

## “The Role of My Boots in the Angolan Revolution”

Mate Dolenc

Translated<sup>1</sup> by John K. Cox

We were docked at the pier in Luanda and our job was unloading general freight for the Angolan revolutionary economy. Every day we were frying in the sun and in the tedium of work on the ship, and this was completely understandable, since we were in Africa, ten degrees below the equator, and I was performing the work of an engine-greaser, which means that for every eight hours of my free time, I had to spend

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<sup>1</sup> “Vloga mojih škornjev v Angolski revoljuciji,” *Vloga mojih škornjev v Angolski revoljuciji* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 1985) 84–109. Readers might notice that the English of this translation is often not smooth or lyrical. The story has irregular rhythms and tends to repeat vocabulary. In part, the translator believes that Dolenc’s Slovene style, preserved here in English, is an attempt to capture stream of consciousness or the breathless reporting of an observer in a new locale or engaged in an exasperating task. Careful attention has been paid to readability and to achieving “equivalent effect” of key words and phrases for English-language readers.

On a personal note, I would like to add that I was drawn to this story partly because it depicts political themes that number among my professional concerns. “Vloga” also resonated with me for its quiet sense of simple humanistic concern that lingers, or germinates, even in scarred or unexamined lives in the midst of social chaos. Finally there was also the considerable appeal of Slovene prose that went beyond Slovenia and even Europe; villages, peasants, priests, questions of national identity, and even the cosmopolitan intellectual milieu of Vienna are not enough for contemporary Slovene culture. Sometimes common humanity reveals the most about specific humans; sometimes exile or absence is necessary for self-understanding. Those interested in another Central European perspective on the civil war in Angola in the 1970s should consult the prolific Ryszard Kapuściński’s *Another Day of Life* (New York: Vintage, 2001); readers interested in another view of Slovene literature on non-Slovene themes might consider Evald Flisar’s *Tales of Wandering* (Norman: Texture, 2001).

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four hours crawling around the hot, loud, and greasy engine house, squirting oil into every possible joint and ball-bearing of a tired engine that trickles its oily sweat out of every seam; and in those hours when I wasn't greasing myself up and liquefying in the engine room, I did the same thing—greasing up and liquefying—in the boiling humidity of the hidden winter sun which looked like somebody underneath it had pumped out most of its air and left behind some kind of rotten-smelling gas in which one could hardly breathe; and if I had not choked on the open deck, I would have done so in my metallic cabin with its broken-down air-conditioner, for the company that owned the ship no longer went in for the costs of repairing such an insignificant item as an air conditioner in the low-ranking crew members' quarters; it was enough if the air conditioning worked in the wardroom and in the cabins occupied by the brass.

Our ship was already old and tired and had been condemned to death several times but still managed never to die; the company had not been able to get rid of it, because it didn't have the money for new ships; actually there would have been enough money for new ships but not enough for the customs fees or something like that, as our *capo*, or chief engineer, said.

If they wrote off all the old ships that were at the firm's disposal, they would be left with almost no ships and they wouldn't be a company anymore; that would be inadmissible for socio-politico-economic reasons. So said our *capo*, shaking his head from side to side.

The ship where I served as an engine-greaser after my failed educational career on dry land could not have been sent to anybody except people in Africa, because it was no longer allowed to enter the harbors of civilized countries due to its age; that is, if the ship wanted to sail into the civilized harbors of civilized countries, it would rate so much in insurance and increased landing fees—due to its age and the decreased safety which accompanies that—that the firm would not be able to afford it. Therefore we plied our way between the Mediterranean and West Africa and we transported to the black people garbage cans and bulldozers, and on the way back we had peanuts, cocoa, coffee, and chunks of valuable African wood—and by the way, the freight that was valuable got put off at Piraeus, Volos, or Venice and Trieste. All that reached our poor homeland from time to time were half-rotten oranges which the homeland could pay for it if worked super hard at it. Money for

valuable things wasn't available, and the less valuable items included me, and others of similar status; there wasn't any money for me, the swab at the bottom of the food chain, if I don't count the two engine-cleaners who were a step below me—that is, they were literally at the bottom, in the bilges at the very bottom of the ship (anybody who knows the structure of a ship will know these are the puddles down below the shaft of the screw propeller and the rudder mechanism). And I had to fight that sonofabitch the chief engineer for every hour of overtime that I put in, since every hour of overtime performed by an engine-greaser (but not paid to him) was like a tiny pearl to the company, one that was worth screwing an indigent greaser out of. If I had tried to save up like my mama ordered me to do at our farewell—ha ha, where would I have ended up? Maybe I could have brought a crate of foreign beer home from a six-month journey. Well, that's not worth saving up for. So it was better just to drink up everything I had, or blow it on black hookers.

Where that was readily possible—though in Luanda it was well-nigh impossible, since after the revolution they organized life such that nearly everything was impossible—even life itself appeared to be something pretty much impossible. For us, roaming around the dirty desolate city looking for some fun, it was impossible to get a taxi, or obtain a mug of beer, or buy postcards so we could write home, or matches so we could light ourselves a cigarette.

Indeed, we stumbled onto matches in this one kiosk, but they were “reserved” for someone. Later, we figured out they must have been reserved for some *camarada* or other, from some kind of committee, because there were things which did not exist but which nonetheless showed up from time to time, as a rule, in all post-revolutionary epochs, reserved for comrades from the committees. So there won't be any mistake: I myself could not have known of such things, because by dint of the date of my birth I have missed all the hitherto existing revolutions; nor did I make much of an effort to study such things, which is why I was a flop in school. But you can bet that our *capo*—that sneaky sonofabitch—was awash in such things and whenever he was saying something and I was close by, I just had to listen to him. “When I grow up to be a big boy,” I'll probably even understand him.

