

Dreams About Ghosts

Lisbon, Portugal, 1980

Carlos slaps the bottle against my chest. It burns going down, but I swallow hard and hope no one notices. I wish I could just disappear.

Normally, today being Saturday means I'll see her in two days, but everything's all fucked up now. Dusk settles like dust on the cobblestone, the picking of Fado slinks through the warm air.

Deus, her touch—I still remember exactly how it felt. I close my eyes for a second and it's like my entire body swells up. I can smell her perfume, taste the sharp mint of her American toothpaste.

Then I trip on the curb and stumble as it hits me: It's over.

I should've just stayed home. I could've said I needed to help pack, but then mom might've gotten suspicious, and anyway, part of me wanted to get away from all the boxes, the goddamn chores. And I still want to see her, even with the way it is now; so awkward when we're together, almost as if the things we did together never happened. Seeing her in the hallway at school is like ripping a bandage off my scraped knee.

I tail along at the rear of the pack, watch Carlos and Marcos skip fist-sized stones down the hilly sidewalks of *Rua de Saudade*. We hear a car window shatter, and everyone laughs. They're not gonna do anything too messed up, but I wouldn't be able to

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stop them if they did. And I've heard the rumors about what they did to the other girl, the one who's a year older than us.

The setting sun litters the city with shadows, the darkening clouds slashed by a knife and leaking gold. I've never flown on a plane before, but tomorrow I'll be up there, white clouds churning like ocean tides around us. The curtains of fog will be pulled apart by a string and America will appear, shiny with golden light and white faces topped with blonde hair. My father Manuel will dig into my shoulder with his fingertips, my mother will struggle to hold onto my younger sister Elena's sharp elbows and scabby knees. Couldn't I just be there now, instead of leading these drunks to Ms. Taylor's apartment?

But maybe tonight is *meant* to happen. This is what those stupid *novelas* my mother watches on TV are always about, right? True love. Moments like this.

Cigarette smoke and laughter blows backward. I trip and catch Donato staring at me.

"What're you lookin' at?" I pick up a loose cobblestone, fling it down the street. It barely makes a sound.

"Nothin.' When you leaving?"

"In the morning, early."

He squints, probably, like me, trying to envision the inside of a plane. Donato's wiry and pretty strong, and I've heard Marcos and Carlos complain about the crushes the girls have on him. "Why would they want him when they could have me?" I heard Marcos snap once, "Cause he's fuckin' *smart*?" But Donato *does* seem smart, and he's

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got this cool habit of letting cigarette smoke leak out of his nose as he thinks. We got drunk a bunch of Saturdays ago at *Feira de Ladra*, just the two of us, and words spilled from our mouths with the wine, making us best friends suddenly, arms on each other's shoulders. But when I saw him on Monday, he pretty much ignored me.

“You gonna' come back?”

“Nah,” I say quickly. “Won't want to.”

Donato pulls his black hat low over his eyes. I've already decided in the States, I'll get one just like it.

Up ahead of us, Carlos, who has thick arms that hang past his waist and black hair he shaves to the skull, jumps up and yanks a dress from a clothesline and drapes it over his head.

Suddenly there's the banging of a window being opened, the screech of a woman's voice.

“Put that back! *Você bastardos!*”

Carlos begins to run, flailing under the dress. I look up and see a woman waving her fist, her face red with anger.

“Hey! Get back here! Luis! They're stealing! Luis!” She bangs on the window as behind her, a child begins to wail.

“Who the fuck is Luis?” Donato sputters as we run, and with an awful ripping sound, Carlos tears the dress in half.

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We slow down at *Se Patriarchal*, where my mother prays. Many times, I've watched her knuckles grow white as her head slumps, whispering to *San Antonio*.

