

Serafina

Augusto do Rosário Rodrigues

Dona Eufrásia Salgado e Cebola, widow and wealthy landowner of S. Tiago Pintado, had a fit when she heard a mulatto girl had bewitched her Ferdinando.

She sent for the local chaplain, Padre Pantaleão Fernandes, an old schoolmate of her son's.

He dispatched a firm but diplomatically worded letter to the *africanista*. That he should take care of his health, not fritter away his money, think of the future because his mama was old already and didn't want to pass on before she was surrounded by a gaggle of little grandchildren. This missive, signed by the old lady, carried a post-scriptum from the padre, in which he urged his friend to come back to Goa and take a wife. That he almost suspected his old classmate had found himself a cushy situation. Ferdinando Cebola, a doctor in the Cape Verde medical services, was intrigued by this epistle from Mother and above all by his friend the chaplain's addendum. Had tales of his debauched life reached his native turf?

Two months later Dona Eufrásia received a cheque from her son for four thousand rupees and an affectionate note saying how much he missed home and asking her not to tire herself out, as she needed to be in good fettle for his wedding. In five years' time he would come back on a year-long furlough.

The chaplain, his former accomplice scrumping mangoes, guavas and jackfruit from neighbours' orchards, received a more expansive letter. Ferdinando agreed that he should marry, but wrote that in Cape Verde—besides white, black and mulatto women—there were only three Goan ladies, all of whom were already wed and happened to be his patients. One of them was even in the family way. If she gave birth to a girl, his friends surely wouldn't deny him her hand. But then mama would have to move in to change her daughter-in-law's nappy . . .

At that point in the letter, the chaplain loosed a guffaw of pure delight. He thought back to the fine times he and Ferdinando had enjoyed before he donned his cassock. One day the irrepressible scion of the Cebolas had dragged him to the Clube for Carnival and had somehow convinced him to dance. The poor girl whose waist he'd cupped with his left mitt suffered a torrid time for the span of that seemingly endless foxtrot. He recalled a picnic they'd organised with four friends who lived nearby: what a *xacuti* they'd made with chickens filched in the dead of night from those very same neighbours' gardens. The pair even had the

cheek to charge five rupees a head for the condiments and the cook, when in fact it was they who had prepared the grub.

From those gastronomic high jinks he'd learnt the recipes for rice curry, suckling pig *cabidela* . . . Padre Pantaleão heard the church bell toll and hurried off for a set-lunch. His measly income didn't stretch very far and he could no longer steal chickens from people's coops. He was now a respectable chaplain who preached the wholesome doctrine of Christ each Sunday, holding up to scrutiny the misdemeanours of his spiritual children. His time for skylarking had passed. And with a sigh that morphed into a long yawn, filled with nostalgia for such carefree times, he headed off for his churchman's regulation afternoon nap.

Ferdinando's mother popped her top when she discovered her son's matrimonial intentions; she wanted to marry him off as quickly as possible. Her fear was that if she waited five years he might return home with a mulatto girl and a couple of frizzy-haired sprogs in tow. What would their relatives and neighbours say to that?

She remembered hearing that one could marry by proxy. A brilliant idea blossomed in her mind: she would spread word via the chaplain of the four thousand rupees her son had sent and let it be known that he wanted a bride. And so it was done.

People now flocked to the Cebola house. Some came to buy coconuts; some came for white rice. Others still asked to borrow copper pans, a mat, or a stepladder. All would invariably ask for news of the young doctor. They wanted to know when he was coming back and whether he had taken a wife yet. The shrewd old lady replied that he was in no rush, despite earning a princely wage. She said that her son first wanted to recoup the outlay on his studies. To Dona Eufrásia's mind this was a foolproof trick to entice a lavish dowry.

The village baker brought a marriage proposal for Dr Ferdinando and Dona Eufrásia agreed immediately to consider its terms. It sufficed her to know that the potential consort, five years younger than her son, was of a good family and, more importantly still, would be dowered to the tune of ninety thousand rupees. Blinded by numbers, she didn't even enquire about the girl's physical appearance, moral fibre or skills around the house.