If it weren't for this chief engineer, I wouldn't know the first thing about the country in which I found myself because of the web of circumstances of my youth. As far as revolutions go, I remembered the

ones from my school days over which they tortured me the most, and I added to them the ones which cropped up most often in American films (sometimes they were the same ones) and those were, as we all know, the French, the Industrial, and the October—and somewhere among all those came the Mexican (which was the most frequently filmed one, and I especially remember one movie Marlon Brando played in) and ours (which Richard Burton played in).

Here, where we are now, they have their own—the Angolan revolution. They drove out the Portuguese colonizers and called on the Russians and Cubans for assistance, to protect their revolution and spice it up. The domestic opponents of the revolution have not yet quieted down and the armed South Africans are raging along the borders. Simultaneously these South Africans are continuing to exploit the gold mines, giving the Angolans a lump-sum payment for it. The Americans are pumping oil, the Russians are catching fish, and the Cubans are watching over everything, armed with Marx and guns.

On the way here I was sprinkled with knowledge of this sort by our engine chief, and I had no reason to disbelieve any of it. But I could not believe that on shore I was not going to be able to get a glass of beer anywhere, and the first day, when I went ashore with *kwanzas* which we had gotten by exchanging money on the black market through our shipping agent (and for once for a change with that money I was a wealthy man, because of this unusual exchange), my tongue was hanging down to the ground and I returned to the ship dried out like a sea plant in the desert. I was furious: well, who do these Negroes think they are? First of all, not a single one of the throng of yellow taxis—Mercedeses—with which we intended to overcome the monstrous distance—none would stop for us (with me were one other engine man like me, a mechanic, and the cook's mate). And then: after a half-hour walk along the main seaside *Avenida*, which was full of abandoned cars and overturned garbage cans from which nobody had collected the trash for months already, we reached the first restaurant that even existed there and that was even working, and they were prepared to give us beer if, in addition, each one of us ate a plate of half-burnt calamari. But why should we eat, since we were just coming from lunch? And why should we eat these over-cooked, god-awful calamari of theirs so that we might obtain the right to a beer? Exasperated, we rejected their offer and hit the road again with determination. To the Hotel Panorama, which for us signified an enchanted paradise, a straight road stretches along the embankment for

some five kilometers. The taxis aren't stopping and neither is anyone else. The automobiles are so run-down that it is a wonder they can still drag themselves along the highway. Every third one has no tail-pipe. Buses without windowpanes lean to the side and are jam-packed to the breaking point—arms and legs protrude from windows and doors, which for the most part hang open as they drive. Along the roadside stand shacks, and in the dust, little African kids are playing amidst black piglets and billy-goats. The dogs have fox-like, pointed snouts. Hens and ducks are living in the bodies of old cars. The low cement houses are without windows and doors and—to the extent that I can see inside—without furnishings; the inhabitants are lying on the floors. Various scents are fighting with each other: the scent of smoke wins out over the scent of trash.

Thus the Panorama was the Promised Land to us. No one warned us, not even the chief engineer, that there, too, we could be disappointed. We had envisioned cold beer and whisky on ice. And maybe we could find some interesting whores behind the counter and we could talk business. The cook's mate Sergio was especially worked up as far as women were concerned. He would have fucked a dead cat in the road if it had a big enough hole.

But everything went downhill for us when a thickset colored man blocked us from entering through the big glass doors. We couldn't understand why, and he wasn't making an effort to explain things to us either. He just said “No!” and stood in the doorway with that biggest of all possible bodies of his. How had he fattened up so much, in a country where the majority of the population no longer had anything to eat? This conceited African enjoyed playing the role of master of our situation. Doormen, janitors, ticket-takers on the tram—they make the worst masters when you put authority into their hands.

Then a middle-aged gentleman wearing a grey suit came up to the door from inside. He was speaking some language that sounded like a cousin of ours. Well, all right then! It was a white man. Somewhat haughtily, but all the same with a fair degree of civility, he asked us what the problem was. We told him and he explained to us that the Hotel Panorama was only for visiting delegations and for foreigners working in Luanda and that we had to have—if we wanted to get inside—permission from the Ministry of Labor or the Ministry of Internal Affairs. He said that he was sorry about this and then he turned back into the secure bowels of the hotel lobby—inaccessible to us—with all of its carpets,

chandeliers, stuffed armchairs, aristocratic stillness and the air-conditioned coolness of the house buffet. All this was accessible to the Russian in the grey civilian clothes, but not to us. Not one of the four of us thirsty wayfarers had ever dreamt that an item like beer is so important after a revolution that it's accessible only with the permission of some damned ministry or other.

After this disappointment, we were parched out twice as badly as before, and we were wilting all over—our tongues, our noses, our cocks, even our ears—and we couldn't give a shit about any world revolution we could think of, without exception. The defeat we had suffered at the hands of the fat doorman and the arrogant Russian tormented me intensely, just like my thirst was tormenting me, and there was just no way I could admit to myself that such circumstances could—or necessarily should—get the better of me. I suggested that we get into the hotel through some side entrance or back door. There was no way all the entrances to this big building could be guarded. Once we were inside and we haughtily took our places in the cool pub, most likely nobody would chase us off because they would take us for Russians. There comes a time in every man's life when he can be happy that he is white and therefore similar to the Russians. Or they might think that our mechanic Tone is a Bulgarian, since his complexion is dark and his hair is growing down long in front of his eyes so that he looks a little dumb; and me they might take for an East German, since I am rather fair and have a goatee; or would they take the cook's mate Sergio for a Czech, because he has an unusually pronounced overbite, or my fellow greaser and companion in adversity, Stevo, for a Cuban, since he was a gipsy, dark and oily?

