

## **Foreword**

“That’s where I learned to fly,” my dad tells me pointing to a lick of sand curling out to sea in the middle distance. “I did my course at the airbase there before I went to Mozambique. Can you see it?”

I squint across the blinding sparkle of the Portuguese sea and can just make out a few squat buildings rising above the pale gold sand. It’s difficult to see an airbase and even more difficult to imagine him learning to fly. He’s a pilot, when wasn’t he?

We’ve just moored in Aveiro after a month of coast-hopping through France and Spain on my dad’s new yacht. It’s a 37-footer like a floating caravan with a dining table that converts to a double bed and a minute galley with three gas rings. This is our first stop in a Portuguese port. My dad seems eager to show us around. He’s happy. Like he’s come home.

That was the summer of 1987; I know because that summer was his last before he went missing - was our last –and considering it from now that month was the longest time I’d been with him for perhaps ten years. My parents’ divorce took me from Portugal to Manchester when I was barely five and I flew to Lisbon three or four times a year, mostly with my older brother, but sometimes alone, when the school holidays came around. In Portugal I was English; in England I was Portuguese, and wherever I was somebody was missing.

By the following February my father was lost at sea in a storm off the coast of northern Portugal. By the time he went, though, I’d missed him for all the time I could remember. After more than 20 years of thrills and adventures flying tin-can propeller aircraft held together with paper clips in Mozambique and Jumbo Jets for Air Portugal, his end was shaped like a boat. He had asked me what he should

name it. “Big Trouble,” I said and that’s how it announced itself on bow and stern when we picked it up in La Rochelle that final summer. He was 42.

The last time I saw him was at Heathrow airport just three weeks before he disappeared. I was 14 and he waved me off at the departure gate as I flew back to Manchester to my mother. Airports, airplanes and departures were a constant in my childhood. I travelled in the jump seat of a 737 cockpit countless times; slept on a mattress over an air vent in a 747 on the way to New York as my dad co-piloted the plane. For both me, and my brother I suspect, planes felt like buses until 1988. They were easy to get on and any place in the world was just another departure lounge away.

Disappearance is not like death. There is no end moment and waiting becomes a draining habit, even when you don’t realise you’re doing it. I’m no longer sure how long I actively waited in the hope he’d be found bobbing around in a life raft in the Atlantic or that he’d be released by pirates or drug smugglers, the latter being my grandmother’s pet explanation for her son being gone so long. At some time that I can’t pinpoint my dad’s disappearance stopped being the very air I breathed and I managed to move along without the benefit of a funeral or that yearned-for miracle.

In January 2009 my grandmother – my Portuguese *avó* - died at 91. She’d had a “good innings” as my English mum said, but in spite of her age tears would catch me out on car journeys to see my grandfather at the old people’s home or eating a cod cake as I realised I’d never taste one made by her again.

After the funeral was done with I went to my grandparents’ empty house to sort through their things. On the uppermost shelf of an old built-in wardrobe at the top of the stairs I found a box of black and white photographs stored in a faded white suitcase. There were hundreds of them and several packets of negatives. Who were these people? I recognised my dad, my aunt and my grandparents, but the others? There were some of my grandmother’s half brothers and sisters at some kind of family reunion and an ancient picture of a couple and a newborn

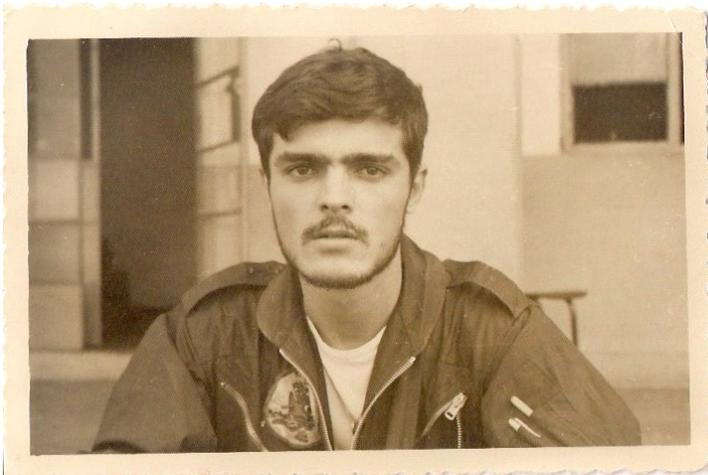
baby. All three of them dressed in black, posing stiffly for the photographer. I recognise traces of my own face in the woman. On the back in tiny copperplate: *To my dearest mother with love and affection from me, my wife and our little daughter. Armando Botto Aleixo. 1917.* My great-grandfather. My grandfather's father.