“Fucking bitch!” Carlos exclaims triumphantly in English, pumping Marcos' hand up and down in an exaggerated handshake. When we were assigned to the new English class together, the first thing we did was figure out how to swear. *Fuck. Shit. Asshole*. The first time I noticed Ms. Taylor look at me differently, Carlos had sworn in class, and everyone laughed, but I turned red and pushed my glasses back.

“You know, you're kinda cute,” she'd said to me as I jogged by after class. “You sure you're not older than everyone else?”

That was months ago, and it's been six days since Ms. Taylor told me it was over. It seemed so fucking *easy* for her to explain it, as she sat there after class, calmly grading essays, and I stood before her, the bottom of my T-shirt twisting in my hands. She'd made a mistake, *this wasn't right, and she was so, so sorry*. I was leaving, and so was she, when the semester was over.

She avoided my eyes, marking her place in the grade book by licking a finger and curling the page. Through the tears, I gaped at her: the pink, sunburned forehead, the pulled-back blonde hair that began to curl at the end of the day. “Please!” I pushed out, embarrassed.

“Stop!” she whispered, but I followed her outside the classroom and down the empty hallway, breaking one of our stupid rules—never be seen together at school. I

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didn't give a shit. "Chloe!?" I called, breaking another rule in calling her by her first name. Her head snapped back, she looked horrified.

"Stop!" She said again, but I only quickened my pace as her heels clicked down the hallway. *We just made love two nights ago. I ran my hands up and down those legs. Don't you remember the things I told you? How can you do this to me?*

She didn't wait to hold the door. In the school parking lot, she slid into her old car and slammed the door, but I banged on the window. The engine rattled to life.

"Please!" I shouted, my voice betraying me, breaking.

The window jerked down a few inches. "Cristiano, you're being so *dramatic*," she said evenly, and rolled her eyes. Then she forced the car into gear.

Carlos' arm rests on Marcos' shoulder as he whispers in his ear. They look back at me but I count the lines in the sidewalk, stepping over them carefully, even though the other day my father slapped the back of my neck for doing it. "A man walks with his head up," he proclaimed.

If I ran away right now I bet they'd turn on me the way I've seen them turn on others. And with me, it'd probably be worse. I'm constantly the last man picked for games, I'm the one who has to steal cigarettes from the store while they wait outside. Because of my glasses and long hair, but mostly my dad's dream of us going to America, and the fact they all know they will never go.

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We weave through café tables covered with yellow tablecloths, clouds of cigarette smoke and the fresh, cold smell of beer. Carlos snaps his finger, and behind him, Donato and Marcos scoop half-full glasses off of an abandoned table.

“Hey, give me one-” I start, but then blindly bump into an older woman wearing lots of makeup and clutching a purse.

“*Disculpa*,” I say as she brushes me away, muttering something.

“Watch out for him!” Carlos calls out gleefully, pumping his hips at the woman. “He likes the older ones!”

“Why’d you stop?” Donato offers me the bottle, more of the *aguardente* Carlos steals from his father.

The rest of the guys are fading off into the shadows. I wish as hard as I can they will just keep walking down the hill. The tram lines hang heavy and black against the sky, cutting the sunset into crooked fragments. If I squint, I can still make out the ocean in the distance.

“Hey Marcos-” Donato starts to shout, “Wait-”

“Maybe just, like, forget it, you know?” I can reason with Donato; he’s not like Carlos and Marcos. Besides, we’re friends.

“Huh?”

“Come on, man, this is fucking stupid. What’s the point?”

“They’re not gonna do nothing! Trust me. They just want to see if it’s true, or if you, like, made it up.”

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I lower my voice. “But I thought with the other girl, they tied her to a chair-”

“They make it up,” Donato snaps. “They wouldn’t do that. They’re just fucking with you.”

“I heard they put a T-shirt in her mouth and-”

“No way.” Donato lights a cigarette with a snap of his lighter, not offering one.

“OK, but shit with me and her, it’s, like, complicated. Can’t you tell them?”