We walked around the hotel, hopped over a low fence and went part of the way along a sandy beach which served as the hotel's garbage dump, although in the old days cosmopolitan white-skinned beauties would stretch out along it, tended to by black waiters. Actually it was exactly for that reason that it was now a rubbish heap. After a revolution it is always necessary to heap up trash on top of what came before—so said our *capo*. And only afterwards do people again rummage about underneath that garbage for the old values. Oh, the kinds of things the *capo* told us! And why shouldn't he, after traveling through so many countries and getting all the oceans and all the little seas under his belt, including the Black Sea? If he wasn't such a rat about paying that overtime, a man could respect him. This thing with the overtime

hours—that was really dirty. But we had to work them, or else the engine would just plain fall apart on us. As we sailed across the equator, he didn't give those of us on duty any free time to participate in the Neptune festival on deck (the deck hands and the guys from the engine house who were off-duty did get to do it) and so I've never been initiated according to the mariner's tradition, although I was sailing across the equator for the first time in my life. I never lost my pollywog status as Stevo the Gipsy did from the other shift, whom they christened “Sea Cucumber” because he was so dark, like he'd been doused with petroleum. Supposedly packs of sharks were circling the boat during the shellbacking. Well, I didn't get to see them, although I was basically very close by, but with a rusty iron wall separating me from them.

So, anyway, we were moving along the litter-strewn beach to the hotel entrance, which looked out over the sands. But dammit—here it was even worse! Instead of a heavy-set but unarmed doorman, here was a soldier in a paratrooper's uniform. He watched us blankly while the dangerous, dark-barreled Russian submachine gun hanging from his shoulder gazed at us ominously. Who could have a conversation with him? But maybe he would let us in for a couple of cigarettes...still, though, we weren't used to negotiating in the shadow of a gun barrel. With our late births, we had missed the earlier wars and revolutions which would have accustomed us to such things. New wars and revolutions are in all likelihood yet awaiting us—but just not right now, and not on account of cold beer.

We didn't butt our heads against the Panorama's walls any further but turned our backs on it and began to go back along the damned hot embankment, in the accursed, boiling, humid atmosphere. In vain we beckoned to the mysterious yellow taxis, which were all on mysterious and important journeys. To our right the bright green ocean was taking a run at the embankment, mixing its tongues of white foam with the fine sand and millions of little shells. To our left under the tall palm trees stood low colonial houses with verandas, some of which used to contain bars and restaurants but now just had soldiers with their stacks of rifles. We moved past the former marina, in which the speedboats and yachts of the previous rulers lay deteriorating; in the restaurant where the Portuguese used to drink whisky on ice and coca-cola and chat about their yachting victories, there, among the broken tables and smashed panes of glass, a little group of young locals was dancing to disco tunes coming from a transistor radio. They were led by a very well developed

girl—she was truly fat, and neither in her weight nor in her disco-reverie was there the slightest trace of Marx, much less Fidel Castro. A little on beyond the yachts, permanently anchored and condemned to slow submersion, a military patrol boat squatted up on a sand dune, which we could see from our ship, too, and which the *capo* said had run aground while it was chasing some Portuguese while they were fleeing with their hoard of treasure. The Angolan insurgents had lost control of this Portuguese patrol boat and they drove it onto the sandbank instead of into the inlet. The Portuguese got away, with their ship and their ivory, gold, and dollars, and whatever else they had with them.

*Ćerveja, ćerveja!* But there was nothing doing with *ćerveja*, beer, not anywhere along the long path under the dull, stewed sun, from the Panorama back to our Avenida; in that one open pub we had gone past earlier and where we hadn't wanted to eat the scorched calamari, there was a fight going on, and a crowd of onlookers had gathered, and they were glaring out at us with their bared white teeth of which we might well be justifiably envious, with our fillings and dentures. It seemed dangerous to us here and we didn't try to make our way to beer again, although our lips were as dusty as an old rock quarry, and consequently we kept our distance and avoided the throng of people at this cockpit for brawlers. We went on ahead, across the bridge that led over some sort of salt marsh that was a part of the sea on the other side of the peninsula. Little black rascallions were selling old conchs there. (Nobody anywhere was selling matches, which we did not have and so we could not light ourselves a cigarette, even though our pockets were full of Marlboros.) We went on, under the hill with the fortress with the Museum of the Revolution with the flag of the New Angola fluttering on top; it would never have occurred to us to crawl around in museums this thirsty, and what's more there was a really long set of stairs leading up to it. Then, instead of going straight along the Avenida, we turned into the interior of the city and after just a few minutes we accidentally stumbled across the central taxi stand, which raised in us the hope that we'd at the very least be able to get back to the ship faster, since, where are we supposed to get a taxi if not at the central taxi stand? Cold beer from Luciano's fridge seemed very close, for a moment—then it was very far away again, since our desire to obtain a taxi seemed revolting to everyone in the garage; they let us know that it was simply impossible to get a taxi; and meanwhile there were some twenty immobile yellow Mercedes



standing in this garage. All the same we got the niggers<sup>2</sup> to open their traps by offering them a ton of cigarettes, and thus we found out that all the taxis that we saw there in the garage were kaputt. One of the mechanics possessed that great rarity—namely, a match—and we all fired up our cigarettes, one after the other, the four of us and the immense throng of garage employees, so that we soon enveloped the whole garage and all the yellow Mercedes in smoke. The smoke thawed the hopeless atmosphere and a ray of hope once again shone into our withered lives, the hope that we would find a taxi and speed back to the dock to our cold beer. “We’ll have to wait a while,” said the smoky, thawed-out taxi drivers, “till one of the usable taxis returns from its run.” But that would not be anytime soon. If we wanted to treat a few guys from the garage to drinks in the snack bar across the street, that would take about as long as it would for one of the drivers to return to take us to the pier. So there was suddenly a snack-bar to be found right in the vicinity, one that none of us had noticed before, and a half-dozen of the garage employees took us over to it, so as to point it out unmistakably to us; all the other young guys came with us and we entertained them with drinks, drinks that were not beer, because they had no beer, but rather white rum and soda water, to which they added some rather un hoped-for (considering the place and time of these events) ice-cubes. The snack bar resembled a train car, and when we moved through it with the boys towards the counter, which was back in the farthest and darkest corner, we were followed by the mistrustful glances of the locals who were sitting on benches along the walls. None of their faces held a trace of a smile or anything similar. For the tall heavysset barkeep—who had lips that I wanted more than anything to slam a boxing glove into—it was too much to ask to pour our drinks into glasses and he demonstrated his power over us by having us ask him over and over for each motion, something which must have had some close connection to the socio-political system into which the Russians