The pictures were not neatly arranged. They had been tidied into a box that once held crochet yarn, but if they were ever in any sort of order it wasn't obvious to me what it was. Some are holiday snaps, some studio portraits in the manner of those that people gave as gifts to friends before anyone thought it might seem vain. My dad and aunt Tina retouched to the photographic perfection of a slicked-down side parting and pin curls looking off into the near distance. Their lower halves merge into the white background where the photographer's signature is picked out in relief.

This box of photos is now mine. “What am I going to do with it?” my grandfather said later when I asked him at the home if he still wanted it. I realised as I rifled through it that my own son would never know my grandmother, much less my father who was gone long before my son came along.

At the bottom I found pictures my dad sent back to Portugal from Africa. Of the three or four there, one in particular stood out. In it he’s in his flight suit and looks very young and so serious. It has a note on the back of it too and I was taken aback to see his handwriting so long after his death. *PAI – Não pareço um deportado? Com um abraço do NECAS.* (DAD – don’t I look like a deportee? A hug from NECAS).



Necas or Manecas was my father’s childhood nickname. To this day my aunt calls him that whenever we talk about him. It’s a diminutive of Manuel.

My father Manuel da Piedade Botto Aleixo was a Portuguese Air Force pilot in Mozambique from 1968 to 1970 and was just one of an estimated 800,000 to 1 million Portuguese men who fought in Portugal’s African colonies to quell the “civil wars” between 1961 and 1974. Portugal’s total population at the time was just over 8 million people.

My dad’s time in Mozambique was before I was born and never of any interest to me, and, although I knew he’d been there it was no more significant to me then

than the fact that he had black hair that started to curl just before he'd go to the barber's to cut it back, or that if he took you to a party he would soon draw an enthralled crowd laughing at his jokes.

“So Doctor, should we start with the ones with the fewest holes or with the most?”

I had heard my grandmother tell me this story dozens of times, and in exactly the same way, and my father's usual flippant tone is what I had taken from it. I thought of it then, looking at that photograph, and heard her say it as if it was the first time. So, my father sorted the dead from the wounded and then the most wounded from the least and loaded those that might be saved into his plane. He never spoke to me about it.

I decided then that I wanted to know more. Instead of carrying on waiting I would go and find my dad for myself and discover as much as I could about, what must have been, a defining time in his life. He was just 22 when that photograph was taken. At 25 he came back from Mozambique a war veteran, like those Vietnam vets you see in the films. How had this never occurred to me before? Who was he when he went out there? Did it traumatise him? Who was he when he came back? What did he have to do?

Being a woman of my time Google is my first stop. In one afternoon I find three different blogs that mention *Furriel Piloto* – Flight Lieutenant in English I suppose - Manuel Aleixo and the most thrilling finds of all are photographs of him eating soup in some place called Marrupa on Easter Sunday 1968, one of him amongst a group of pilots all oozing late 1960s cool, and – this I can hardly believe – a photo of him doing a fly-by in a T6 Harvard fighter plane labelled with his name and rank. I feel like some kind of digital archaeologist and though my father won't come knocking on my door some day, finding these traces of him feels like the next best thing. I look up the archive department of the Portuguese Air Force and email them asking for his military record. They message back

almost immediately saying it will take five working days to find it. It's insane to me that this information has just been waiting for somebody to read it for all these years.

I leave comments with my email and phone number on all the blogs and wait.

## **Departure**

Before I was born my parents lived in Mozambique for a short time in a place called Nova Freixo and they rented a house there. The story has always been about the two of them. Because my brother was just a toddler he's a bit player and if I think of him he's just sitting on somebody's knee looking angelic. My dad would go off to the airbase where he "worked" and sometimes be away overnight and when he came back he would circle over the house in his airplane to tell my mum he was back. I imagine her waving to him from the garden and rushing inside to put the dinner on so it's ready when he gets in. It's quite the suburban cosy scene and in my mind falls just short of my mum in bobby socks and a beehive and my dad calling, "Hi, honey I'm home," as he gets in from a long day's flying. *I Love Lucy* set in the African jungle except they were sitting on tea boxes and the only furniture they had was a bed, a cot and a dining table. It would be a perfect love story if they hadn't separated by the time I was four, but it comforts me to believe that the potential for a happy ending was so patent there in the heart of Africa.

My parents met in 1966. My mum Christine-Chase-of-Wythenshawe, brought up on a council estate and eager at 24 to see more of the world, was on her third foreign holiday with her friend Barbara-from-the-Inland-Revenue. The story goes that the two girls were sitting in a night club in Albufeira - probably with Sinatra playing in the background - on the Algarve in southern Portugal and some young Portuguese man was trying to chat them up.

