

My First Million Dollars

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January 1, 2021



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If you think this story is going to end unhappily for me, you're badly mistaken. Fortunately, I'm the narrator.

Envy is shit. I think it was in Brazil that I first saw that phrase, written on the windshield of a car on one of my many visits there. I like that country. Above all, I like Brazilian whores. They fuck like crazy. And on top of that, as everybody knows, they cum. When I get fed up with the envious types who are constantly printing lies about me in their shitty papers, I go to Rio de Janeiro, spend a week there living it up, and come back refreshed, ready to face them all. Those guys talk and talk, but they're envious as hell. Shit, they ought to do what I do, when they're pissed off—catch a plane to Rio and go wild at the Barbarela in Copacabana...

If you can, buy a first-class ticket like me. Ha ha, it's all about buying! For a long time now I've only traveled first-class, and I've never run into any of them... I always see them back there in coach, kind of embarrassed, loaded down with suitcases, bags, and packages, and pestering the flight attendant for another beer... They think I don't know them or don't remember them, but I know very well who they are. Several of them have even come to me for favors. I always receive them well, and I've even done favors for two or three—a job, a car, funding for a trip, when their requests are modest—but as a rule I let them stew for months, until they give up. Maybe that's why they send the journalists on me—that pack of wild dogs, but I take it in stride. Yes, envy is shit. The Brazilians are real pissers; only they could have invented that expression!

I normally only make an exception for hot girls... But I don't let on at the start, because I'm an old hand. I say I'll analyze the request but in the meantime would like to get to know her better. That is, I need to evaluate the situation in all its aspects, maybe even arrange something extra, needs are like cherries. (I don't know where I got that from, after all, we're in Angola and we don't

grow cherries yet, which gives me an idea: one of these days I'm going to have a cherry plantation on one of my estates...) You pick one and right away three or four more fall off the branch, how about dinner at Pinto's on Friday for her to explain her needs in full detail? It's a sure thing. The girls open up like ripe fruit. I'm worn out from screwing so many women like that, even married ones.

So if it's a hot gal I have no reluctance about being generous. But it's not expensive for me. Luckily, what I make is enough for those small extravagances and then some. Normally, the basics are for the house payment, school tuition, a small allowance for extras (the hairdresser, or "salon," as they call it, is obligatory). Besides that, a dinner now and then, a night in some hotel (obviously, I only choose a four-star; in Luanda, unfortunately, there aren't any five-star hotels yet), a weekend in some province, a week's vacation abroad. The only country I don't take them to is Brazil. That would be like coal to Newcastle....

Lately, since I haven't had much time to travel on my own, especially to Brazil (my wife, I don't know why, is suspicious and has decided to track me man-to-man, so to speak), I've opted for a different strategy: I've started importing, let's put it that way, a few Brazilian women, who usually stay here for one or two weeks and with whom I and some of my more serious and trustworthy friends have some parties to dip the old wick, the lumber, the *kinjango* or whatever other word you like except penis, which has no charm at all. We arrange a discreet hotel in Luanda where they stay, but on Fridays we send them off to one of our plantations, where we organize one hell of an orgy that lasts till Sunday afternoon. And never beyond Sunday afternoon because Monday morning I have to be at the office. To me, whoring is whoring, work is work.

The sons of bitches who put me down in the newspapers, at weddings and funerals, who slander me and try to undermine me with the Chief, don't take into consideration that I don't run away from work, that I'm not lazy like them. That's how I got to where I am. I always accepted the assignments that handed me, even those about which I had no knowledge or experience. After all, no one is born knowing. When I get something in my head, I can do whatever is necessary. Live and learn, isn't that the saying? I'm a quick study. Above all, I'm a practical man who likes to get down to brass tacks, I don't have anything to do with those shitty intellectuals who waste their time on grand concepts, strategies, plans, and other crap. But good old screwing-nothing! Not me: I work hard. Only work enriches a man. I've always known that.

In addition, I'm a direct man. I don't like double meanings, even when I seem to use them. Just the opposite—I like to live up to what I say. The truth is that I got to where I am thanks to my work. The money I have today didn't fall from heaven. I didn't shake a mango tree and have dollar bills drop from it. If I'm organized today, I owe it all to my own effort. Screw the envious types. Envy really is shit, and they can eat it. And bon appétit to them.

For my part, I have nothing to hide. Yes, it's true that the positions I've held up to now have been and continue to be quite useful for me to attain my current situation. I admit that. But, as they say, I was merely always in the right place at the right time. Is that my fault?

In any case, grabbing onto the opportunities that life offers us takes work. At times, lots of work. My enemies don't know, for instance, just how hard it is to negotiate a kickback. At first, the whites said they could only give ten percent. That's how it is in the rest of the world, they said. But who said that Angola is like "the rest of the world"? We're fucking special! It took work, but the gringos ended up agreeing to the increase in the kickbacks. Now the minimum is thirty percent. I've even managed a hundred percent or more, but I had to sweat for it, butt my head, use my imagination. When none of those resources was enough, I made use of power: if the kickback wasn't what I demanded, no deal. I've always known, also, that power is to be exercised.