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<sup>2</sup> This word is translated from the author’s original term *črnuh*. In the opinion of the translator, it is meant here both to be offensive here and to reflect the prejudices of the time, shared by the fictitious narrator and his colleagues and, by extension, probably much of the rest of Europe. Elsewhere in this text, *črnuh* has been rendered as “spook,” for esthetic reasons and for the purposes of preserving the shock effect of the word’s initial appearance in this passage. Throughout the text, the adjective *črnci* has been rendered as “black” or “African,” while the nouns *zamorec* and *črnc* have been translated as “Negro” and “black man” or “African,” respectively.

had initiated him; and what's more, all of what we had drunk cost, according to the official exchange rate, at least 100 dollars, and a person should rejoice over that much money in a country that was starving.

Our fellows from the garage had grown very animated, and there was no talk of a taxi until they had drunk six rounds. Then we paid for everything and went back through the railroad car, accompanied by the pretty much hostile gazes of the blokes along the walls (and all the while we could not tell if they were looking at us like that because they took us for Portuguese, Russians, or Americans) and we went back across the street, to where a taxi was supposed to be waiting for us. But the one usable taxi which had returned was reserved for some *camarada* from some committee who wasn't there yet, and we had to wait some more and offer around more cigarettes. Meanwhile, a column of black Volgas drove past, accompanied front and rear by Russian VAZ army trucks with Cuban crews, draped with weapons. Tone, the mechanic, asked the drivers if this was perhaps Dos Santos driving past. No, not Dos Santos, they said; he never drives around Luanda in the daytime; he resides on some estate deep in the interior and he takes care of all his business from there. There are various ministries in Luanda, and in the Volgas are probably ministers with Russian advisors. The column of black shadows in black Volgas motored off like a sinister black caterpillar to the lower Avenida, turned left, and wiggled out of our sight.

The *camarada* from the committee, in fatigues with a pistol stuck into his pants, drove off with our taxi and with an entire carton of our Marlboros to boot. We stared after it, with legs trembling after those rums in the boxcar, in even worse shape than before. Finally we gave up. For a long time there had been no more taxis at all, and the only one which came had been immediately declared kaputt—and indeed oil was trickling out of its crankcase and was starting to flow downhill in a thin stream along the street as it sloped towards the sea. We could not demand from the staff of the garage that they take us in a Mercedes which was right then threatening to need an overhaul, and they already had at least twenty automobile corpses like that in the garage; so we departed on foot, after leaving all the remaining cigarettes with the drivers. How many yellow taxis now drove by us! As if all the ones that were kaputt had been revived and joined the sound ones in their perpetual phantom rides up and down the *avenidas* of Luanda.

The spooks in guerrilla uniforms (automatic weapons over their shoulders) who were guarding the gate to the port smirked and greeted us with “*Bom dia, camarada*”; however, that did not wet our gullets or improve the taste in our mouth or our disposition; we had to continue our thirsty journey across the great port, where our boat was somewhere clear at the other end; we hoofed it past heaped up, forgotten goods, from electric appliances whose packaging had started to disintegrate to rusty tractors, which, once ordered and paid for, came off some ship and stopped and stuck here, something our omniscient *capo* explained as part of the system about which the Russians had enlightened the Angolans. The plan was fulfilled when the Ministry of Agriculture ordered the tractors; it wasn’t important what happened to them afterwards.

The harbor stench forced its way into our nostrils as we floundered through the foul mire towards our ship; the time was approaching six in the evening, and the workday was over for the dockworkers, throngs of whom were pouring from all sides into the main road leading towards the exit. Some of them were in grey, torn clothes, and others were dressed in garish multi-colored pants and shirts (imported goods from the USSR, with some of them even coming from us, as the *capo* stated) and all of them were thin, with their ribs showing through, like they wouldn’t even be able to lift a shoebox, much less any kind of crate; and nonetheless they had worked all day long, even if indolently and ineffectively, and all day long they had gone without food. Our chief cook, a big fat good-natured guy with a pendulous moustache, was an exception among our crew and used to—whenever he could—set out a loaf of bread and a glass of mineral water or beer through the kitchen window onto the poop deck at the stern, so that those hungry men could get some powerful refreshment for their stomachs, although it was officially strictly forbidden—by the oral decree of the captain—to allow locals below decks on our ship. The sailors mercilessly expelled them from all the places where they had, uninvited, stuck their black noses and the doors had to be bolted shut the whole time, a rule that was hard to keep to since after all the sailors had to go through them, too. If now and then the doors were not bolted shut and some starving black daredevil managed to get into the passageway leading from the doors to the cabins and then got snagged there, he was pitilessly, brutally flung out by the hands of young white guys from a friendly country. As I already said, the cook was an exception and he gave them food, although he’d

already heard reprimands from the crew for this. For that reason, he walked up to the captain one day and gave him (in his capacity as the supreme commander on the ship, a title which included supervision of political affairs on board) back his red League of Communists' membership booklet, with the declaration that he could not be a communist on a racist ship. The captain winced over the fact that there might be a scandal in the company over this, and he racked his brains for two days about how he could convince the cook to return to the red ranks and finally he came up with a trick. If the cook really wanted out of the party on account of the racist behavior of the crew towards the locals, he himself would have to detail all the instances of such behavior, including those involving him, the captain; this report would go to the administration and after the return of the ship to its home port, they would take whatever measures were necessary. Of course the cook was not up for the idea of individually denouncing the guys on the ship (although he would have done that to the captain); he silently took back his red booklet and put it in his pocket. In the kitchen he had enough bread and beer for all the African starvelings (who even devoured the gristly meat scraps off the ship's dog's plate behind the guardhouse on the poop deck). After the incident with the booklet, nobody reprimanded him anymore about anything, and the captain hypocritically feigned appreciation for the cook's humane treatment of blacks. The cook became famous not just in Luanda but in all the African ports in which our ship dropped anchor.