“His English was terrible,” my mum says, “all he knew how to say was *I looves yuuu, I looves yuu*. I was sick and tired of it, but then your dad came along with his friend João and they sort of saved us.”

Manuel-Aleixo-of-Lisboa told her he was older than he was by two years to impress her, and she said she was a couple of years younger so as not to scare him off. Still, he must have swept her off her feet because by October of 1966 my mum had moved to Faro and on my dad’s 21<sup>st</sup> birthday at the end of that month... “As they were getting ready your dad asked me to pretend he was turning 23,” my *avó* Albertina – my grandma - says, “because he’d told her he was 22 and he didn’t want her to know, but we had a cake with the right number of candles and everything. The party was at Mónaco – that restaurant on the coast road to Cascais, you know, where the road bends and all those cars crash. I remember *Sr. Zé* once had a crash there, *Dona* Emilia was terrified they were going to end up in the sea, she says that...”

We never did get to the end of that story, though she told it to me a dozen times or more, the Mónaco restaurant always side-tracked her into the story about the neighbours and the details of how my mum found out she was three years older than my dad never came out.

Despite this less-than-honest beginning my parents married on 6th February of the next year – 1967 – less than a year after meeting in Albufeira. A whirlwind romance with my dad as the chisel-jawed hero and my mum the leading lady played by Audrey Hepburn, to whom, in fact, she bore a not insignificant resemblance at the time, from what I’ve seen in the photos. My dad, having got married after being called up for the air force but failing to ask the permission of a superior officer he had yet to meet, was supposed to have been jailed for ten days for marrying my mum. Romantic as it seems it’s always sounded unlikely to me, but my mum swears it’s true. My dad then spent a year in the Portuguese Air Force training to be a pilot, and was... “The best pilot in the class,” says *avó* Albertina, ever the dotting, but perhaps slightly deluded mother.

While he was doing his training, my mum got a job at the British embassy in Lisbon; now was that before or after my brother came along? Details here are sketchy. She lived with my grandparents and my aunt Tina in their two-bedroom house near Lisbon airport. It must have been cramped. The house is tiny even now with its two small living rooms, but when my mum was living there the second living space was still part of the back garden. Did she sleep on the sofa? My brother, Paulo, was born in July, that I definitely know, and perhaps a little too early for perfect Hollywood timing - “People said he looked like a little old man, but he was the most beautiful child I’d ever seen,” Albertina again - but he was blond and blue-eyed to make up for any embarrassment about making an early entrance.

A year after that my dad was posted to exotic Mozambique to “do his duty.” Nobody actually said that, but that’s how my grandfather Julio might have told it, except that he was too stoic to talk about much at all. My *avó* more than made up for any silence on his part, though. My mum, unable to face life without my father and concerned for the future of the incipient family unit, as in all solid screenplays of this kind, followed a few months later with my brother in tow. So Twiggy-like was my mother at the time that when they put her, my brother and their single bag on the luggage scale before they boarded the plane, in all they weighed not more than 50 kilos. I think of them standing like two refugees on that scale and so slight are they both that they are barely there at all.

What other scraps do I have? The airbase was called AB6, *Aeródromo Base Nº6*. I know that because I remember a *Fado* song my dad would sing: *AB6 como eu te vi, e como tu estás agora...* AB6 how you used to be, and what you are now... My parents shared their house with two couples at different times. My mum didn’t get along with the lady of the first couple but liked the second one. Their landlady was an old colonial type called *Dona Olympia* who used to beat her black servants. My own image of this “battle axe” is of a white-haired cartoon Cruella de Vil wielding a stick. My mum, properly playing her role of British-fish-out-of-water would do her own washing as she was too embarrassed to ask her own *boy* – a married man in his thirties called Anastácio - to do the housework for her.

My parents went on holiday to Lourenço Marques, known as the Pearl of the Indian Ocean and the capital of Mozambique that is now called Maputo, and stayed with my father’s uncles and cousins who had emigrated there in the 1960s.

The beaches were wonderful and my father's youngest cousin, Maria Alice who was about 16, "was quite taken with her handsome pilot cousin and his glamorous English wife," my mum says.

This is what I knew - from 1973 when I was born, until 2009 - about the first few years of my parents' lives together. Broad strokes; the family saga of our beginning told and re-told and then honed in the telling and then sharpened further into this summary. I've said it a few times when asked: "My mum lived in Mozambique," or "My dad was a pilot in Mozambique," and if whoever I'm speaking to is not Portuguese they might ask what they were doing there. "In the Colonial War. My dad was an air force pilot." That's usually enough to end a conversation about it and I wouldn't have much else to say if somebody wanted to get into more depth.

