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Maputo Diary

Mozambique gained its independence in 1975. It was ruled by the socialist Frelimo Party. My parents decided to relocate to help the government rebuild the country. We arrived in Maputo on the 11 of January 1982. I was five years old.

I started in kindergarten. From the roof terrace, we would dance and shout out loud: "Long Live the President Samora Machel!", "Down with The Armed Bandits!", "The Struggle Continues!". And we performed for the 4th Congress of the Frelimo Party. I was the only white child amongst some 100 kids on the stage of the huge sports stadium. Some months later my grandfather came to visit. He was a zoologist and liked venturing out on his own looking at beetles and butterflies. Once, he came back with a Mozambican soldier pressing an AK47 against his back. My grandfather had been too close to the border and the soldier thought he was a South African spy. The soldier saw me and recognized me from the performance at the 4th Congress. I always liked to think that was why he let my grandfather go.

Already then the civil war was catching on. It was fuelled by the South African Apartheid regime and by right wing forces in the USA that supported the Renamo Militia. The everyday name of the militia was the "Armed Bandits".

We lived on the 7th floor of a downtown apartment building on 25th September Avenue. From my room, I could see the Maputo Bay. The area on the other side of the bay was called Catembe. On Sundays, we would sometimes take the little ferry there and spend a day at the beach.

My best friends lived on the 5th floor. Oanana, Detinha and Fatu were siblings. Fatu was my closest friend.

I would ride to kindergarten on the back of my dad's bicycle. On the way we counted the ships in the Maputo Bay. That's how I learned to count in Portuguese.

My kindergarten was just next to the Museum of Natural History. We used to go there a lot. The Museum was in a white turn-of-the-century colonial building which resembled a magic castle. It was surrounded by a tropical garden with live monkeys and a caged python in the back. Inside there were dreamlike setups of stuffed animals - a lion digging its teeth deep into a zebra's throat, crocodiles, impalas, elephant fetuses and suspended birds.

When I started school, we were more than 50 kids in my class. Fatu and I were in the morning group, starting our lessons at 6am. On our way to school, we walked the empty streets of Maputo and passed through the Botanical Garden. We threw stones at the mango trees and fled with the mangoes that fell down, chased by the garden attendants. When we arrived at the school, we sang the National Anthem about the Frelimo Party and the People of Mozambique. Half of the class were sitting on the floor. I always had a chair to sit on.

Once, Fatu and I saw a ghost together. It was up on the 8th floor of our building: the Portuguese fled the country before they finished the construction, so that floor was still standing unfinished with metal wires pointing to the sky. The day after we'd visited the 8th floor, Fatu became very sick. Her parents sent her to see a traditional healer way up North, in the Nampula province where they were from. Everybody knew Fatu had a connection with the spirit world.

Fatu was away for almost half a year. When she returned, her older cousin, Xinoca, came to live with the family. She was 13 years old and pregnant. Xinoca gave birth to a baby girl and we played with her all the time. Nobody ever talked about the father.

Gina lived with her aunt on the 6th floor. She was a bit older than the rest of us. Gina was the first close encounter I had with the war. Her parents had been killed by the Renamo Militia. She didn't like living with her aunt who beat her up a lot. She hid food in the wardrobe, to ensure provisions for when she would run away. Once she took a piece of raw meat and hid it. The aunt found out because of the rotten stench. Gina got locked inside the house for a long time after that.

Food was hard to come by. Once a month, the government gave the people an allowance of food - the 'abastecimento'. It consisted of a pack of sugar, corn flour, rice and beans. During holiday season, we got pasta too. To get hold of meat, you had to know people in the countryside. For a while, we had a pig living on the little veranda outside my room.

I always liked animals. Apart from the pig on the veranda, I had a chicken, a rabbit and two yellow birds. The birds were from the old "Birdman" down at the Central Market. He caught the birds and built cages for them himself.

One day, the cage was empty and my two yellow birds were gone. Later Fatu confessed to me that she had been part of a group of kids that let one bird out and killed the other. It was Gina who twisted its neck.

My parents' contracts ended in 1985 and we travelled back to Denmark.

In 1986, president Samora Machel was killed. The airplane he travelled in mysteriously crashed while crossing over South Africa.

We returned to Mozambique in 1989. While on the plane going from Copenhagen to Maputo, I got my period for the first time. When we arrived back in Maputo, everything had changed.