At the foot of the brow we had to wait a while, as the workers staggered up one after another along the swaying little bridge onto the firm ground of the pier. There, two soldiers were waiting for them with automatic rifles. They inspected them closely as they came off the ship, one after another; for the length of each search, the others stopped for a few seconds and the moveable gangway shook and rose and dropped at every footfall and each standstill. The soldiers felt all over the shirts that were stretched too tight, and they inspected the occasional bag or box, and verified that the people hadn't concealed anything behind their backs, and when in any given instance everything was in order, and no one had stolen or received anything, they let them go forward: go according to your wishes, towards your evening and night-time destiny, wherever it awaits you—in a tent, in a hut, at the town garbage dump, under a palm tree, in a house or in some ramshackle high-rise building, in which modest suppers were cooking on little fires burning on the

parquet floors. In the morning you will return to work, full or hungry, on the foreign ships which were once the source of small cadged or stolen fortunes but are not anymore.

At last the workers had gone and the gangway was empty, so we could get up on the ship. Right away we descended upon the head steward in his cabin and we sent him scampering to the walk-in for a box of cold beer after this dry odyssey to which Dos Santos had condemned us (dry, if I don't count the white rum the taxi drivers had hit us up for, not that it was any use to us).

The *capo* grinned at us when we told him how we had fared on shore. “Yes, yes,” he said, “that’s how they’ve been taught. Give, so that you’ll get nothing in return. Look at all these ships...” With his hand he pointed to the bay in which several dozen Soviet fishing ships lay at anchor. “What do you think those guys are giving the Angolans in exchange for their fish?”

“Well, it’s not totally free,” I said. “They are giving them something...”

“You’re right,” said the *capo*. “They’re giving them that over there!” And with that he pointed at a Cuban freighter from which they had been unloading military trucks for several days. Several other Cuban ships were anchored in the middle of the bay and around them there were constant detonations—the guards were tossing depth charges around the boat, out of fear of possible saboteurs. I can state that there were explosions around those boats night and day—so the guys on our ship were exasperated, because the bombs drove all the fish out of the bay and it was hard to catch anything on a fishing hook. Before the Cubans arrived with these bombs, the old-timers here said the bay was so full of fish that you could catch them with an empty hook, yet now nothing was biting, even at meat.

Meanwhile the early winter night was falling across the water. Some of us crowded into the commons with the VCR, bringing along our beers, pouring them into ourselves with a bit onto the table and floor for good measure. On the VCR we watched endless episodes of “The Cat in the Hat” cartoons, which we knew by heart; I wasn’t too into that series, but a lot of the others watched it day and night, beats me why. We were also smoking and chatting, so that the common room was completely clouded by smoke and words. Later the head steward, Luciano, joined us

and made Istrian soup for us. We ate toasted bread soaked in sweetened red wine mixed with olive oil and listened to Luciano's sex tales from Japanese ports. Luciano was full of experiences from other ports, but he never actually left the boat in ports where we were stopped at the moment, so it was hard for us to understand when all this stuff could have really happened that he was always telling us about. Maybe he concocted his tales in some artistic procedure using the true stories of other people? The important thing was that it was entertaining. Then the skipper himself barged into the room and grumbled about the noise and the mess; before he left he threatened to ban alcohol from the commons. "Fuck him," we said when he left. All the way up to the morning shift on that filthy engine, I most definitely did not think any more about things going on outside of our old safe ship; maybe the Negroes are hungry, but in our coolers frozen Polish veal was hanging, purchased in Italy at a time when the Poles, starving and exhausted, had risen up in yet another hopeless rebellion. Nevertheless, while I slept, later in the night, in my cabin, I was tossed up into the air whenever a depth charge exploded under the closest Cuban ship.

In the morning I had my shift and I had to prolong my four hours by three overtime hours, without knowing whether the chief engineer was going to log them in for me or not. Usually we worked on one of the three generators. In the middle of the morning a tanker truck came and we filled up with fuel, which was cheaper for us here than anywhere else in the world. The fuel transfusion was not yet complete when I was finally free, just before lunch. Before I went to take a shower and get changed, I stopped for a minute at the railing above the tanker. For some time I stared at the dockworkers; the majority of them were lying about in the shade at the wall of the big warehouse; at any rate there were three times as many of them as would be necessary to unload an eight thousand-ton ship. The davit on their poop deck was working and from the holds came swimming up pendants of goods about every ten minutes. They were military-green crates, officially containing "candy." It was a secret that they contained ammunition. Below the boat a few extremely active workers were directing the crates onto a truck, pretty clumsily, and they were smashing up every fifth one. Meanwhile, those on the bottom of the hold used their couple of minutes to lie on the floor and catch their breath. On the truck, to the tune of their lively gobbledygook, the men put the busted crates back together and beat all over them with nails and hammers, so that I involuntarily thought back

to some of my acquaintances without arms and legs who got mixed up with munitions in a similar fashion shortly after the war, when they were little children.

At the foot of the gangway stood the standard two spooks with automatic rifles; by the main door to the warehouse a jeep was idling, with several soldiers leaning on it. They were stretching and waiting for something, in the way all armies wait when they are not in use at any given moment.

Towards them, under the big dock “cats” resembling gigantic robots on four legs fastened to rails, some officer with a pistol shoved into his belt was coming out of the hazy distance. The soldiers in the seats and around the jeep started straightening themselves up. When he reached them, he ordered them to stand at ease and they began discussing something. The officer leaned onto the hood.

