressions of the great event. Ramrod straight, chin down, Damata stroked his moustache. His other hand behind his back clutched his hippo-hide whip, that faithful companion he had brought back from his travels in the South as a government official. At one point, he addressed his friend with a note of censure, "Why did you two hide those sacks when you knew how scarce supplies were out here?"

Caught off guard, Candinho practically bellowed, “That’s a dirty lie! Not even Chinhabonga believed that nonsense. It was all cooked up by that scheming rat Julinho.”

He glanced round at the circle of feet about him, took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

“Go about ranting like that and you’ll find yourself in the slammer again one of these days,” snarled Fanha.

Candinho ignored the interruption and went on, “You lot can’t guess why he did it, can you?”

He paused before continuing. Lelona came out, still buttoning his trousers, and joined the group.

Candinho felt rage rise in his throat. “He wants to get ahead at others’ expense. It was just a way to lick Chinhabonga’s boots.”

He took two agitated steps across the veranda. Turning suddenly to Damata, he placed a hand on his shoulder. “Listen, Damata, do you think I’d really hide food and leave our people with empty bellies? Do you? You know the answer, Damata, and you can’t deny it. I pay better than others do when there are goods to unload and I, and I, yes, and I” – his voice redoubled in strength – “give alms every Saturday to more than thirty paupers.”

He glared round at them all, searched again for his handkerchief and wiped his clammy forehead.

Carrying a tray filled with glasses, a maid weaved her way across the veranda. She stepped into the dining-room.

“Anyway, let’s have something to drink,” Candinho said.

His duties as a host dampened in him, for a moment, the ardour of the quarrel.

He led his friends into the large dining room. A buffet of salty snacks and finger food lay waiting. Nha Rosa had just set a tureen down in the middle of the table – chicken soup probably – and the delicious aroma invited them to yank off its lid.

Candinho returned to the veranda and peeked out. Leaning on the balustrade, chin cupped in hands, that was how Damata was when he found him.

He walked over, slipped an arm round Damata’s shoulder, and unburdened himself before he had

time to regret it, “Listen, if I weren’t your friend and you mine, just now, when you said what you did… I almost felt like giving you a couple of hard slaps.”

Damata shrugged his arm away. “Come off it, Candinho!”

“Yes sirree, two good slaps. Just who do you take me for, eh?”

His pale eyes regarded Damata half in anger. The latter, vexed by the awkwardness of the situation, retorted, “Leave it out, Candinho. I don’t play games. If I asked why you hid that food it was because I wanted to know why you did it. That’s all!”

Candinho was beside himself. He saw nothing before him but a red mist that seemed to come from nowhere. “I’ve told you already. I didn’t hide anything. I told you that.”

In exasperation, yes sirree, he raised clenched fists. His lower lip trembled for a moment, spittle wetting its entire surface. He wiped his mouth with the back of one still-bunched hand. One last, uncertain dribble of saliva trickled down his shapeless chin.

“If I get hold of that rat Julinho,” he blustered. “I’ll throttle him, I swear. That dirty rat! All this just to get himself made administrator. I’ll throttle him. I’ll throttle the swine.”

“Hey Candinho, what’s all this?” His friends had come back out onto the balcony and were trying to calm him down. He was a hot head, they all knew it, but his anger blew over just as quickly as it came.

“Nothing, nothing. Damata just thinks he’s being clever.” He turned to his friend. “You always were a pain in the backside, do you know that?”

“On a day like today! I ask you!”

“Lads, lads, what’s got into you both?”

“Hey Candinho, did you get subversive ideas in the henhouse? Looks like we’ll have to send you back!” joked Senhor Sequeira.

“Heaven forbid! He’d come home all brainwashed and then, and then! A fine mess! Our Candinho leading the revolution! A fine mess!” he winked and chortled along with the others.

“So let him. Put an end to this misery. An end to shameless traders stashing corn away each time there’s a dry spell,” growled Fanha in his rough voice, half lit by two sly grogs sunk at Nininha’s bar most likely.

Fanha made this aside to those closest to him. All the same, his drawling voice escaped the group and reached the far end of the veranda.

Candinho’s friends took him through to the parlour where the students were crowding about Senhor Muntel. He had also joined the festivities. A man with no family, alone in the world, well, he had to celebrate his freedom somewhere, didn’t he? Quite right, he was in coming over to Nhô Candinho’s, yes sirree. Who knew when his family would arrive from Germany? Senhor Muntel was quite right to come over, of course. Hey, Senhor Muntel, which one’s better, the concentration camp or the henhouse? Those boys were such scallywags!