The first couple of weeks, we didn't have our own place to live. We stayed at the expensive Polana Hotel because of my dad's new work at the Danish Embassy. Mozambique was like a forgotten territory in those war-torn years. Schools, hospitals, museums and the other buildings around town... everything seemed to be slowly disintegrating. I laid with severe stomach pains in bed, watching cockroaches and mice running around our five star hotel room.

The fighting had driven people away from the countryside and into the cities. Everybody had a family member that had been killed or kidnapped by the Renamo Militia. Maputo was crowded with street kids – children that had either lost their parents in the war or who'd been kidnapped to work as soldiers for the Renamo and had somehow managed to escape.

The gap between rich and poor increased dramatically as the war worsened. Being white meant being part of a privileged class of people. We moved to a house in a wealthier part of town. Because of the frequent roadside attacks, we were not allowed to leave the city, except by air. My dad's position as a diplomat entitled us to "hardship travels". A small plane took us to Swaziland where we could shop and swim in the pool of the Ezulwini Sun Hotel.

I was a painfully shy and lonely teenager. I felt Mozambican but lived another life than my old friends down in the building on 25th September Avenue. The war was everywhere and yet I was strangely protected from it. I attended a private school with other foreign kids. The constant power cuts and water shortages were the only direct intervention the war made in my daily life. I buried myself in books and video films. There weren't many movies to choose from. I watched the same ones over and over again. David Lynch's "Blue Velvet" was the one I watched the most.

It took me two years to get through the teenage limbo. I shaved my hair and found a group of friends. It was all about secret teenage lives. The cool guys were rastas and played in a band. (In the days of the president Samora Machel, dreadlocks were not allowed). We danced to the tunes of Bob Marley and Lucky Dube, drank buckets of toxic homemade sangria and explored the night from the back of scooters and pick up trucks.

Although Maputo was crowded with people fleeing from the war, it was as if we lived in a village. Everybody knew one another. We were isolated and craved entertainment. When something happened, the entire city would gather. The old Avenida Theatre began staging plays again. Television started broadcasting 3 evenings a week and would leave streets deserted at the time of the Brazilian Telenovela and MacGyver. A circus came

to town for the first time since before independence. We all went to see lions jumping through rings of fire and acrobats jumping from one white horse to the other.

In June 1992, I left Maputo in order to finish my education in Denmark. On the 4th of October, 1992, the Frelimo government and the Renamo militia signed a peace treaty. The war had officially ended.

Six years passed before I returned. My mother and younger sister, Siri, still lived in Maputo. As I walked out of the plane, I was hit by that familiar sensation of humidity and heat. I hailed a taxi and drove through the Maputo afternoon. There, I was confronted by it all again - People everywhere, walking, working and hanging out in the streets; sounds of laughter and shouting, red earth and smells of firewood, car exhaust fumes and sweat. Tears rolled down my cheeks all the way from the airport to my mother's house.

That summer I took my first photo course at The School of Photography in Maputo. I used the camera that my grandfather had given me before he died. In the dim red glow of the basement lab enveloped by smells of developer and fix, I felt at home. Eduardo worked in the darkroom. We would sing and laugh and his hands danced above the photo paper as he taught me how to make a print. After lunch he took his afternoon nap amongst the photo paper on the shelves below the enlargers.

I ventured around Maputo photographing the life in the streets. I discovered how I could use the camera as a way to challenge my shyness and meet people I would otherwise never have dared to approach.

In 2000, I spent another summer in Maputo. This time I helped out at the photo school and got to use the darkroom for free. One day walking home from the school I met Ingracia and Antonieta. They stood out from the crowd as they strolled down the streets of Maputo, hips swaying. They were openly gay and for Maputo this was truly outrageous. I approached them and we spent an afternoon together. Gradually they allowed me to get a glimpse into their lives. Stigmatised and yet inhibited by such a crazy and stubborn will to survive. And with a fearlessness I admired – there was not much left to lose. Antonieta worked the streets and Ingracia survived by entertaining in the bars of the Shanty Towns and getting people to buy him beer and food. They introduced me to their circle of gay friends: “The Sisters”. I photographed the Sisters and got the feeling of a story that was so much deeper than what a few pictures could convey. That was the beginning of Maputo Diary.

