

# *Africa Sickness*

**Zin Murphy**

Copyright 2020 Zin Murphy

**Uniro Publications**

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, places or events is purely coincidental. The characters are products of the author's imagination.

## License Notes

Thank you for downloading this free e-book. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes, provided the book remains in its complete original form. Thank you for your support.

To discover more work by Zin Murphy, visit:

<https://www.free-ebooks.net/drama/Revolution-Number-One>

## Africa Sickness

Gunfire salutes Makália's New Year.

It is the country's sixth year of independence, and the colonial war has morphed into a civil war, which has progressed enough that firing guns to kill people has become unusual in the capital. The chance to fire them in celebration is rare, and not to be missed.

The sound wakes Ed from an uneasy sleep. He feels awful. His head aches, his leg hurts, he cannot remember where he is or what that damned racket is. It sounds to him like the audio track of a war film nearing its climax.

The young man sits up in bed, lifts the sheet to wipe the sweat from his face, for it is mid-summer here in the Southern Hemisphere, swings his legs off the bed, places his feet instinctively into his flip-flops, wraps the sheet around himself, moves into the living-room and towards the french windows to see what is going on. A searing pain in his left leg brings him to a halt and jolts him fully awake.

*Of course!* He is at home, his temporary home, in Jindungo, the crumbling capital of the former Portuguese colony of Makália. His head aches because he had spent too much of the day walking around the city bare-headed in the sun, and his leg is giving him grief because the treatment he is buying from a traditional healer in the hope of curing his long-term limp has yet to prove effective. Well, Ed knew it was always likely to make things worse before it could make them better.

Ed shuffles along the concrete floor, trying to ignore the pain in his leg. He slides open the french windows and steps out onto his balcony on the third floor of a five-storey block of flats designed by Cuban architects and built by Makalian workers under their supervision.

Ed's block – the block in which he has been allocated a share in a flat – currently houses a cosmopolitan mix of Makalian officials and foreign guest workers from both East and West. The block opposite is inhabited mainly by Cuban teachers and doctors, here on a mission of solidarity with Makália, but tonight they must be partying elsewhere, for there is no sign of them.

The gunfire intensifies; the sound of it is deafening. As Ed is about to lean over the balcony rail to see what is going on below, a hail of bullets flies upwards past his eyes. He realises with a shock that the neighbours below are firing automatic rifles into the air from the edge of their own balcony.

Ed swears in English and steps well back. So this is how you celebrate the New Year in Makália! He goes back inside his living-room. A clock on the wall suggests the time is indeed shortly after midnight.

More gunfire invigorates his headache. Sleep does not beckon. The two parties he has invitations to will be in full swing, but now it is too late to go to either of them. The curfew came down at midnight. Guests who didn't leave early – and who would on New Year's Eve? – will have to stay and party until the curfew rises with the sun at dawn. Would the authorities really enforce it tonight of all nights? The soldiers themselves would surely rather be celebrating. There again, any soldiers who actually *were* patrolling might be more trigger-happy than usual, out of inebriation or resentment. In any case, Ed has no wish to leave his flat, which now seems to him a place of relative safety.

*Safety*, Ed mutters to himself, *something to celebrate!* He limps across the room to the cupboard that holds his liquor collection and pulls out a half-full bottle of Portuguese firewater. He finds a clean glass, pours a shot, takes it to the sofa and tunes the radio to the concert being given by the Gabonese singer Pierre Akendengué, recorded live at the Karl Marx Cinema, formerly

the Santa Engrácia Opera House, located just a couple of kilometers from his flat, earlier in the evening and being broadcast now in hope of encouraging people to keep off the streets. He taps his wedding ring on the glass in tune to the music. When the song ends, Ed knocks back the firewater. He relishes the way it sears the back of his throat, enough to distract his attention from the pain in his leg and the menace of the now intermittent gunfire outside.

