

## THE DANGERS OF LAUGHING

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It was only when we stopped the jeep that I saw them. There they were, by the side of the road, half hidden in the din of the sunset – the old man and his lizards. They were huge lizards and they had a wrinkled neck like the old man's, and the same small mysterious eyes. He noticed my interest and told me how much they cost:

“Five million, mate. Each”.

It seemed to be a fair price. It was worth arguing over:

“Five million?! For five million, only if they spoke...”

The old man looked at me very seriously:

“Well, as for speaking, they speak very little, mate. But they laugh a lot”.

The lizards, laugh?! What did they laugh at? The old man shrugged. He didn't know. They laughed for no reason at all like only the mad do, they laughed at one another while sunbathing. I thought the old man deserved the money, were it only for his answer. I gave him the five bills, which he carefully smoothed out before minding in his pocket. Then he gave me the largest lizard of them all:

“This one's called Leopoldino, and it's the most smartest”.

I wanted to know what he ate. The old man explained that the animal knew how to take care of itself. It fed off flies, cockroaches, mosquitoes, it kept the house free of insects. I tried to play around a little:

“And we can even tell it jokes, can't we?”

The old man didn't answer me. He leaned over the lizards and told them something. He seemed to speak another language. He spoke a breeze, a whistle, a humid little vegetable whisper. I got into the jeep and sat and waited as I saw him disappear, a shadow in the darkness of night, with the feeling that it was he, that it was he who had made fun of me.

But, when we were almost reaching Sumbe, the lizard started laughing. I know it seems weird, but it's the pure truth: Leopoldino laughed. It didn't laugh exactly like a person, of course, it laughed like a person resembling a lizard, but it was laughing nevertheless. They were dry, cynical laughs, which echoed

through the jeep in a vaguely frightening way. I heard it and didn't feel like laughing. My friend, who was driving the jeep, was even more restless:

“What is that animal laughing at?”

I shrugged (like the old man had done). And how was I supposed to know? Maybe it was one of those that laughed for no reason at all, like only the mad do. I told him that this species of lizards communicate with one another, laughing out loud while sunbathing. However, my friend had another opinion:

“No!” he said. “It’s obviously laughing at us!...”

That supposition built up distrust in the jeep. I opened the shoebox where I had placed Leopoldino and placed it on the control panel in front of us. Its eyes were very old. The whole of it was very old.

We watched each other, the three of us, in silence. Leopoldino gave us a defying look, maybe a little arrogant, but I didn't discover in those eyes the slightest flare of irony.

I tried to calm my friend down:

“Parrots laugh, they even speak, but their laughter, or the things they say, don't have any meaning. Well, reptiles are related to birds, so why wouldn't lizards be capable of imitating man's laughter?”

My friend was beginning to get nervous:

“Don't bullshit me! I know very well when a lizard is laughing at me...”

If you put it that way, it was already a personal matter. A laugh out loud can be much worse than the worst insult. On top of that, Leopoldino's laughter opened the door to different speculations: it could be laughing at our human repulsiveness (reptiles must find us very ugly); it could be laughing at the stupidity of two individuals who buy a lizard, on the road from Luanda to Sumbe, for 5 million kwanzas; or maybe it might know something (about us) that would be best no one knew (not even our conscience). I only said this to make conversation, but my poor friend took me seriously:

“It must be because of what happened with Ana”, he whispered gloomily, “that damned animal knows too much.”

I didn't know what had happened between him and Ana; I didn't even know who Ana was, but I thought it would be best to keep quiet. It must have been something incredibly ridiculous. If he had told me, maybe I wouldn't have been able to restrain myself from laughing. And if I had laughed there and then, that would have been the end of our friendship.

“I haven't told you the worst part yet”, I confessed; “If we're to believe the old man, then it can also speak.”

“It speaks, the animal speaks?! No, that's too much...”

He pulled over at the side of the road and, keeping the headlights on, he jumped out of the jeep onto the road. In his right hand, he held a gun.

“I’m going to kill that damned animal!”

It was the first time I saw him with a gun. I got out of the jeep in shock.

“Of course you’re not. The lizard’s mine”.

He looked at me and I realized that he wasn’t joking. My friend had been through the war. Two years in Cuito Cuanavale.

“The lizard’s mine”, I told him, “let me be the one to handle it.”

I took the gun out of his hand, grabbed the shoebox Leopoldino was in and moved a few meters away into the bushes. The jeep’s headlights lit up the dry grass, the huge cactuses, the large outline of a baobab tree. In the immense clear and starry night, all you could hear was the hoarse singing of a cricket. I put the box down on the floor, I pointed at it and fired three shots. As the echo of the last gunshot dispersed, there was an unearthly silence.

And then, suddenly, a burst of gunfire from a machine-gun, to my left, stirred up the night. I stood there, for a moment numb with fear, then turned towards the jeep and started to run. Behind me, drowning out the roar of gunfire, I distinctly heard Leopoldino’s dry laugh.

My friend was already sitting at the wheel.

“Hurry up, *muadié*, you’ve got some bad luck, looks like you started a war.”

As we dived swiftly into the night, with the lights off, he turned to me and asked,

“Did you kill the animal?”

I answered with a grumble. All I wanted was to get out of there.

“It had to be that way”, said my friend, and his smile glowed in the dark.

“The guy knew too much!...”

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