But what do I already know about Mozambique? Now this is not so well polished, but like every good Portuguese girl I know some basics and because I'm only half Portuguese I might be forgiven for knowing a little less than some. It's in East Africa, it used to be a Portuguese colony and now it's in a terrible mess because the civilising Portuguese influence has gone... that's how it goes, I think.

Portuguese explorer and national uber-hero Vasco da Gama travelled there in 1498 as part of the Portuguese "Golden Age of Discovery" and the area was colonised in 1505. My official line on history is better than I thought. I didn't know those exact dates until I just looked them up, of course, but I had the gist.

From my contemporary history lectures at university I remember that Mozambique, Angola, Portuguese Guinea, Cape Verde and East Timor were

renamed as “overseas provinces” of Portugal – in 1951 it turns out. This was an important distinction for the fascist regime of dictator António de Oliveira Salazar. Colonies are additions to European countries and the name implies annexation and taming of the wilderness – and by implication of the savages that inhabit it - by more civilised people. Provinces, on the other hand, are like second homes in the country where we go to visit our yokel cousins. These cousins aren’t as worldly-wise as us, but we love them all the same and they are welcome to visit us in the metropolis so long as they promise not to stay.

Photos of tribesmen living in deepest Angola, worthy of a National Geographic spread, were captioned *Um Português de Angola* – A Portuguese from Angola - in school books from the 1950s onwards. This was the national mythology of the Portuguese global nation illustrated by an unsuspecting African who probably spoke no word of Portuguese and was even less likely to have heard of António Salazar and his *Estado Novo* (New State) regime in far off Portugal.

Salazar transformed the colonies into provinces, like some shepherd gathering his flock a little closer, just as independence movements were rising up all over colonised Africa. In Portuguese Africa the “trouble” first started in Angola, then in Guinea and finally Mozambique, which led to civil wars as the Portuguese regime saw it and to wars of independence as the Africans saw it. Whatever you call it this is the war my dad was sent to fight.

After my parents came back from Mozambique to Lisbon my dad was taken on by TAP-Air Portugal as an airline pilot. For the first time my parents had a bit of spare money and life looked good.

In 1971 my parents moved into the house next door to my grandparents. I marvel at my mother's ability to live in such close proximity to my grandmother, but also imagine that having a permanent babysitter was no bad deal. No. 15 was the house I moved into when I was born. Later I would walk through a specially-opened breach in the wall between the two gardens and as a toddler I more than once climbed onto my parents' garage roof through my grandfather's back garden scaring the bejesus out of my mum some ten feet below. Even after my parents separated and I was visiting from England, every day I'd walk from my dad's house - it wasn't our house, it was always his in my mind from the time we left it - through that hole in the wall to get to my *avó* who was always ready with breakfast or afternoon tea.

My grandparent's house stands empty now and my dad's house, which was only rented, has new owners. It's hard to know that this story has come to an end. Most of the characters have gone and the others have moved on.

All these narratives I carry around with me are "based on a true story". Their origins lie in facts – my parents were definitely in Mozambique and it's historically documented that the country was a Portuguese colony for over 400 years – but the details are not what I know, they are what I've been told. On top of that they've been embellished by an adoring mother (my grandma), by a wronged wife (my mum) and even by me as loving daughter.

Portuguese history, like the history of so many countries, belongs to those in power and what filters through to schools and the general public is only what is convenient for schoolchildren to understand. Like the Vietnam War for the

United States, the Portuguese Colonial War was ultimately unsuccessful. It came to an end after the military-led Portuguese Revolution of April 1974 toppled the dictatorship. What truth will I be able to uncover about a war fought for a fascist ideal, now in a democratic nation that despises its fascist past? And what has happened to the men that fought in that war? I'm certain the truth of it is not to be found in the history books. If I'm going to find out about the time my dad spent in Mozambique I need to find the men that served with him. They lived through it.

“Olá! Catarina?”

“Yes...”

“You don't know me, but I knew your dad in Mozambique. I'm the *Madman of Malaysia.*”

April 2009. I've answered a call I don't recognise on my mobile. I was expecting somebody to try to sell me something or a request for a translation. I don't get many non-business calls and certainly not from madmen. I don't say anything.

“I'm Rui Ferreira. I got your number from a blog about AB6. I was stationed in Marrupa with your dad. He used to take me on missions with him so he didn't have to go on his own.”

It's been weeks since I posted my information on the blogs and I'd figured nobody wanted to talk to me, but Rui, or *O Louco da Malásia*, as my dad would have called him, clearly wants to talk. He lives in Alfundão in the southern

Alentejo region of Portugal, about two hours from where I live. We arrange to meet at a café next time he's in Lisbon.

“I'll bring some friends,” he says.

[END: 2403 words]