On the other side of the bay, the box-like Hotel Panorama quivered in the feverish haze. In front of it was the stranded patrol boat, with its prow jutting up into the air, as if it were still trying to climb over an obstacle so that it could slide down the other side and dash off in its delayed pursuit of the enemy. As proof that this would not happen, motionless black cormorants sat on its abandoned railings. Along the beach before the Hotel pranced white herons, pecking into the sand and garbage. At the mouth of the bay several native fishing boats were moving slowly towards the open sea, their triangular sails sewn together from countless pieces of multi-colored cloth so that they looked like mosaics. The fishermen from these boats will catch fish, and if we like them we can buy them in the evening. They’ll come up under the poop, and with a rope and bucket we’ll let down *kwanzas* and cigarettes, and then they’ll place fish in the bucket—sea breams, sheephead, pandoras. We’ll cook them on the deck—oh, I can already smell that mother of all aromas, smoke from a grill, with neat lines of the little creatures lying on it, doused with olive oil.

Right in front of me stood the tanker truck with its cloth intestine hooked up to our belly. On the fender lay a young local in soiled pants, which you could see had once been red, and a t-shirt, which was full of holes, as if it were perforated by moths or cigarette burns. His legs were hanging down over the edge of the fender so that I saw the dirty white soles of his feet. In the same instant that I caught sight of him, he fixed his glance on me and smiled. I nodded to him and he waved at me.

What beautiful white teeth they have here despite the bad diet, and we with our steaks have gaps and fillings! I waved back at him and in the same moment drew back from the railing, as if an inexplicable feeling of shame had come over me. I went to my cabin, took off my coveralls, and stepped under the shower. I was reflecting on why he had waved at me. They sure do wave and nod a lot here, and I don't know if it's from pure friendliness or because they are expecting something. The way he looked at me, that little devil! He probably works on that truck, maybe as the driver. Oil is flowing into our tanks, and he's resting in the meantime. Who knows how much they pay him?

When I stepped out of the bathroom, I noticed him again: he was just entering my cabin. Although I was unpracticed at analyzing black faces, I saw in him genuine friendliness and a pure, innocent soul. With a little white smile and hand motions, he asked me if he could come in. I nodded while I pulled on my worn-out jeans and stuck my toes into sandals and wondered how he found precisely my cabin after our fleeting encounter. I was in my room before he had time to come on board via the brow. How did he figure out where I was? By telepathy?

The young man walked over to the table with hesitant steps and stopped by the chair. I motioned for him to sit down, and by way of example I took a seat on the other side of the table. I was still not able to dispel my amazement at how he had located me. What did he want? The Old Man would have a few things to say to me if he saw this—a black man sitting at the table in my cabin. I knew that I was breaking the house rules here by not throwing him out. But he was grinning too affably.

Then, after things settled down and we were just sitting there smiling at one another, I thought: it won't go beyond this, because the Portuguese language is going to be an insurmountable barrier between us. But it wasn't. The young man indicated that he wanted paper and a pencil. When I placed both items before him, he started writing down the simplest of concepts in Portuguese, illustrating them with his own pantomime: drinking, eating, smoking, sleeping—living—dying. He wrote fluidly, with textbook-neat letters. In a few minutes, half the paper was filled and I understood the words on it. The conversation flowed with the help of this dictionary, which the Angolan supplemented when necessary. He did something that no professor with whom I had to work during my schooling would be capable of: in five minutes he opened up



the route into a language that was completely alien to me and he made it possible for us to understand each other.

He said his name was Zeka. He worked as the assistant to the driver of the tanker. He hadn't had anything to eat since the day before. He did not mention this as a way of asking me to give him anything, but I stepped over to the cabinet where I kept my night-time food supplies and I opened up a tin of Spanish sardines. I had no beer in the cabin, so I poured him a glass of Vecchia Romagna. He drank half a glass and wanted no more. He ate the sardines slowly, as if concealing his hunger; he must have been famished because, you know, he was all thin little bones.

I do not know why I told him my complaints about my sojourn in Luanda, why I explained my bad impressions to him, about how there was no beer anywhere, how we got hit up by the taxi drivers, and how we couldn't even smoke because the matches were all reserved for some *camarada*. In response he looked around my cabin—which was actually more like a hole in the wall, though for him it was probably like a grand suite—and with pencil and mime he let me know that he had neither a bed nor a proper roof. He slept on the bare floor, and once a week he got coupons for food at the docks, but with what he got he could never eat his fill. I took it that he praised the days when the old president Agostinho Neto<sup>3</sup> had been alive; he died in Moscow. He believed in Neto. Now he does not believe in the future. I tried to console him by writing down a series of numbers, dates, from the current year forward: 1980...1981... 1985...1990... and so forth. The years will pass and everything in Angola will get better and better. But at the sight of the later dates Zeka broke out in a smile like a child—a child who knows that he is very sick. “I won't live to see those years,” he said, and then he wrote: “By then I'll die from hunger, or they will shoot me.” Next to the words he drew a rifle on the paper.

Then he wanted me to give him an article of clothing. In exchange he would bring me the following day a package of good

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<sup>3</sup> Agostinho Neto (1922–79) was the first president of independent Angola. A well-known poet and intellectual, he led the popular struggle for independence from Portugal. He was a Marxist-Leninist with some maverick and nationalist tendencies, an approach to politics readily intelligible to Yugoslavs. He died of cancer and was succeeded by Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

Angolan coffee. Instead of clothes—what I had was old and tattered, but I still needed it—I offered him *kwanzas* for the coffee, but it was obvious that meant nothing to him. He liked my scuffed-up leather jacket. The elbows of this jacket were scraped down to the lining from leaning on counters and on the back there was a hole, now glued together with “Oops,” which had originated in the quick scaling of a wall somewhere... No, it was my only jacket. Should I give him my sandals? Lord have mercy! The straps barely cling to my feet, so what are sandals like that going to do for you? And they are absolutely my only footwear, unless I count my cowboy boots, which are standing in the corner of the cabin by the door, and which were too hot for me to wear here. No, nothing will come of this clothing thing. I myself am just a poor proletarian from a poor land, although I am white, and I need everything that I have. Still, I’ll give you some canned fish, if you want. No, not that; he doesn’t dare leave the ship with anything because the guards at the brow will take it all from him. It would only work with clothing, since you put that on and if you are lucky and the clothing isn’t too new, they don’t notice.