“Jesus Cristo, it’s a little late now, don’t ya think? Anyway, you’re fucking leaving tomorrow, what does it matter?”

“But-”

“If they do anything too fucked up, I’ll do something, OK? I’m not afraid of ‘em. I could take Carlos and Marcos, they’re not so-”

Carlos and Marcos race towards us sloppily. It’s suddenly clear how drunk they are. “What are you bastards doing?”

“He wants to stop.” Donato jabs his thumb at me.

“Oh, yeah?” laughs Carlos. “This guy? The one who gets to fuck the teacher and go to the States wants to stop?”

“Forget it,” I mumble, steeling my eyes at Donato. *Traitor.*

“So, is this it?”

“Where is she?” Carlos scratches his crotch.

I point up three floors to the window I’ve stared out of every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon for the last four months.

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“Floor?”

“Third.”

“You’ll show us where.” It is not a question.

“Look, I showed you where she lives. She-she doesn’t want me coming over anymore. She said it, she told me.”

He narrows his eyes, crosses his arms so his muscles bulge. “So?”

“C’mon, let’s go up there,” says Marcos, butting in. His spiked black hair looks sharp, his breath smells of metal. “Hurry up!” he says, shoving Carlos in the chest, who tips backwards and almost falls.

Laughter pours from Donato’s mouth, so I choke out a laugh but then, instantly, Carlos is on me.

“Laughing at me, you little fuck?” He yanks at my collar. “I bet this is all a big lie. Take us to your tourist-bitch *namorada*, now. You can leave after that if you want.” He catches Marcos’ eyes and winks.

Skirting through the hotel lobby, Donato and Marcos smile innocently, bottles hidden behind their backs. From the front desk, the hotel attendant, Franco, waves us on grudgingly, barely looking up from his newspaper. As the elevator door slides shut, Marcos gives him the middle finger.

“Stop it,” orders Carlos. “Don’t get us kicked out.”

We’re cramped in, and I can feel someone’s arm twitching back and forth.

“What’re you doing?” asks Marcos.

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“Getting ready,” says Donato, and Carlos snickers.

The numbers slip from one to three, the door chimes. There’s no going back.

Her door is the only one with two flowers pinned to it, now dry and brittle. I resist the urge to tell them I gave them to her. Sweat slips tickles my ribs. I want to run away, and at the same time I want to push myself into the apartment and fold my body into hers, feel her cool hands on the back of my neck, wake up in tomorrow morning’s gray light.

“Knock,” says Carlos.

When I knock, tiny patches of sweat cling to the door.

The hallway is silent except for the distant chime of the elevator.

“Again.”

Someone behind me belches.

“She’s not home, OK?” I turn and bump into Marcos.

“Watch it, *cadela!*” He slams me into the door.

“Here we go,” giggles Carlos, “she must’ve heard that!”

I glance wildly down the hallway, my skin crawling. *Push away, run as fast as you can.* What would dad say to do? *Stand up to them, be a man, Cristiano.*

The lock unclicks, the door swings open. “Boys?”

Her hair is piled on her head, glasses sit at the end of her nose. Everyone jumps back, examining her for the first time out of the classroom. She’s wearing a button-down shirt and jeans, and her toenails are painted pink.

Marcos jabs my back with a finger. “Ask her.”

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“Ask her what?” she smiles, but with only the top few teeth. Her hand is still holding the doorknob.

“Well, we know you leaving and we want to thank you for teaching,” I spit out in English, the words jumbled, rushed.

“We know *you’re* leaving,” she says, winking at the boys behind me. They hoot and slap at each other.

“Ms. Taylor, we brought you.” Carlos holds up our last unopened bottle.

She blushes and flashes a puzzled look at me. “Well, that’s a little inappropriate, but...” “Thank you. She looks quickly at the label.

Carlos is staring at the pale skin of her chest. Are they going to make me ask her? She won’t admit it.