Ed contemplates taking a chemical analgesic to calm his leg, which is starting to twitch as well as ache, but prudence would then mandate switching his drink to water, and Ed feels that at barely thirty he is too young for either death or prudence, so he sticks with the firewater, which is starting to taste more than palatable, until the concert ends, the gunfire subsides and he can imagine that his left leg, now stretched along the sofa, belongs to someone else and is ruining *their* life, not his. Taking great care, Ed sets his empty glass next to the bottle, which still holds a little clear fluid, on the floor, lies back on the rickety sofa, and passes out.

*Jesus, it's hot! What's that bloody row? Surely they're not still firing guns? What time is it?*  
A new year, but the same baking, asphyxiating heat as the year before, the day before. The angle of the sunlight blinding him and scorching his body and brain through the front window tells Ed that it is around ten in the morning, and the bloody row must be someone banging relentlessly at the door of his flat.

Ed takes care not to trip on the bottle and glass he recalls depositing on the floor, as he limps to the door.

“Who is it?” he demands in Portuguese.

“Oh, come on, man, open up!”

Even with a hangover that seems to be blocking his ears the better to keep his headache in place, Ed recognises the voice. He opens the door to let in his friend and colleague, José Carlos Ndunguidi, but is knocked back into his flat by two young women smiling in both amusement and embarrassment, propelled in from behind by José Carlos, who pushes his own way in after them, laughing as though he has played a great joke.

“Hey, Mr Scripps, how many times have I got to tell you? Don't open your door to anyone you haven't checked through the peephole! That's what it's for. Could've been anyone – dirty rebels, filthy South Africans, nasty neighbours – all imitating my nice friendly voice so they could come in and kill you. Aren't you lucky it's actually me? And look what fine company I've brought you!”

José Carlos indicates the two women with him, who do indeed look decidedly decorative to Ed, though he'll reserve judgement on the quality of their company until they actually say something. Anyway, they've made a good start in not seeming fazed by his appearance: half naked, half asleep and thoroughly bedraggled, his fine wavy blond hair, normally a source of attention and attraction in this part of the continent, now dull and matted, as though he had made a poor attempt at dreadlocks.

Ed gets the three of them to sit as comfortably as they can in his ramshackle front room, asks what they want to drink.

“Whatever you've got, my man Edward.”

“Yeah, erm, like, whisky, beer, coffee, tea, fanta, oh yeah Portuguese firewater, must be some left. Erm, you know ...”

“Leave it to me, brother. I know where you keep everything. You don't look too good.”

“No. I feel like death warmed up. Only colder. If you don't mind, I'll go and clean myself up. Join you when I feel a bit more human, Zeca, OK?”  
Even indoors, the light is blinding, the air seething.

“Do that. Look, Ed, your flatmates, have they arrived in Jindungo yet?”

“Nah. Still stuck in England, waiting for their entry visas. Back in a minute, ladies. Make yourselves at home. Put some music on, if you want. No, on second thoughts, please don't.”

As Ed closes his eyes against the pain in his leg and the ache in his head and lets his house radar guide him towards his bathroom, he wonders whether the giggles behind him denote sympathy or derision.

Ten minutes later, having bathed as best he can with cold water stored in a five-litre plastic flagon that once held wine and later beautiful big scarlet cockroaches that would emerge and fly away, and with his left leg wrapped in an inexpertly fashioned bandage, Ed makes it unobserved to his bedroom, dresses in the cleanest clothes he can find while performing the incantations against evil beings who cursed his leg when he was a child, and limps back into the sitting room, where only the darker-skinned of José Carlos's two friends still sits on his sofa.

“Where's Zeca and your ... his friend?”

The woman produces a smile that reminds Ed his heart is still working and points with her tumbler at the closed door to one of the spare bedrooms.

Ed wonders what language he should speak to her in. She decides for him: English.

“Come and sit down” She pats the uncomfortable sofa next to her. Ed notices her long fingers and her unfashionably slim hips as she makes the gesture. “You look as though you've had a long night. I hope it was a good one, too,” she says. Memories of gunfire assail Ed's brain.