In the middle of our conversation, which had grown tiresome because, despite our successful linguistic ciphering, we had not come to terms—someone knocked on the door. Even before I could leap up, Luciano stuck his red head into the cabin and caught sight of the Negro, although he said nothing about it, just: “Lunch. Come on to lunch!” In a flash he had disappeared and I heard his steps fading in the passageway. What should I do now? Zeka gave no indication that he understood what Luciano had shouted into the room and no indication that he intended to leave. Should I throw him out now? At the beginning I could have, but not anymore. Should I therefore leave him in the cabin while I wasn’t there? It was clear that I couldn’t take him along to lunch. But couldn’t he take something from me while I’m in the mess-hall? Would he steal some of my insignificant clothes, after I explained to him that the main reason I’m not giving them to him is because I need them desperately myself? Would he steal something else? Books? What could he do with them, since he doesn’t know English? But then again, he can’t take a thing past the guards at the brow. I will leave him here. At least let him enjoy a few minutes in this sort of civilized place. No company would have ever lured an American or German or Swedish sailor into a pit like this, but it was perfectly acceptable to me (someone from the Balkans), and to Zeka it was absolute paradise. Therefore I said to him: I am going to the dining-hall to eat. I can’t take you with me, and you know yourself

what the rules are like. But I’m giving you another can of Spanish fish and leaving the Vecchia on the table. OK? The Negro nodded and smiled with gratitude.

On the steps, even before I entered the mess hall, the Old Man said: “Don’t you be bringing blacks into your cabin!”<sup>4</sup> Luciano had already told him that I had a visitor. I shrugged my shoulders. To the cook, who had tossed his red membership booklet at his feet, he hadn’t dared to say anything. But me—who has nothing red, not even my tongue—he would straighten me out! “Fuck you, captain!” I walked past him into the mess-hall like he hadn’t said a word. I sat down at my place opposite Tone the mechanic. On the checkered tablecloth between the plates stood little bottles like pieces on a chess board—with ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, tabasco, vinegar, and oil. Tone opened two bottles of cold beer. I ate and reflected on what the black man might be up to in my cabin. For me the lunch tasted good like always. Our cook was out of this world. Before coming on the ship, he had cooked for the President himself, and if anything ticked him off—besides the sailors’ bad relations with the locals—it was that he was not allowed to offer the crew two or even three different menu options at each sitting, because that wasn’t provided for in the ship’s budget.

I—who fell into this slimy, screwed-up situation from my middle-class social origins—liked his cooking, as did the officers. But the opposite was true for the crew, which was pulled together from all imaginable southern regions of our country and which grumbled at his concept of nourishment for not including their *pasulj* and *ćevapčići*.<sup>5</sup> When he made cold steak tartare for us one Sunday night at supper, a rebellion erupted in our mess hall. They shouted: “This guy’s crazy for serving us raw meat!”<sup>6</sup> The cook didn’t poke his nose out of his cabin for two days, he was so offended. Sergio had to feed the crew and the officers, and he barely knew how to peel an onion. In his cabin the cook was just stewing: “I’m good enough for the President, but not for this rabble here. I’m not messing with this anymore.” After two days the skipper roused him from his cabin, and, following an hour-long discussion, he returned to his spot at the stove. Right away he grilled

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<sup>4</sup> Serbo-Croatian in the original: “Nemojte mi uvlačiti crnce u kabinu!”

<sup>5</sup> Typical Balkan, especially Serbian, dishes. *Pasulj* is a rich stew with white beans while *ćevapčići* are small, savory grilled sausages.

<sup>6</sup> Serbo-Croat in the original: “Ovaj je lud, što nam nudi sirovo meso!”

some *čevapčići* for our “Asiatics,”<sup>7</sup> and for some time there was peace again in the mess hall.

I ate and I chewed; and more and more I was chewing more than I was eating. It didn't matter—but what was that black man up to in my cabin? I was beset by a kind of petty-bourgeois fear—something I had always intended to scorn. In the final analysis I did have something in the cabin beyond some rags and books. There was also an alarm clock, and a mirror and comb, and a small statue of ivory and a toothbrush, towels, sunglasses, a bracelet from some bimbo back home—all of it together didn't amount to much at all. But if I ended up missing any one thing, there'd be the hassle and expense of replacing it; at the very least, I'd be bummed out that I was now without some treasured memento. If he steals my toothbrush, am I going to walk around with a smelly snout? If I don't brush my teeth, then I don't wake up completely all morning. If I don't comb my hair, then my head itches all day. If I don't look at myself in the mirror, then I simply do not know if I am who I was yesterday...

I tossed down my food, took a cold beer from the fridge and set out for my cabin. If Zeka had eaten another can, he would probably be glad of a beer. Let him drink this beer and then I'll get rid of him in some pleasant way and go to sleep. I opened the door, stepped into the cabin and, because it was not some huge-ass cabin but just a hole in the wall—I knew immediately the Negro was no longer there. The tin of fish was empty. He had not touched the cognac again. A quick survey of things told me that he hadn't carried anything off. The alarm clock was still ticking away on the table. Everything was in its place, in the bathroom too. Next to the tin and cognac lay the paper with Portuguese words on it. It looked like everything was in order. Why wasn't he waiting for me, though? Had someone chased him off?

But things were not in order. My cowboy boots were not on the floor in the corner by the door. This hit me hard—I really liked those boots a lot. I bought them in London and they had the words “Made in Romunia”<sup>8</sup> written on them. One year I wore them for three seasons straight—just not in summer, when I put on my sandals—and I had no other shoes. They were four years old and in that whole time they'd only been in for one repair, because the heels had worn down and needed to be replaced. I can't wear any shoes with low heels, because I have a

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<sup>7</sup> The term Dolenc uses here is “Filipencem.”

