

**THE
CIRCLE AND
THE EQUATOR**

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THE EQUATOR**

KYRA GIORGI



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for my mum

A man should live if only to satisfy his curiosity.

– Yiddish proverb

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The circle and the equator

Cassinga, Angola, 1978

I

The first time I saw Tercero I didn't know what I was seeing. His head loomed over me, and I thought he must be a spirit or an animal, or a combination of the two. From his mouth came a language that rolled and bubbled and spat like boiling water. It was awful. I had never seen a white person before and now here was one with his green eyes fixed on me and his meaty arms around me, scooping me, jostling me along. I cried for my mother, but she did not come. And then from the white face came a different sound, a *schhhsh*, *schhhsh*, that recalled wind caressing sand, and my eyes would not stay open any more.

What I remember – what I know – has been delivered to me by the other children who were there that day. It was early and the sun had begun its gentle blaze through the treetops. As on every other morning we were gathered outside, along with our parents and the soldiers, to salute our flag. It fluttered against the pearly sky from which,

seconds later, a succession of white pellets fell. At the same moment we heard a plane overhead. What I do recall, all by myself, is that there was a great excitement among us children, because somebody shouted that the pellets were sweets, and the plane was the President's plane, and he was dropping them for us, a special treat. We were refugees – the idea that sweets could fall from the sky was unthinkable, but then thinking was a luxury, too. Our feet shuffled on the dusty ground as we became ever more excited, while our horrified guardians realised what was going on. Then the first bomb hit the ground and our joy shattered, irretrievable in the general panic. I was pulled up very hard by one arm, I suppose by my mother, and at some point the tension dropped off and I was alone, and the bombs continued to fall, shaking the air, shaking us – and there I stopped gathering memories for a while. After that the paratroopers came, and then the Cubans to chase them out, but I missed all of that. That was why the first white face I saw was Tercero's.

The South African government forces had followed us to our haven. We Namibians had fled into Angola and were living in Cassinga, in a camp run by the armed wing of the SWAPO, our party of national liberation. There were quite a few of us, and of those like me – children with a mother or father, but not both. I think I had been a refugee since I was born. I had no sense of home, or of any place to return to. There was only forward.

For a long time I was glad that I had not seen the body of my mother, as some children had, decomposing in a pile with others in a hollow in the ground. But later I wished I could have seen something of her – even if it wasn't really

her, but just a glimpse of her hair or a fragment of her dress, the one with the bird pattern that she was wearing that day. I think they buried her before I woke up. In any case, I didn't see her again.

Many years later, Tercero told me that the raid on our camp might actually have saved my life. I'd had malaria, and was malnourished, anaemic – I might not have received proper treatment otherwise. He was a medic who had arrived with the Cuban soldiers to save us. They had a base not far from Cassinga, and when news of the attack broke, they rushed to our aid, but too late, he said, to save all of us. Hundreds perished. I should count myself lucky, he said.

The refrain followed us thereafter. We were lucky. We had survived the imperialist attack. We were the hope of a new, internationalist Africa. We embodied socialist ideals and the promise of youth. Cuba would help us break the shackles of apartheid and we would return, victorious, to an independent Namibia. When we moved from Cassinga to another camp in the north, we were taught it all again, but in Spanish this time. As we sat repeating our *yo soy, tú eres*, we could hear the thump of earth as the soldiers dug trenches around us, just in case our new camp should also come under attack.

2

Before he left, Tercero taught me two very important things. First, that if I felt lonely I should think of him, because he would forever be my friend in the world. Second, how to remove my shrapnel. Fragments of the bomb that had knocked me out had also embedded

themselves in my face and body, and the blast had sent other broken bits of the camp flying into me too. A shard of metal became lodged in my side, and another entered my shoulder, but these larger pieces were surgically removed after the raid. Then I healed. The wounds closed over, my body remade its armour. But one day, while idly picking at my scars, I noticed that certain places felt hard, like there was a grain of rice under the skin. Some of them hurt when I pressed them, and so I pressed them some more, half in irritation and half in curiosity.