“It vass horrible, lads, it vass horrible,” was all he replied. The words came out sluggishly, but the students egged him on. They wanted to know everything. How had they been treated, had Chinhabonga given them any explanation, in short, a hail of questions.

The room filled with the men’s voices. Fanha edged over to the box of bottles sunk in ice and sawdust in a corner of the room.

Senhor Muntel wiped his spectacles. His attentive, mole-like eyes followed the loops his hand described on the lenses, which he had clasped in his hankie, between thumb and forefinger.

Out in the street, the lights came on. Through the windows seeped a dull glow from lamps that barely illuminated the city. Candinho twisted a switch and brightness swallowed the shadows in the corners of the room. Fanha stood holding a bottle aloft. He’d removed the cork with expert skill. Champagne foamed in glasses, other corks popped, and the party got going once more.

The students, out of place among those older people, considered leaving. Senhor Muntel hadn’t told them anything in the end really. A poor wretch was all he was. A real clodhopper!

The old Jew was just then saying to them, “For me it vass all a joke. My vife when she arrrifes from Germany vill haff a good laugh.”

Fanha drew near. “Your wife will laugh like a dog, won’t she, Senhor Muntel?”

The Jew barely understood the creole used by Fanha, who had already turned to the lads. “What’s this, lads? Not drinking? Bring glasses for these lyceum boys, for our future scholars and poets.”

Champagne from ceremoniously uncorked bottles splashed down onto the oilcloth.

Candinho filled his friends’ glasses. Senhor Adalberto leant against the silver cabinet savouring a glass of grog. Senhor Sequeira turned to him and remarked, “Have you heard? Julinho’s been made administrator for the district of Boa Vista.”

“Enough with that sort of talk. You’ll ruin Candinho’s party for him,” quipped Senhor Adalberto, showing a mouthful of overcrowded teeth. He downed the rest of his drink before continuing. “This grog must be from Candinho’s estate. His father owned some good irrigated land over in Santo Antão. Christ, just look at the face on Fanha!”

Fanha was a pleb, a pickpocket, a runner of contraband and a first-class drunkard. But he was allowed along to their get-togethers. Such occasions needed no invite and Fanha didn’t miss a single one. When Silva had returned from Lisbon after graduating, there he’d been too. No one batted an eyelid at the brazen presence of this serial deportee to Sal Island.

“He’s a chronic case now. Gets going first thing he leaves the house in the morning. He lives over in Lombo-de-Trás. He flaunts it, he does. In and out of every bar until he gets home.”

Adalberto cleared his throat noisily.

“Candinho’s got to be careful running grog now. He’s got to be absolutely on the ball, otherwise… Oh boy, what about that tantrum on the balcony, eh?”

“Who, Candinho?” asked Senhor Sequeira.

“Who else?”

Adalberto and Sequeira glanced at one another and burst out laughing.

“Dipstick,” Senhor Sequeira concluded.

There was a lazy pause in the flow of conversation, which Senhor Adalberto used to reach over and take down a bottle from beside the dresser mirror. He filled his glass carefully. The clear liquid vanished in a single glug and he helped himself again.

“Lelona just told me Nha Hortênsia sold her quarry to Senhor Muntel. She must be in a real jam to do something so foolish.”

“Cunning devils, those Jews.”

Senhor Sequeira brooded enviously on a good business opportunity missed. “It’s true, quarries don’t need rain to flourish.” He fell silent and the lull was interrupted by the guttural shouting of Fanha, het up by drink and the stuffy night. “Here we were feeling sorry for the widow, not wanting to filch her livelihood, ruin her life, only for some beaky Jew to come sniffing round…”

“Listen,” said Nhô Adalberto, cutting in, “has Damata left?”

“Must have, he’s not here.”

He glanced round the room. There was Fanha, dark as temptation, standing on a chair. He was making yelping noises with his arms outstretched, a bottle clutched in one hand, a glass in the other. As he wobbled precariously, the tilted vessel splashed its contents every which way.

Senhor Sequeira decided to get his hat and leave. He was stealing through the welter of voices when Fanha gleefully tipped some drink onto Sequeira’s bald patch.

“Stop that, you idiot.” The old trader stopped and raised a splayed hand to his head.

Up on the chair, Fanha laughed and laughed. “Idiot, eh?”

Still grinning, minded to repeat his trick, Fanha aimed the bottle neck-first at Sequeira’s head. “You’ve probably got corn hidden too,” he concluded, suddenly grim-faced and spoiling for a fight.