<sup>8</sup> English and misspelled in the original.

horrible case of flat feet. Even my sandals have a fairly high heel. My feet hurt in other kinds of shoes.

I deliberated for a moment on these facts about sandals, boots, and flat feet—and then I lowered the beer to the table and dashed out. The door to the corridor was unlocked, although it wasn't supposed to be; that's why Zeka had been able to come in and that's why he'd been able to walk out.

I ran outside to the edge of the ship next to the pier. I spied Zeka, with my boots on his feet, as he headed down towards the guards, trying to keep his balance on the swaying gangway. Incidentally, I also noticed that a number of soldiers had gathered around the jeep and the high-ranking officer was telling them something, like they were getting ready for some kind of mission. But they certainly weren't in any hurry; they were leaning on the jeep and against the wall, and some of them were smoking, probably cigarettes mooched off of us. In general they were just very quiet. I guess they were there completely by chance; there were certainly enough of them all over the place.

I ran along the rail to the beginning of the gangway, holding up my hand with my index finger extended, aimed accusingly at Zeka—and he noticed me at that moment. I caught sight of his mournful big Negro eyes... it was the glance of a child who knows that he is sick unto death. In the same instant I wanted to restrain the involuntary cry which was already erupting from me—I mean, the boots were not worth this much—but it was already too late. I heard my own words:

“Give me back my boots!”<sup>9</sup>

Of course I never thought about how Zeka did not know English.

The young man bolted, but because the gangway was rocking, he lost his footing after a few steps and he flew the last few meters through the air and landed in the clutches of the two guards at bottom. The soldiers and the officer at the jeep turned their heads towards the ship. I stopped running and leaned onto the railing right away, like I had nothing to do with any of this. In the first instant I feared mostly for myself—I don't know why. Then I was prepared to renounce my boots. I don't want to get Zeka into any trouble. I meant him no harm. Let my

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<sup>9</sup> English in the original.

boots become his. Let me contribute something to the Angolan revolution. Let me own a share of it, although it hadn't offered me even a beer.

The two guards led Zeka off to the jeep. The Negro was kicking them in the legs and thrashing about—in my boots! Several soldiers hastened to the guards' assistance, and even all together they had a tough time getting Zeka onto the ground amidst the general uproar. When they had pinned him down so that he couldn't move, the officer came up, pointed at him and then at his boots, and said something, enraged. Apart from Zeka, nobody looked towards the ship again, as if they had forgotten where the boots had come from in the first place. Only Zeka was looking, and from time to time I caught his glance, whenever the legs and arses of the soldiers parted for a moment. I began moving back and away along the catwalk, brimming with bad conscience, as if I myself had cooked up Zeka's misfortune. The whole time he was looking up at me, from down there in the lowest of all possible positions to which he could have fallen—in contrast I stood at the railing of the ship, high above him on the deck. I wanted to flee into my cabin, but something kept me there all the same. Maybe nothing nasty would happen. Indeed, ultimately, why should anything nasty happen? Zeka is probably neither the first, nor the last, harbor worker in Luanda to steal something from a foreign ship (although in general there wasn't a lot of stealing since the revolution, since supervision was strict). They will punish him, and when the punishment is over, everything will be like it was. Perhaps someone will even bring the boots onto the ship and ask whom they belong to. I don't know why, but I didn't really believe that would happen.

A bunch of soldiers grabbed Zeka by the legs and began to pull the boots off him. But he started thrashing about with renewed, even redoubled, energy. I could not understand why he didn't accept reality the way it was—that is: he stole them, they caught him, they're going to take the boots, and he's going to be punished. But he was fighting as if this wasn't just about boots, but rather like his life depended on it. What did this fight mean to him?

After a long period of kicking and squirming, the first boot came off in the hands of one of the soldiers. The soldier began to look it over adoringly—but not for long, because the officer snatched it from his hands. He placed it on the ground next to his feet, shod in some very old army boots of Yugoslav origin. My boots were nothing special, but as old as they were, compared to the military-issue misery on the officer's feet,

they shone like a display in a ritzy boutique. Once upon a time, I thought, I owned some beautiful boots. Now someone else will have them and it won't bother him a bit that they are too big, just like it didn't bother Zeka.

At that moment, some craziness took hold of him and he suddenly wrenched free of the crowd of hands that were pressing him to the ground. He jerked upright and with just the one boot on his legs he propelled himself through the ring of soldiers, knocking some of them to the ground; he ran past the jeep, back towards the boat, straight towards the retractable gangway, where now there were no guards. It dawned on me that the boat was his salvation in this situation and that I, on the boat, was his savior, and I had already started moving from my look-out post towards the gangway so that I could admit him. I did not expect what happened next. Several of the soldiers grabbed their weapons and bullets hastened after him and they did not need long to catch up with him. The ones that didn't enter him whistled and clacked off the hull of the ship. Zeka fell at the foot of the gangway. The soldiers and the officer ran up to him and the first thing they did was take off the other boot. The officer was the first to return to the jeep; he sat down on the bumper and changed his boots. A soldier whose boots had completely fallen apart took the officer's. Nobody looked back at the ship. The others picked Zeka up, carried him to the jeep, and threw him on the back seat. There was no life left in him, no future years. The two guards took up their positions again by the gangway, grinning and chatting about the incident. The officer and some of the soldiers squeezed into the jeep; the ones in the back were probably even sitting on Zeka. They drove away.

All the while the cheap oil was flowing into our belly from the yellow tanker truck. The shots had drawn several of our sailors to the railing and now they were guessing what had happened. They didn't know that this was about my boots and I preferred that they not know it. Of course the *capo* knew; he'd been a witness to most of this business. He had seen me walking onto the boat wearing those boots in our home port. Now he was standing about ten meters away from me, smiling and nodding meaningfully. It seemed to me that he was also murmuring: “Oh yeah, revolutions, revolutions.” I couldn't swear that's exactly what he said. I went back to my cabin, took a gulp of the Vecchia, and stared at the rifle which Zeka had drawn beneath my numbers of encouragement.