“Uh, I've had better. And you?”

A mellifluous laugh momentarily soothes Ed's hangover.

“Me, too, actually. Anyway, Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year, to you and yours and all of Makália!”

“Um-hmmm. We live in hope.” Again that laugh. *Where did she get such good English? That much control of intonation?*

“I'm Ed, by the way. Ed Scripps.”

“Yeah, Zeca told me your name. About a hundred times. I'm Luísa. Maria Luísa dos Santos Nascimento e Silva, for short. Or just Luísa. Hey, sit down, I'll get you something to slake your thirst. What's your poison?”

*Is she taking the piss? Well, never mind, let her, any time. With that voice.*

“Water.” Ed can barely force the word out between his dry lips. “The stuff in the fridge. The other stuff, in the flagons, is only good for washing. Though equally precious.” *Listen to yourself, fuckwit!*

Ed sits down and reaches a hand out toward Luísa's shoulder, but she is on her feet and heading toward the kitchen and the fridge. Dizziness attacks Ed and he stretches out on the sofa, feeling under his face the warmth where Luísa's bottom had been. *Cheek to cheek*, he thinks, and once again dives into sleep.

Ed wakes to the cooling touch of Luísa's hand on his forehead. She looks worried, but gives him a smile that would warm an English winter – *ah, if only, first time in my life I've wished for an English winter* – and helps him to sip from the glass of water she proffers. The next time Ed wakes, Luísa is talking to Zeca's other friend in a language Ed fails to understand but identifies as Swahili. He catches the name Assunção, which reminds him of his estranged wife Conceição, before his lids close like a submarine hatch. The time after

that, the light indicates late afternoon, and only José Carlos – Zeca – is still with him.

Ed's left leg feels different, still painful, but lighter. He looks down at it. Someone has stripped the bandage away.

“What have you done to my leg, damn you?”

“What have *you* done to your leg? It looks awful! It stinks!”

“That's just the medicine the traditional healer put on. Some kind of ancient ointment. It's going to cure my limp.”

“Yeah, you won't even *be able* to limp when you've only got one leg. Are you crazy?”

“No, of course not. Traditional medicine has worked for Makalians for thousands of years, so it can work for me. Western medicine hasn't.”

“What did you take for your hangover?”

“Nothing. I don't keep Western medicine in my home. You're Makalian, what do you take?”

“Me? I take Panadol. When I'm lucky enough to find any.”

Ed groans, but Zeca continues. “And it's your lucky year because I happen to have some today, in fact here and now.” He reaches into a trouser pocket and pulls out a tiny jar, rolls two pills from it into Ed's hand, passes him the unfinished glass of water which Luisa has left beside the sofa and waits patiently until Ed wilts under his hard stare and swallows the pills.

“Right. Now, let's take a good look at this leg. Bloody hell, some bastard has cut you!”

“Don't call my traditional healer a bastard. He was just doing his job.”

“His job, your future. Ed, I can't help you with this. You've got to see a doctor. A real doctor.”

“You mean a 'Western' doctor?”



“Ed, I mean a doctor of any nationality who has studied science-based medicine and been trained to apply it.”

“Easier said than done, here.”

“Can't your Embassy help?”

“There isn't a British doctor in Makália. They advise us to see the doctor at the Danish Embassy. She's usually good about seeing non-Danes.”

“Ed, do it! As soon as you can. I need you for my beach volleyball team!”

Ed smiles as the Panadol sends him into a dream where, in a dim-lit hospital ward, cool hands smooth and soothe the ache in his leg until Conceição bursts in armed with a Kalashnikov. Before he can ask where she got it, the lights fade to black.

The summer sun has yet to set at six-thirty the following afternoon. Ed is in a back room at the Danish Embassy, located in a low-rise building in downtown Jindungo. The doctor examining him has eyes as blue as his own. Her hair and skin are even paler. Her name is Clara Diamant, and her face is registering shock as she examines Ed's leg.