Those envious idiots have no notion, either, of the situations I had to endure, the roles I had to play, to achieve my objectives. I don't know which is worse sometimes: the look of moral superiority (feigned, of course) of the gringos I had to bargain with for my kickbacks in order to clear the way for the business they were interested in, or the plain and unbearable feeling that my Chief always suspected our technical and scientific arguments to convince him to approve certain projects. At times I came to think that he knew perfectly well about everything and was letting me simmer while awaiting the opportunity to burn me. On such occasions I nearly panicked, but fortunately I'm strong. Life tempered me. Don't tell me that's not work...

And what about the work needed to avoid the sabotage by our subordinates or our very peers? Certain projects in which I had an interest almost went down the drain because some sons of bitches who worked with me pigeonholed them and didn't give them the attention they merited. I had to fire them without notice. What's most complicated, however, is the risk of submitting a project to someone who, after killing it, copies it and orders it carried out by some other firm, with a different name and different trappings. That happened to me once. The entire work process, as is well known, has its problems. Since then I've been more careful.

The problem is that everyone wants a piece of the action. But it's hard to reconcile all interests. Sometimes it's impossible. Honestly, I don't understand the why of all these campaigns against me.

In any case, I don't pay it any mind. The fact is that my work and my sacrifice have borne fruit. I won't go into details, of course (secrecy is the soul of business, a truth I learned in childhood) but I can say I have a solid structural base. I don't go hungry (just the opposite, in fact, and I have to give some serious thought to going on a diet, as my belly is getting a little too big, and that's starting to affect my sexual performance...), I own some properties that allow me to ignore the picaresque salary the State pays me, three or four hefty accounts in first-class banks overseas (my local account is for current expenses)-in short, I've got no reason to complain. But obviously I don't plan to stop here.

Actually, I can't stop. The girls I'm screwing on the side are more and more demanding. I had to set up one of them with an apartment in Lisbon. The others have got it in their heads to ask me for luxury jeeps, like Porsches. After all, power is an aphrodisiac (I read that shit somewhere), but its maintenance requires a lot of expense. Besides that, my sons, whom I sent off to boarding school, are assholes who've done nothing but generate bills that get larger every month. My wife is more and more of a spendthrift, while in bed she's been avoiding me (has she discovered I'm cheating on her?). What I mean is, the more I earn, the more I spend. It's a damned treadmill. You wouldn't want to be in my skin.

But it won't come to anything. My businesses, I can say, continue full speed ahead. In fact, my calmness has a special reason for being. I'm going to reveal it, without any problems. Damn anybody who's jealous of my success. Like I said, I live up to what I say.

Last month I earned my first million dollars. I put together an operation with some Lebanese that made, just for me, all that cumbu, minus what we had to shell out to two or three guys who were also part of the scheme. Luckily it was a small change, because they had no idea of their importance for the realization of the negotiation. As I was the pivot of the scheme, I knew full well that their evaluation was crucial for the operation to be approved, but my strategy was an intelligent one: I told them the boss had already given his approval and that their report was pro forma; but that in any case I wouldn't forget to give them a taste, something more or less token in nature, unfortunately, because my margin of profit wasn't very large, maybe next time things would be different. Or maybe not, of course... The guys fell for it like children.

Therefore, my first million dollars is in the bag. Right now it's drawing interest in one of my offshore accounts. I admit it: I'm in seventh heaven. The thing now is to keep on ascending.

There's only one thing that bothers me. The jealous sons of bitches, especially the reporters, don't give up. The latest invention is that I gave one hell of a bash to celebrate my first million. A lie. It wasn't a bash, and besides that, it was a far cry from deserving such a derisive term. It was merely a small dinner for a hundred people, some family members, closest friends, and of course my Lebanese associates who made that result possible, something I hope to repeat many times.

The dinner went smoothly, calmly, without any kind of excess (another lesson that life has taught me is that discretion is the key to success). There were even a few elegant touches that my wife insisted on introducing because, according to her, now that we're millionaires we have to learn to live like it. She asked me to order from Brazil a magazine called *Party* (for which I had to activate one of my, shall we say, contacts from the Barbarela, a woman from Rio Grande do Sul named Camille that I screw whenever I'm in Rio), from which she took a few hints that helped her organize the dinner. It was her suggestion, for example, that we remain exactly half an hour at the door to our house to receive the guests with a clothespin smile (that stretched-out smile that looks more like a grimace, as if the corners of the lips were held by clothespins). We also hired a dozen waiters, all in black pants, white shirt and gloves, and black bowtie.

The cherry on top of the cake, as seems to be the phrase, was the surprise we saved for all the guests as they left: a bottle of champagne (real champagne and not that South African spumante with the red ribbon) personalized with the name of each one, and on the label a photo of me and another of my wife.

That inspired idea was also my wife's (I'm a down-to-earth man who leaves the extravagances to her. I've noticed that since that time she's been nicer and more disposed, including in bed. A pity that she's also let herself put on weight. I have to tell her, any day now, to spend two weeks in a spa in Brazil. I've been told that São Paulo has good spas.

I'm thinking of going with her. But I'll stay in Rio, needless to say. Tomorrow I'm going to call Camille to set a date for my trip.

João Melo's stories have appeared in *Words Without Borders*, *Catamaran Literary Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Archipelago Books* and *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. He was awarded the 2009 Angola Arts and Culture National Prize in the literature category.