She pulls the door so it’s halfway closed. “OK,” she says, “I’ll see you next week for our last classes, *gentlemen.*”

“But we’re not done yet,” says Marcos rapidly in Portuguese.

“What’s that? I’m sorry, I still don’t-”

“Umm-” I start, but Carlos puts me in a headlock and rubs my head with his knuckle. “Cristiano! He’s—how you say—*lindo? Certo?*”

She looks at me strangely.

“They know, OK?” I exclaim.

Her lower lip betrays her and trembles. “Know what?”

“About *us.*”

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She laughs with her mouth closed, in a way I've never heard before. "What, that you have a *crush* on me?"

That does it. I reach for her hand but she pushes it away, and everyone hoots. *Fine, if I have to do it now, I'll just do it! We're in love, aren't we? Or, we were in love?*

"Why are you doing this? What happened?" My nose is running. "What did I do wrong? What did I do?"

She looks at me the way my mother does when I'm sick.

"Stop it," she says quietly.

Screw this. "I'm out of here!" I announce, and elbow my way out. I'm going home.

But someone slaps me in the face and shoves me to the ground. My glasses fly off and I reach for them blindly. "His nose is bleeding!" Marcos crows.

"Stop it, right now!" Ms. Taylor shouts, "Stop!" She grabs at Marcos, but then leaps backwards, trying to swing the door closed. Carlos pins her against the door with his body, Marcos jams his foot in the doorway. The bottle drops to the floor and cracks, wine pooling under it, as Donato wraps me up from behind. His hold is tight and he's muttering something under his breath as he kicks me in the back of the knees and we push our way inside, our feet crunching glass.

Ms. Taylor's clambering for something on the counter. Carlos runs over and knocks the phone away, its shrill beeping like an alarm.

"Do something!" she screams at me, her eyes bulging. "Why are you just *standing* there?"

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“Donato, stop it!” I shout, fighting against his grasp. *Me and you, we can stop them!*

“Do something!” Ms. Taylor screams again. The sound of her own voice shakes her, and she climbs atop the small kitchen table and pounds on the ceiling with her fists, plates and silverware scattering, yelling for help at the top of her lungs.

“Shut up!” Marcos wraps his arms around her kicking legs, but she jerks her knee into his chin and then smashes something—a plate—over his head.

“What the fuck!” he yells, ducking, and Carlos shoves him out of the way, then reaches up and tosses Ms. Taylor over his shoulder, covering her mouth with a big hand.

“Stop scream,” Carlos says in English, “No scream, no yell. None.”

She flails her skinny arms and legs and one elbow catches Carlos in the mouth.

“No!” he says. He slaps her face, hard, and finally her legs loosen and hang off the table. For a second, she reminds me of the flies that catch on the paper my mother puts in the bathroom.

Marcos checks the back of his head to see if it’s bleeding.

“Come on,” he says, “You relax. We just want to talk. We haven’t, like, settled this yet.” He looks back at me. “Right?”

“And what is wrong with you?” Marcos flicks Donato’s hat off of his head in exasperation. Donato’s hold on me slackens. “You’re not gonna help?”

Something whistles in the other room. “Go,” says Marcos, pointing at me. “Turn off.”

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I walk into the other room. The kettle. On the table there is a mug with a teabag already inside, next to it a copy of a magazine I don't recognize. The woman on the cover has big breasts and straight, white teeth.

In the living room, they have Ms. Taylor upright in a chair, her wrists taped together. I fiercely try to lock eyes with Donato, but he stares at the ground.

“So,” says Carlos, pointing at me. “You are a big lie.”

“She says she never do nothing for you. With you.” He corrects himself, grinning. “I can't get it right, Ms. Taylor!” he says, “maybe you can teach me, too?”

Ms. Taylor's eyes burn bright with hatred, but her voice wobbles. “Shut UP! All of you! What is wrong with you? You're a fucking, a fucking disgrace! Let me GO!”