‘Leave them alone,’ Tercero advised, ‘and they’ll come out on their own.’ They were the minute fragments the Cuban doctors had left inside me. ‘But I wouldn’t worry. Your body doesn’t like the taste of metal, so it spits it out eventually.’ Tercero told me that when I could feel or see a fragment emerging I should ask a nurse for help, but he didn’t seem to believe I would, because he showed me how to use my fingernails to prise out the foreign bodies, and even gave me a small glass jar to put them in. ‘Next time I see you you’ll have a fine collection!’ he said.

When the first piece began to emerge – a tiny disc of metal from my left thigh – I sat down on the ground and, positioning the nails of my thumbs just as I had been instructed, carefully lifted it out. It slid to the surface without a sound or protest, like a ripe berry that detaches from its stalk at the slightest touch. I examined it on my fingertip. Such a tiny thing! I wondered how many smithereens that bomb had blown, and how many it had blown into me. I spat on the wound, which had begun to bleed a little, and, as I anticipated the next addition to my new collection, was filled with a sense of achievement.

I was not the only child with shrapnel wounds. If we waited long enough our fragments might push themselves all the way out, but they were itchy and irritating, and it was impossible for us not to pick at the little shards as they began to emerge. One boy, who insisted on being called by his newly adopted name, Artúlio, was particularly taken with my collection, a modest confetti of metal, glass and plastic. We both coveted especially a green plastic piece, a lovely, still-vivid emerald, that we guessed had come from a bucket that had been sitting in the courtyard. Massaging the bumps under our skin, we played guessing games, trying to predict what our bodies would reveal next.

At the end of the year they took us to Cuba, as promised. From Luanda to Havana, and then under a heavy indigo sky towards a small town on the coast, where I smelled and tasted the sea for the first time. There the sky broke as we knew it would, for it had mirrored our exhaustion. And while the heavens were still flecked with rain, we continued our journey, now across the slapping ocean, to a place proclaimed the Island of Youth. In that name was the promise not of youth but arrest – after a lifetime of moving, the declaration that we would live, study and work on the island until we were adults seemed like the story of the rest of our lives.

3

Every morning revolution infiltrated our dreams. From huge loudspeakers, radio broadcasts informing us of quotas exceeded or enemies trounced crackled through our sleepy heads. Our dormitory was for Namibian children

only; others housed children from more distant parts of Africa and the world. For half the day we learnt about our people's campaign for independence, the Cuban Revolution, mathematics and the socialist struggle against imperialism. For the other we worked in the fields, harvesting lemons, oranges and grapefruit. We took turns to attend to the chickens and goats, and the vegetables we would later eat. It was not always easy, but we were self-sufficient and building a bright future for ourselves and for the world.

My injuries did not prevent me from working hard; I was able to do as much as anyone else. I still collected fragments from my body, but after a few years the seam ran dry. That was a relief. The exit of the fragments, not always at the point from which they had entered, created new scars, and my face and neck were furrowed with grooves and ridges. Now the pleasant anticipation of expanding my collection had gone, I became newly aware of the disfigurement the bomb had caused. I compared my riddled skin to that of the other children, the ones whose bodies had not been thrown about by the wind of a blast. They were refugees too, but their stories were not written on them so clearly as mine. Yet it was not done to dwell on this. There was the implicit understanding that we Cassinga children were special. And in this, exceptional behaviour and forbearance were expected of us.

By lights out, the memory of our cacophonous awakening had dissipated into the silence of the dormitory. Into that space crept our families – the dead and distant and disappeared – and we sang to them with our sobs and prayers. I wanted to be stronger, but the night had such

vastness, such depth...It was the space for a sorrow so pure that I could not resist plunging into it with the rest. That was what the night was there for, after all. To submerge and suffocate us, to wring from us every last drop of memory and consciousness, so that finally we could sleep.

4

Every year, on the occasion of 1 May, the *Dia del Trabajo*, a card would arrive from Tercero addressed to us all. Then one day they stopped. The last arrived when I was eleven. It had been brief, a perfunctory message of good wishes that I should have known foretold his detachment from us. The following year I waited until August before I conceded that no card was coming, but I did not give up. I decided to write to him instead. As a model student I was eventually permitted to send a letter to our doctor, our saviour.