One and a half years later, I returned. I went to look for Ingracia at the apartment where he used to live. His mother had passed away and Ingracia's older sister, Carla, had taken over the place. She had kicked out Ingracia who was now living with an auntie. We met again and over the coming months my life in Maputo became intrinsically intertwined with that of the Sisters.

Ingracia showed me the way to Antonieta's new place. He was living in another rented shack haphazardly put together from thin aluminium plates in the same area as before, Mafalala. Antonietta was more tired than when we first met. Tired of walking the street every night. Maputo gets cold in the winter. I would walk the streets with Antonieta - attracted to that dark and secret side of life.

Antonieta was the only man in Maputo that dared wear women's clothes in public. He had worked the streets since he ran away from home at the age of 13. Whenever he managed to make a little money, he would spend it right away. He said: “ Save money for what if tomorrow I might be dead?” And he lied a lot. It annoyed me when he also lied to people about me, bragging about the big money I had spent on buying us drinks at an imaginary bar the evening before. I told him off and he said: “Ditte; When I meet a man I tell him my name is Isabel and that I have two children, Carla and Nito. My whole life is built on lies”.

On New Years day we travelled to Xinavane, the village where he was born. There, with the family, Antonieta was Antonio.

Antonieta died the 11th of January 2004. He was 29 years old. I always felt it as a special confirmation of the bond between us that he died on my birthday.

Ingracia's brother Zito was in jail. Zito had been using hard drugs for a long time and was now doing time at the "Central Prison". Marcelo, a Sister, had been accused of stealing a pair of pants off a clothesline and was also at the Central Prison. Ingracia had been inside for a while. He sold his stove back home and used the money to pay an officer to sign his release papers.

The prison was overcrowded. There was one water tap for the 2000 inmates and no latrines. A plate of food was served once a day and always the same - rice with a watery sauce. Inmates survived by trading food which family brought on the visit that was allowed every two weeks. Sex was traded too.

Marcelo was found innocent and released, having spent eight months in the Central Prison. He returned to his home province and lived there for two years until he passed away. Soraia, the owner of the bar where we used to hang out, said: "He should have played safe".

Rui rented a room in the outskirts of Maputo. He also belonged to the group of Sisters. As a teenager, Rui went to Eastern Germany, where he worked on a power plant and came out as a gay man. When East and West Germany reunited, all Mozambicans were sent home. Coming back was tough. Jobs were hard to find and Rui moved around a lot. Wherever he moved to he would bring with him his pot of orange flowers. Last time we met he said: "There are so many feelings in my life. I think a lot about love and the work that I don't have - and sickness." And I asked him what he meant by sickness. "You know, any kind of sickness... And I'm afraid because I'm alone..."

Twenty percent of the Mozambican population are HIV positive. Yet it is still a taboo to talk of the disease.

Rui passed away in 2004. He was 32 years old.

In August 2003 the series about the Sisters; "Manas" was on show at the Photographers' Gallery in Maputo. Those weeks of the exhibition were strange. So many turbulent and tangled up feelings. It was impossible to anticipate what kind of reactions the exhibition would fuel. The people close to me were afraid on my behalf and I was afraid about the consequences the exhibition might have for the Sisters. In the end Antonieta was the one to say: "Do it - let them see how it is."

And meanwhile, I was saying goodbye to Maputo. A month after the opening, I was going to start a four year course at the National Film School in Denmark.

As I was mounting pictures, a stranger walked into the gallery. He was barefooted and his clothes were torn. He carried a dirty old guitar and flowers with roots covered by fresh earth. He gave me a flower and sang me a song in English and left me wondering. I later learned that the man was Zandamela. He had come to the Association to meet up with Quico.

Zandamela was a painter. He had travelled and exhibited his art abroad.

I spent my last day in Maputo with Quico. Together we went to visit Zandamela, who had been admitted to the Psychiatric Hospital. Flowers, rotting fruit and paintings were placed around his room in a holy order of which only Zandamela knew the meaning. He talked and moved around for hours. Non-stop. At the end of the day, a Russian nurse came and gave him an injection of such strength, that he fell asleep even before she had pulled out the needle.

Zandamela passed away the following year.

The psychiatric hospital was hit by a missile when the nearby military base exploded in the spring of 2007. The Hospital was completely demolished.

The Natural History Museum is still there. Some birds have fallen and the impalas have lost most of their fur.

My mother and Siri live just a few blocks down the road. The window of their living room overlooks the Maputo Bay.

I live in Denmark now. Last night I dreamt about Maputo.