Someone tugged at the trader’s sleeve. He allowed himself to be led away as he dabbed at his head and face.

“That Fanha is unbearable when he drinks.”

“He always gets that way when he’s sozzled, it’s true. After a few too many no one can stand him.”

“Haven’t seen him stinko for ages.”

“He can be a pain in the neck at times. When he gets started on someone he just can’t leave off.”

The voices mingled, rose up, and were finally left muffled behind Candinho, Nhô Adalberto and Senhor Sequeira

“Makes no odds,” Senhor Sequeira said, rubbing at the drops of wine that had splashed his white linen suit. “Everyone knows what a lout he is.”

He stopped by the coat rack and donned his hat.

“Candinho, hey, Candinho,” Nhô Adalberto gripped him by the arm. “I think Damata’s left.”

Senhor Sequeira had reached the end of the corridor already but still heard Candinho’s reaction, “Damata? But why?”

Two deep lines sank from the bottom of his nose to his chin. But Candinho’s face was still youthful and well preserved for a man of his mature years.

He wiped his forehead, passing one hand up over his hair down to his sweaty nape.

“But why?” he repeated. “Did someone upset him?”

The whole front room was chattering about how Damata had left after being insulted by Candinho.

Quite pie-eyed now, Fanha piped up inopportunely, “Let’s go find Nhô Damata!”

Nobody moved. Their enthusiasm had fizzled out. With hesitant little steps, like Charlie Chaplin, Senhor Muntel went back and forth waving good-bye with his chubby hands. Fanha followed behind imitating him, exaggerating his waddle and flapping his arms like wings, “Quack, quack, quack!”

Everyone was in stitches. He looked just like a clown. Feeling everyone’s eyes on him, however, he capped off his antics with an ugly, vile gesture behind the Jew’s back.

“He’s an insolent so-and-so. Lucky no one takes him seriously.”

Leaning back against the door, Lelona blew his nose and chuckled.

Fanha turned on his heel, pricked by a sudden idea, and went back to the dining room.

Gradually the friends were taking their leave. The torpor of the night had got to them and they were drifting off because it was getting late after all. Senhor Adalberto was hunting around for his cane.

In the dining room doorway, he bumped into Fanha. Unable to hold back, he grabbed him by the arm, an old habit.

“Hey, when will you grow up, boy? You almost bowled me over there.”

With his white, neatly aligned teeth, one arm slung over the old man’s shoulders, Fanha gave a hic and spluttered, “I’m slipping off that way.” And he looked at the stairs. He raised his chin, pursed his lips, and jabbed a finger at Candinho, “Up the creek without a paddle, that one.”

Candinho was up the creek indeed. His coat thrown where it lay, he rolled his sleeves back, lost in thought. He then chose a chair and slumped down, disillusioned. The party had done nothing to relieve the indignity of his arrest. A man of standing in local society, why on earth did Chinhabonga play him such a dirty trick? Why, I ask you? In lean years traders have always hidden corn.

His eyes wandered over the glasses littering the tables and he stroked his chin. Down in the garden, the dog tugged at its chain and yelped. The wind kicked up and swept unbridled into the darkness.

With a shiver, he slipped his coat on and leant over the veranda railing.

The dog’s bark rang out once more in the cool of the night.

Translator’s Note

A difficulty of “Sunset” is the complex interplay between Portuguese and Cape Verdean creole. Given the lack of a fitting second code and the plethora of oblique references, I have adopted a domesticating approach that allows an unfamiliar reader to engage with the intricacies of the story. Amarílis’s portrait of mid 20th century Cape Verde at first frames this Portuguese colony as a backwater, far removed from major world issues. Yet as “Sunset” develops an enmeshment in epoch-defining questions of colonialism, racism and class division emerges. We glimpse the ambiguity of the Cape Verdean mixed-race elite, visible in the contrast between protagonist Damata’s hippopotamus-hide whip (a normally classic symbol of colonial injustice) and the subjection of his class to the whims of Chinhabonga (nickname of the then Portuguese governor Gomes de Figueiredo). Even the mounting tragedy of Nazi Germany makes itself felt through the German-Jewish Muntel and the wife who – we intuit – might never join him. Here antisemitism in a

territory which had seen Jewish settlement since the sixteenth century is carefully depicted as manifesting structural frustrations at a personal level. Shot through with local divisions representative of wider phenomena, “Sunset” is not an outlier in world literature but a powerful depiction of global divisions we are still working through.

I wish to thank Ana Josefa Cardoso for all her kind help puzzling out the linguistic and cultural complexities of Amarílis’s story.



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