Dear Comrade Doctor Tercero Martins,

How are you? Well, I hope. I am sorry to inform you that we did not receive your card this year, so that is why I am writing to you. What is it like in Havana? Do you work in the hospital there? They say it is very nice. I have been to our capital, but it was only for a few hours so I don't remember much. I didn't see the Castle or the Plaza Vieja or anything like that. I hope that one day I will go to university in Havana. I want to study medicine and be a doctor too. I am studying very hard and my teachers say I will be one for sure. Maybe in Cuba or maybe in Namibia. For now, I don't know. Our nation is not free yet but it is only a matter of time because the struggle continues.

*We are all very happy here and everybody says hello.
We are wishing you and your family a happy Dia del
Trabajo, even if it is a little bit late, and we hope you will
write to us again and not forget us.
¡Hasta la victoria siempre!
Yours sincerely,
Helvi Maria*

These were not exactly my words – I'd had to rewrite the letter a bit for approval, and they'd made me collect signatures from the other students as well. I wasn't pleased with this, as I had wanted the letter to be just from me. For a year, perhaps more, Tercero had been by my side – he had nursed my wounds, tucked me in at night, played games with me – and while he had done the same with the others I had been sure that I was his favourite. Each morning for months, though the revolutionary broadcasts clamoured for our undivided attention, my waking thought was whether I would receive a reply that day. Then one morning there was a shift, and a different thought replaced it, the remnants of a dream I had been having when the broadcast began, something unresolved, which felt in that moment more urgent than anything else. Time seemed to be composed of semi-transparent layers that drifted down in between hopes and memories, separating them out, distancing them from me.

And yet I could not imagine that Tercero would not turn up again some day, just to check up on me, to make sure I was studying hard, to give me advice, and observe how I would turn out to be a doctor like him. Subconsciously, I prepared myself for the event, telling my

teachers, to all-round approval, of my ambitions. I read books on biology and nature. I devoured entries about phagocytosis, memorised the parts of the brain and their functions, and carried out, with scientific rigour, the mechanisms of crying. I learnt that we are born with more bones than we die with, that the brain is as soft as a banana, and that the skin has many layers. I tried to imagine what had happened to my skin when those fragments of the world penetrated it, then made their way up through the dermis and epithelium – what they broke through, and what they left intact. Now there was nothing left but scar tissue, and something invisible beneath the surface, like roots. By expelling the fragments my body had been protecting me, knitting me back together to prepare me for the years ahead.

5

They looked after us, our hosts did; they made sure our youth was developing in the correct way, along the right path, towards the proper destiny. Every so often we underwent a general medical, which I always passed: my weight was healthy, my teeth were good, I rarely fell ill and was strong, and my scars looked better and better. That year when I was called for my check-up I positively bounded forward – this was my favourite kind of test, one I did not have to study for to pass.

The nurse was new, not one I'd had before. Like most of the school staff she was Cuban, but she was also exceptionally fair – even her eyelashes were pale, almost white – and along with the dusting of freckles they looked

like things that had been dried and carried by the wind, like hay or pollen, to settle on her face.

‘Ah, a Cassinga baby...’ she said, leafing through my file. She read further in silence, betraying no judgement on my illustrious past. ‘Good. Now, let’s have a look at you.’

There followed a sequence of poking, pressing, weighing and measuring, punctuated by the odd instructional murmur. Then the questioning: did I feel well, when was I last sick, was I checking my shrapnel regularly.

‘I don’t have any shrapnel,’ I said. ‘It all came out.’

‘Did it now. And when did it all come out?’

‘The last one was two and a half years ago, here.’ I showed her a small scar on my shoulder.

‘Hmm.’ She looked at the notes again and began to gently palpate the area between my neck and right shoulder. ‘Can you feel that?’ I shook my head. ‘You’ve got a big scar there, and I think I can feel a fragment underneath it.’

I told her that all the large fragments had been removed in surgery, after the blast.

