

## The Cell Phone

João Melo

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Chiquinha Setenta left her home earlier than usual. She had to take care of some money concerns. A mixed-race female crook from Uíge owed her five hundred dollars for some garments she had brought from Rio de Janeiro, a month ago, and she hadn't been able to receive the money. Every time she sent word to the woman the latter would reply that she would settle the matter by next week. But so far she hadn't! Whenever Chiquinha went to where the woman lived she was never there, or she would send word saying that she wasn't. So on this occasion she decided to get out really early to catch that bitch (obviously, Chiquinha Setenta's wording was ruder...) while she was still in bed. That mixed-race woman should give her the five hundred dollars on that very day, for better or for worse, because Chiquinha had just bought a cell phone from a neighbor, and she had to pay for it. As a businesswoman she obviously needed to own a cell phone and, what's more, she could not afford to have a reputation as someone who didn't pay her bills on time or had bad credit.

When Chiquinha thought about the cell phone she discreetly patted her purse to confirm that the new possession was where it should be. The reason for her concern was quite basic: she was sitting in a cab. For those who have never ridden in a cab in Luanda, let's say that taxis in that city may be less comfortable than those in New York, but are, perhaps, more exciting. Chiquinha was squeezed in between a peddler, carrying a basin filled with okra and *jimboa*, a student with a swollen head and straightened hair, whose

armpits emitted a fierce odor, and an albino with strange scales on his face. And right behind her a policeman moved his hands nervously and leaned against her neck every time the car went over a bump in the road. Chiquinha Setenta, most likely to get rid of such a discomfort, decided to start mentally constructing the summary statement of her life, beginning with the nature of her own name:

*I haven't been a virgin since 1970! That's why everybody calls me Chiquinha Setenta [Seventy]. I was born in Benguela, in Baía Farta, but have been in Luanda since I was a child. In my earliest years I lived with uncles, but then I decided to take to life. I met many men, had several abortions, and never got married. I have two sons and not even I know who their father is. But what does that matter? After Angola gained its independence I became a revolutionary (I was completely nuts!...) and I joined FAPLA [the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola]. Fortunately I managed to drop out of the party. Now, I am a businesswoman! I travel to Brazil, South Africa, and Namibia and purchase clothes and other goods in order to sell them in Luanda and elsewhere.*

Chiquinha Setenta patted her purse again, just to make sure that the cell phone bought from one of her neighbors (to facilitate her business contacts, some being international ones) was still there. Just by way of example, the next day she would be calling her kinswoman Aparecida in Rio de Janeiro, to inquire about the purchase, ordered last month, of women's panties (a daring type with an erotic heart-shaped opening in the front, which, according to her own experience, would meet with a lot of success among her customers). By one of those unsolvable mysteries of the human brain, remembering that task reminded her of the Uíge mulatto woman. However, the thought could not be more scabrous: *For sure that damn retarded woman does not even wear panties!*

The cab was just arriving at the spot where Chiquinha would get out. She couldn't help being startled when she understood that the albino was about to exit at the same stop. A risky driver's maneuver—passing two rows of cars and then bluntly pulling to the right, then speeding up resolutely while inside the car the student with straightened hair and foul odor was yowling hysterically—caused Chiquinha's startlement to dissipate, but not for long, as we shall see. In fact, when it came to her mind that she had left home while her children were still sleeping, she decided to call them to make sure everything was ok. The albino came back into her thoughts when she understood what was going on:

*Oh no! My cell phone! Who stole my cell phone?! Someone took my cell phone!... Hey you, driver! Stop! Goddamn it!*

Another theft in Luanda. The local members of the petty bourgeoisie believe, and I do not know why, that this beloved (no matter how jaunty and how irresponsible) city of ours, more than four hundred years old, can at times be seen as being similar to Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. So one more robbery or another does not add to nor diminish Luanda's image. Furthermore, on that same day, and despite the fact that it was not yet seven in the morning, the sun seemed even brighter, the sky even bluer, and even the landscape vividly colored (sorry about the poetry). Nevertheless, Chiquinha Setenta could see darkness before her, and, while screaming, she could not help watching the albino:

*Hey, you, you damned albino! Where is my cell phone?*

As soon as the taxi stopped, its worn-out brakes painfully screeching, Chiquinha Setenta's intention was to assail the albino, who looked at her with terrified eyes, perhaps thinking about all the tribulations people of his "racial" group have endured (and, believe me, will continue to endure). A most assertive voice from behind held her back. It was a voice used to giving orders:

*Wait! Lady! Wait! Do not do that! Here, I am the authority!*

This was the policeman. Making his way among the other taxi passengers he attempted to reach the door, while ordering that no one leave. As the security and public order officer he would be in charge for that purpose. How convenient was his presence, one should say. Without his presence things would be even worse. However, his efforts to reach the door could not be more useless. The situation really had become chaotic. The albino was held back by the woman street peddler. I swear, however, that I don't know if that would be evidence that gender solidarity is not a mere fiction of modern politics. The female student with straightened hair had been literally flattened against the inner wall of the cab. Chiquinha Setenta had put her purse completely upside down to let all of its contents out. These items do not need any identification because the contents of every female's purse, whether in Angola or Cochín-China, are among humankind's greatest mysteries. Because she was crying so loudly and in such despair it would seem as if Chiquinha were losing her hymen for the second time.

*It was in here! Really, it was really in here!*

She was referring of course to the cell phone. Even so, the policeman, who could not progress in his legal and well-intended attempt to reach the door to get in charge of the situation, dared to ask:

*What was in there, madam? You really had a cell phone? Or you are just willing to disturb everybody? And why would you decide to pick on an albino? That is discrimination! According to the Constitution...*

For many years now Chiquinha Setenta had lost her patience for any number of reasons.

*You son of a bitch!*—she said. *Would you dare to think that I cannot afford a cell phone? Look, I am a businesswoman, I can even buy you and all your family!... Come and arrest that damned albino! He was the one who stole my cell phone!...*

Until then, the only person in the cab to remain completely silent and not make even the tiniest sound (if we add to the words exchanged and the comments of most passengers the yowling of the student with the straightened hair and smelly armpits), was the driver. He abstained from anything other than driving the car, dangerously overtaking other vehicles while greeting other drivers most effusively, and provocatively honking against all those unwary drivers who had dared to face the chaotic and violent city traffic that day. When the chaos caused by the missing cell reached its maximum the driver immediately stopped the car and discreetly nodded, out of all others' view, at the fare collector who, unseen by all, locked the exit door for passengers. A few minutes later, as the argument went on and on, around and around, getting hotter and hotter, he took his own cell phone out of his pocket and directed a question to Chiquinha Setenta (after all, one should bring to an end that heated discussion in the *kimbundu* language because the day was just beginning and he would have long working hours; and more or less for the same reasons the narrator needs to end this report somehow...):

Madam, your cell phone number, please?

The story of the security and public order officer who stole Chiquinha Setenta's cell phone is still well known in the city. However, nobody knows why it is still mentioned as "the-case-of-the-boot-that-answered-phone-calls."

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