“Who did this to you?” she asks.

“I've had a limp as long as I can remember, actually. But now it's getting treated properly and cured. By my friend Ngaizekele, a traditional healer.”

“He might be traditional, but he isn't your friend! And he was never going to heal you like this.”

Ed is beginning to believe he has made a mistake in coming to see someone with such preconceptions.

“As a matter of fact, I'd trust him with my life.”

Clara is about to comment on this but holds back.

Ed goes on: “He's already pinpointed where the evil influences were coming from, *and* he's counteracted them. Now I'm just waiting for his healing medicine to take effect. No pain, no gain.”

That is too much for Clara.

“It'll be a case of death cures all if you don't let me clean this up! May I? I *strongly* advise it.”

Ed ponders. Maybe there is something in what she is saying. Not to mention a bit of close contact with her.

“OK, go on then. Thank you.”

Clara sets to work. Her touch is soft, but contact with the wound the healer made to let the evil influences out is painful. To distract Ed, she asks him how long he's been in Makália.

“Just a couple of months. Should have been here earlier, but, you know, the paperwork. Instead of getting rid of the Portuguese bureaucracy, the Makalians just took it over wholesale and added some new layers of their own.”

“Tell me about it. *My* trouble was *staying* here. I came with my husband, who was doing his military service. Yes, honestly! You know in Denmark we still have it, for men, but you can do foreign aid work instead of learning to kill people, so coming here to look after the health of our diplomats seemed like a good idea.”

“A soft option.”

“Hardly. There's nothing soft about Jindungo! But I like that. I like it here. And when Andre had done his stint, he went back and I stayed. I even managed to take over his job.”

“Is he coming back?” Ed asks, a bit too quickly.

“I hope not. Hey, don't look at me that way! He did some unethical things involving the diplomatic pouch, and I think the Makalians found out, so it would be unwise for him to come back without diplomatic cover. He's biding his time in Antwerp, doing a bit of import/export with Zaire. And having a good time, I'm told. Not that I particularly want him *here*. Frankly, I tend to get on very well with most Makalian men. They like to party and so do I! And what are *you* doing here, Mr. Ed?”

“Just Ed. I'm setting up a special unit to teach foreign languages at Petromak. You know, the state oil company. It's fun. And useful. Then, next autumn, I'm going back to England to study so that I'm actually qualified to do the job I'm already doing.”

“Well, it sounds like you have landed on your feet, as I believe you say.”

Ed nods vigorously.

“Yes! And what's more, once they stop pretending to be communists, there are going to be fantastic business opportunities in this country, especially for foreigners who understand the way things work here. I think that will happen sooner rather than later, and I intend to be ready.”

Clara looks doubtful. Ed finds that look attractive. He finds all of Clara attractive; even her voice posing awkward questions.

“If you don't mind my asking, why did Petromak give you a job you don't think you're qualified to do?” she asks him.

“Well, not many well-qualified people are willing to come to a war zone. And I guess they were looking to the long – Aaaaagh!”

“It's OK, it's just to disinfect. There's no need to make a fuss. Don't bite your lip like that or it'll bleed and I'll have to disinfect your mouth, too. Talking of which ...”

As Ed lies flat out in agony, Clara slips out of the room. She returns a minute later carrying a tray with two glasses and a bottle of Danish firewater on it. She sets the tray on a table in a corner of the room.

“Here, get up and have some of this. It won't cure your limp but it won't kill you, either, and it *will* make you feel better. Before I stitch your wound. Which, I'm sorry, will make you feel worse, since the military has a monopoly on anaesthetic in this city.”

“Are you kidding?”

He sees that she is not. Ed takes a deep breath.

“Well, the Makalian Army is keeping the South Africans out and you and me alive, so I can't begrudge them a bit of anaesthetic.”

“You will, Mr Ed, you will.”