Carlos pinches her cheek. “Maybe you say yes to me, too? I no understand English. I think you say you like me. I think you say you want to-”

“Look, she's lying,” I whisper.

“What?” says Marcos.

“Let's get out of here. What if someone's coming?”

“Shut up, *buceta!*” barks Carlos. “You're the one who wanted to come here!”

“*No I didn't!*”

Ms. Taylor squirms in her seat. “Donato, hold her!” instructs Marcos.

Donato puts his arms around her neck. His eyes are blank. *Traitor! You're all fucking talk, Donato!*

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“Now,” Carlos says, “We’ll find you out.” Ms. Taylor snaps her teeth at him, and Marcos laughs.

“Did you fuck him?” Carlos asks her sarcastically. “Did. You. Fuck. Cristiano.”

She stares past me, into the kitchen where her tea is ready, her magazine is laid out. She considers. Slowly, she nods.

“Shit,” says Marcos admiringly. Donato won’t meet my eyes.

“OK,” I say, “Now, let’s go.”

Marcos nods at Carlos. Ms. Taylor stamps her feet.

“Cristiano, you want to stay or you want to leave?” Carlos asks quietly.

“What?”

“You’re leaving tomorrow, right? You want to go now, OK, you gone.” Carlos shrugs, rubs Ms. Taylor’s shoulder. “You tell anyone about this, we find you before you leave. Me and my brothers come to your house. Do it in front of your family, your sister.”

“How old’s the sister?” asks Marcos.

My hands tighten into fists, I look around frantically for something to throw or swing.

“Um, what are you doing?” asks Marcos. “Just go. We’re fucking letting you go.”

The two of them watch me. Donato is across the room, looking out the window, hands on his hips.

“So?”

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I think of my mother rushing around the house, wringing her hands. My sister crying because she doesn't want to leave, doesn't want to go to this America. Even when my father puts her on his lap and whispers in her ear, she says "*No, please Papa, no.*"

"Alright," Donato finally says, walking over. He's holding his pocket-knife in the air. "We've scared her enough, OK? Let's let her go and fucking go eat. I'm done with this shit and you two idiots are-"

It's Carlos who swings the bottle that catches Donato in the cheek. There is a popping sound as it breaks, a stripe of blood that dribbles to his chin.

Carlos seems surprised by the blood. Donato's bent over, and Marcos shoves him the ground, looks at me one more time and motions to the door.

Ms. Taylor screams and begins to curse and plead incoherently in English. Her face is dark red, she's breathing in rapid gasps.

Marcos shoves a folded dishtowel into her mouth. It's the green one I used weeks ago it to clean up a glass of wine I spilled.

Carlos rips her shirt from the neck down. Her legs kick in the air, spinning frantic circles.

When my hand touches the doorknob it's cold. The last thing I hear is her faint screams echoing through the hallway.

"*Boa Noite.*" I trip a little at the sound of Franco's voice but then I am through the open door and into the street. The *Marquis de Pombal* is littered with people, and they're floating. Couples drift past me arm-in-arm, the tips of cigarettes sparkle against the black.

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The statues glow, the metro shakes below. Hands in my pockets, I head toward the river, dodging the cracks in the sidewalk. With my shirt I wipe the sweat and traces of blood from my face, then clean my glasses.

Above the river *Christo Rei* shines calm and white in the moonlight. People are always crossing themselves when they see the statue, or smiling and waving, but when I was young my mother told me he could see everything I did wrong. Sometimes I dreamed of the statue climbing in my window at night, reaching for me with giant hands as cold as the breeze off the water.

As I start up *Rua Augusta Rosa*, the gentle plucking of a guitar sifts out of a bar. It's a song my father used to sing when I was a kid, about a man whose wife has been unfaithful.

"*Pobrecito*," he would say softly when he was done playing, his eyes filled with a softness rarely seen. "*Pobrecito*."