She wrote to her son asking him to return forthwith, as she'd been ill of late and wanted to decide his future before she expired. The young doctor replied that he was unable to come and, playing along, invited her to bring the prospective daughter-in-law over to him. A few days later, he sent a telegram to forestall an expensive journey that would be unadvisable given his mother's frailty and years. In response Dona Eufrásia suggested he marry by proxy. His future wife's journey out would be paid for by the state and, as for herself, she could cough up her own fare. Ferdinando replied that it wasn't so much a question of money, but of the discomfort travelling at such an advanced age would cause her. As for marrying by proxy, he was at a loss, didn't even know who the bride was, whether she was fat or thin, white-skinned or sallow. His mother, who had anticipated such a reaction, hustled the marriage negotiations

along. The bride was invited to tea so her prospective in-law could finally see what she was like. The chaplain, who witnessed the interview, or rather, as he put it, the summary inspection of a property for sale, scowled but didn't utter a word. When, with a regal air, the lady of the house asked his opinion he exhaled a puff of smoke, tapped the ash from his cigarette and replied:

'She was a dark-skinned birdbrain who laughed at the drop of a hat. Her face was caked in so much rice powder it looked like a cloud.'

'Yes, just so. With those sharp eyes and that fine aesthetic sense, you recall the legendary Casanova.'

'What, me?'

'Yes, indeed. But since we're not seeking a wife for you, your grace, but for your friend my son . . .'

'Heaven forbid. And do you think Ferdinando would appreciate her bearing, her colour?'

'Why not? As you said yourself, Serafina's complexion is celestial.'

'My most venerable Dona Eufrásia, I'm afraid I don't quite follow.'

'Don't clouds float in the heavens, Padre Pantaleão? It follows, therefore, that they are celestial. And for those such as your friend, who court African maidens, a cloud-coloured, celestial wife could only bring gentle comfort. There is nothing else to say. It is God who brings joy to a home; the tint of the happy couple doesn't matter. Have I made myself clear?'

A portrait was taken of Serafina. The photographer saw the distress of his co-villager Sacrafamília Robalo who, despite his vast landholdings and fortune, was having trouble offloading his dead weight of a daughter. Anyone who beheld the picture made of Serafina—a true work of art—would be instantly enchanted. And such was Ferdinando's fate when his mother—plus a letter that stressed she was fully aware of his freewheeling lifestyle—sent him a copy of the photograph carefully retouched by S. Tiago Pintado's resident lensman. The doctor fell immediately under her spell. He wrote back that he would accept whatever decision his mother might take concerning his matrimony. And she took care of everything. After the prenuptial agreement had been signed and the marriages, both civil and church, celebrated by proxy, Dona Eufrásia heaved a great sigh of relief. She had saved her son from iniquity and fortified the illustrious house of Cebola with the precious grout of ninety thousand rupees. And this without a peep from the chaplain.

'In Heaven are sewn your wedding and your winding sheet', the churchman would say, but it was Robalo's voluminous fortune the old lady was after. If she thought that whitewashed coal dolly was a fitting daughter-in-law . . . well, that was her business!

One fine day, a British ship docked at Mindelo and deposited an Indian girl from Goa on the wharf. There she stood, waiting in vain, as the passing Capeverdean women looked scornfully at the dark-skinned, straight-haired interloper. Tears had begun to well in the poor wretch's eyes when another Goan woman, the wife of a Public Works officer, approached her. It turned out she

was the wife of Dr Ferdinando! And he, driven almost to despair at not finding his ravishing bride, had been just about to leave. The blame lay with the photograph his mother had sent . . . The same ship had brought a letter from Padre Pantaleão, in which he explained the scheming of Dona Eufrásia, who had found out all about her son's dalliances with the dusky maidens of those latitudes. He advised his friend to endure his fate with patience, for God often wrote straight along crooked lines!

—Translated from Portuguese by Paul Melo e Castro

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Augusto do Rosário Rodrigues (1910–1999) was a regular contributor of poems and short stories in Portuguese to the post-1961 Goan press and radio. Characterised by the Goan critic Bailon de Sá as displaying a sort of “inside out exoticism”, his fiction, often historical, focuses on the Goan Catholic community and treats themes of decline, re-evaluation and recovery.