‘Sometimes,’ she said, making her way back round to face me, ‘doctors don’t remove all the big pieces. Sometimes it’s too difficult, and they decide it’s better to leave them in there rather than take them out. Did nobody explain that to you?’

‘No.’

‘Well, perhaps that’s because you were very young. But now you can understand. You might still have some fragments in you, and you should be checking them. That’s because sometimes shrapnel doesn’t want to come out; it gets confused and goes in the wrong direction. So we have

to keep an eye on them to make sure they don't decide to migrate where they shouldn't. Do you understand?'

I didn't understand. How there could still be something inside me. I didn't understand.

'You mustn't worry. I can feel the one here and it's still below the place where it went in, so I think that one's decided to stay put. But I want you to feel it, here...' – she guided my hand to the place and she was right, there was something there, beneath the ridges of the scar – '...and remember where it is. We don't want it deciding to go on a journey to your neck, do we?'

The fair-skinned nurse found one more spot where she thought some shrapnel might still be lodged, beneath a scar on my right hip bone. She would check them again next year, but in the meantime I should not prod and poke at these places too much, in case I damaged the surrounding tissue or, worse, prompted them to start a journey. 'But don't worry,' she repeated, 'I expect your fragments are perfectly happy just sitting there and your body has made friends with them. You're a very healthy young woman and very lucky, too.'

As I left and the next child moved forward, I could hear the wind howling outside, a storm coming in over the sea, and I was consumed by a sense of utter failure.

6

This new information did not suit me at all. It did not suit the person I had become. It threatened my sense of possibility; it made my past into a tightening noose. Since I had been told not to provoke my shrapnel, I did.

Why shouldn't I? It had provoked me first! I pinched and prodded and rubbed the troubled sites, urging the pieces to go on their way. They did not belong there – they were intruders. If my body had befriended them then it had done so against my wishes, and they could all go to hell.

Indignation, I discovered then, was a very satisfying emotion. I had never felt it before. Although for years we had been coached to be outraged by the injustices of capitalism, the exploitation of the workers and the arrogance of the Yankee imperialists, I had always been aware of my limitations – never entirely convinced that the emotions I was summoning up were substantially inflamed. But it was just that I had been doing it all wrong; my efforts had not been truthful. Finally I had found my enemy, and my soul trembled and shimmered with a glorious fury.

In the beginning it took me far. It was a useful indignation, easily transferable into the right kind of outrage. In meetings and debates I was always one of the most ardent. Passing my ideological tests was a piece of cake. I exceeded expectations. And all the time I was running alongside a fate that I could not allow to overtake me.

I did not receive a reply from Tercero, but I had long given up waiting for one. I continued my studies as diligently as ever, but without the same enthusiasm. Those passions that were larger and more abstract were much easier to deal with.

My anger swept me through the years and then, in my fifteenth, began to splutter and die. I had moved into *preuniversitario*, and left my nationality group behind. Now I was mixed with the others: Cubans, Angolans and

Mozambicans, Mongolians and North Koreans. At the annual cultural festival we divided up again to present our songs and dances, food and oral traditions, and then came together once more, a kaleidoscopic folding. It was wonderful. I could not remember our traditions, but some of the other Namibians did, and we often joined up with the Angolans, in whose country so many of us had sheltered for so long. I found a boyfriend – a lithe, long-limbed, long-lashed Angolan – who spoke softly and was not a bit interested in my scars, preferring to dwell instead on the smooth skin inside my thighs. When he slid into me, I did not cut him to pieces. The shrapnel had not killed me, nor, as far as I could tell, had it moved at all. In this new world, it had lost its meaning. We had all left something behind; we all carried something with us. I was no different from anybody else.

I never saw Tercero again. When I went to Havana for my medical degree, I often imagined I would bump into him in the street. When I won a scholarship to specialise in surgery, and worked at the general hospital, I kept expecting to see him there – haunting the corridors, looking for somebody to help. But he was not. Perhaps he was practising private medicine, or was away visiting relatives, or had started a new life somewhere. Perhaps he had fallen out of the world and into the Caribbean Sea. Whether the memories he held on to would drag him down or buoy him up, I did not know. I hoped I was one of them. I hoped that I could carry him back to dry land.