

The Dark-blue Suit

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Translated by Cliff E. Landers

“The dark-blue suit, dear, the one I brought back from Indonesia some days ago.” (She had asked, “What are you wearing to the reception, André?”)

There went Belita, once again silent, spending her life at the ironing board. Her eyes, inexpressive but at the same time with a serenity that was nevertheless intriguing, already knew the path; as for her hands, those calloused, lusterless hands (“Fairy hands,” praised her husband only after the lunches he constantly promoted there at home, with her doing all the work, obviously), were informed (how many centuries ago?) of, shall we say, the historico-social responsibilities expected of them.

Belita’s thoughts: “This suit is really very handsome; André always had very good taste, that’s one of his qualities...” She remembers the exotic scarf her husband brought her from his last work trip. “But lately he’s been bringing me worthless things....”

André was director of a state-run entity and traveled frequently in service. “These days, a good job is one that provides lunch and two or three trips a year, to clear away the cobwebs,” he would say from time to time. He had such a job.

“It’s much better than working for some foreign firm,” he theorizes. “It’s true that the gringos provide your meals, but that too comes out of the workers’ hide... Besides that, they’re the only ones who get to travel!”

He spoke little with Belita about his work as such. But, one day, while he was playing cards with a group of friends, she heard him laugh like a pig: “I’ve really got it good! No one hassles me, the entity is practically at a standstill, but even the minister doesn’t want to be bothered, and from time to time I take my work trips, here a conference or two, there some visits to exchange ideas-I admit

it, I'm one of the beneficiaries of the Revolution!" His wife thought his guffaws were rather obscene.

André's position afforded him a certain prestige. Now and then he would receive at his office bottles of spirits from foreign ambassadors, among them a Korean concoction in a greenish bottle containing some kind of reptile (it seemed to him); that was the only one he refused to drink. ("Better safe than sorry! Those Orientals are crazy, they eat dogs, roaches... I have no idea what that crap is!") He was also frequently invited to official receptions, invitations he never declined. ("In times when food is in short supply, you have to take advantage of every opportunity...")

Belita had become accustomed to never accompanying him to the receptions. The day it occurred to her to ask why he never took her, André had answered that the invitations were strictly individual. Since then, she had stopped staying up late in the living room waiting for him to return. Actually, her husband didn't care.

They had been living together for three years, during which time they had two children (Belita: "Neither of them looks like me..."). He was divorced, while she had never been married (her fiancé had been burned to death inside an armored car struck by a South African flamethrower near Huambo, virtually on the eve of Independence). By coincidence she asked, not long ago, why they couldn't get married. André's reply: "Is it necessary, love?" No, of course it wasn't.

There he is, in his undershorts, at the door of the ironing room. He doesn't say a word; Belita understands. "Relax, love. The suit is almost--"

The two rarely spoke. Or rather, he avoided talking to her. When they were at home (which wasn't easy, after all he was a man with many responsibilities... In any case, he had never slept away from home a single day!), he communicated with his wife in monosyllables; if he used more than half a dozen complete sentences a day, it would be cause for celebration.

One day, Belita got up, as her grandmother would say, on the wrong side of the bed. "Why won't you talk to me, man?" she yelled at her husband's expressionless eyes. "I'm tired, you hear, tired... For the love of God, say something, man!" For the first time, she suspected that she could reshape the world.

André argued that he liked her very much, but deep down they had little in common; the proof was that she had no interest in politics, wasted a lot of time on the telephone with her women friends, and besides that, didn't know how to play cards. What is to be done? (He had seen that title in some book or other.)

Sex? Two or three times a week they made love. It was like this: he would get into bed, give her a superficial kiss, open her legs, and introduce himself into her vagina, not noticing that she wasn't ready; two or three minutes later, he would spill into her aching insides an insipid viscosity while emitting unintelligible sounds devoid of any poetry; afterward, he would clean himself on the sheet, turn his back, and begin to snore like a satiated animal.

"To tell the truth, even that has become more and more rare. In fact, I've noticed that in the last few months, André has been acting very strangely. He hardly ever seeks me out in bed, and he keeps getting home later and later... Does the Party have meetings every night?"

Belita decides that any day now she will have a talk with her husband. She must choose the appropriate moment and be very tactful...

"All right, André, here's your suit!"

When he says goodbye to her at the door, Belita comments that in Indonesia the suits are quite handsome, as well as inexpensive. She perceives behind André's suddenly tense gaze a new glow, as if he were not on his way to merely one more reception but to an inauguration, for example, as if he himself were going to take possession of something that gave him immense satisfaction, a cabinet post, perhaps. She can't help smiling at such an outlandish comparison but says nothing.

Half an hour later, Belita barely manages to hold onto the telephone after hearing that fateful voice that will never again leave her mind: "Do you know your husband is getting married right now, in the Church of the Carmelites?"

She doesn't even have time to wonder why the world has suddenly become so dark... Before collapsing to the floor, she barely hears the voice saying, "He's wearing a dark-blue suit, quite elegant, by the way."

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.