Zeca is waiting down below in the company car which he had commandeered to drive Ed to the Danish Embassy and then home, since Ed is in no state to drive himself. Zeca climbs out and supports his colleague as Ed hobbles to the passenger door and lets himself in, groaning. Zeca looks worried.

“Are you OK? What did the good doctor do to you?”

“Doctor? Witch! Opened up the scratch my healer made, then supposedly cleaned it, then poured a gallon of antiseptic into it, then stitched it up with only Danish firewater as any kind of anaesthetic.”

“Hurt?”

“You can't imagine the pain! I'll never drink that stuff again, as long as I live.”

“Hey, come on, at least you will live.”

“Yeah, she said I should go back to England to get it looked at more thoroughly, and to have the stitches out with real anaesthetic. Said her supply of firewater was running low.”

“If you need to go to England, I can persuade our boss to let you have the time off.”

“You can? But what about the ticket and the exit visa? I've been told those visas take weeks.”

Zeca starts the car and moves into the light rush hour traffic. He laughs.

“Trust Ndunguidi! I'm your friend and I'm the man who gets things done. Fear not and think of England!”

“You're ace, man.” Ed leans back in his seat, stretches his leg as best he can, groans then latches the newly installed seat belt.

“Doctor? Witch! Witch doctor!”

Zeca chuckles. “Nice eyes, though. Bewitching.”

Ed groans even louder.

Two days later, Zeca is driving Ed again, this time to the airport.

“Zeca, I don't know how you did this, but I'm eternally grateful.”

“Come on, that's what friends are for. I'm just sorry Petromak wouldn't pay for you to go all the way to England. Still, Portugal's not so bad. I mean, the Portuguese might not be in the vanguard of modern medicine, but they've had centuries of practice at stitching – and unstitching – scratches young men picked up in their colonies.”

“Petromak are amazing! A full fortnight, hotel at their expense!”

“Yeah, have a holiday. Enjoy yourself!”

“I will. Pity I can't afford to go farther. Anyway, be nice to see Lisbon again.”

“Maybe see that wife of yours. The one you never talk about.”

“The one I wish, Zeca, I really wish I didn't have.”

“Still wear the ring?”

“Keeps the vamps off. I can't afford to lose blood these days. Look, is there something I can get for you when I'm there?”

“Sure is.”

While Zeca manoeuvres his way through the traffic, which is light on cars and heavy on pedestrians, he rummages in a pocket and brings out a couple of sheets of paper. He passes his handwritten list to Ed.

“Couple of things for my wife and kids. Don't worry if you can't get everything.”

“You're married, Zeca? I didn't know.”

“Of course I'm married. All Makalians are married. What do you think we are, a load of fairies?”

“That's not a word I'd use.”

“Hell, even the fairies are married here. Keeps the bigots off their backs. Believe me, there are as many fairies in Makália as anywhere else.”

Ed scans the pages, and gulps.

“Erm, there's quite a lot here. I might not have time to get it all.”

“Don't worry, Ed. Every little helps. You know how hard it is to get stuff here. Oh, by the way, someone here is looking for you. I'm not sure who, but apparently he's been very persistent. And that's not a good sign. Got any enemies?”

“Come off it, Zeca, not even *I* can make real enemies in just a couple of months.”

“OK. But from before. You spent the last few years in Portugal, right? Before that, England?”

“Boy, did I make enemies in Portugal, without even trying! But in the end I let the criminals take over my business, and I helped get the one really bad guy put away for years.”

“OK, Ed. Just do me a favour. To be on the safe side, add one thing to that list.”

“What?”

“A gun. For you. And learn how to use it.”

It feels great to be back in Lisbon.

In truth, Ed has only been away for six months. Before he left Lisbon to return to England, en route, as it turned out, for Makália, he had lived and worked in Portugal's capital for five good years. It came to seem like home. Until criminals into whose territory he had ventured made it clear they would kill him if he didn't leave. On the grounds that dying in his twenties was not a great life choice, Ed packed his bags and departed from the city he loved. Now he is back, but he wanders the streets of the city like a ghost, hoping not to run into anyone who might recognise him and pass on the news of his return to to people who would still rather see him dead than defying them by his mere presence. He is also keen not to be seen by any friends as a wreck after only two months in Africa. Those he told had thought he was crazy going to a war zone, mad anyway for choosing Africa over Europe, and Ed did not want to admit they had a point.

Petromak have housed Ed in an unpretentious hotel in Praça Alegria, a neat square in the heart of the city, with a small park at its centre planted with trees which Ed once considered exotic. He can hobble from there into the commercial district without too much pain, enjoying the strange mixture of cold and sunshine. He has brought Zeca's shopping list: might as well get that

out of the way in the couple of days he has free before his appointment at the hospital. Few of the items seem practical; most are to do with appearance.

*Jesus, thank goodness I haven't got a family to clothe. Zeca must have a lot of brothers!*

Ed soon reaches the Rossio, Lisbon's small central square, once the scene of public executions and, more recently, the starting point for revolutionary or counter-revolutionary demonstrations, which would set off for the government buildings beside the ferry terminal, and the riverside march to the presidential palace near the Jerónimos Monastery in the posh district of Belém. Today, pigeons parade undisturbed on the mosaic cobbles by the mid-square fountains, striving to make themselves heard above the horns of the gridlocked traffic. With Makalian oil money in his pocket, Ed is able to do what he could rarely afford to when he lived in the city, namely take a table outside the Pastelaria Suiça café and sip an aperitif while watching the world go by, enjoying the slow pace at which it does so.

Ed drinks in the sight of the Palladian architecture of the National Theatre just metres away from the café, along with the taste of his wine spritzer, made with the local Colares white, nostalgia getting the better of his awareness that it is a waste to dilute a good wine. Ed attacks his bowl of olives, another luxury he has not seen in Jindungo. He looks up at the statue high on a plinth in front of the theatre, Mexico's ill-fated Emperor Maximilian repurposed, after his execution, as Portugal's King Pedro IV, too high above them all for anyone to notice the mis-match. Ed sits back, closes his eyes and lets the comfort of Lisbon envelope him.

He is woken by a waiter asking him if he would like another drink. The sun is in roughly the same place, so Ed assumes he has dozed only briefly, not long enough to make a spectacle of himself. Nevertheless, he notices over the



waiter's shoulder a middle-aged man staring at him. The recognition, if that is what it is, is not mutual. Then the waiter obscures his vision as Ed orders an espresso and a custard tart. When the waiter moves off to fill his order, the observer has disappeared.

Ed does not get much shopping done. He feels light-headed, his leg is throbbing, and items on Zeca's list like “stylish pair of top-quality ladies' shoes” are not specific enough to help him choose. Moreover, he deems it wise to keep glancing around him to make sure he is not being watched. He decides to call it a day and, after stopping in a bar for a quick coffee at the counter to wake him up, he heads back to his hotel for a rest. On the short walk to Praça Alegria, the back of Ed's neck tingles, but whenever he turns around, there is no sign of anyone observing him.

Despite the coffee, Ed falls asleep on his hotel bed. He has short, intense dreams in which he is back in Jindungo. In one, his leg is cured and he can run like the wind along a beach of pristine sand. In another, he is being interrogated about diamond smuggling; the only way he can escape is by falling asleep, but his questioners have set a telephone to squall whenever he succeeds, bringing him straight back into their world. Then Ed realises that their world is his world, he is in Lisbon not Africa, and the phone beside his bed is ringing. Both relieved and irritated, he picks it up.

“Ed?” A woman's voice. *Promising.*

“Ed, darling.” *Even more so.* A pause. *Unless ...*

“Ed, darling, this is your wife. It's so lovely to talk to you.” *I haven't said a word yet.* “After all this time. I've missed you so much, isn't it obvious? Oh, Ed! When can I see you?”

“That isn't a good idea ... at the moment. I'm over here for medical reasons. I'm not at my best, not by any means.”

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

