

Taste

The early afternoon after the third time they made love, the first grain of doubt nested in Andréia's sternum. Doubt might seem immaterial, but it is formed by imperviable particles that settle in a lover's heart like a mound of sugar gathered at the bottom of an improper hourglass. Each molecule adds to the weight of doubt but in such a slow and delicate process that the feeling is finally grasped after years or decades of accumulation and denial. Doubt atoms are polymorphic too, they hide infinite deceptions that we prefer to ignore. They dance in front of our eyes more like a parade of unrelated costumes than like the solid bricks of a structure that will break us eventually.

"I'll have a Pilsner Urquell. Shall we make it two?"

Andréia looked at Henry from a distance that was objectively dictated by the tiny round table between them at the populated terrace of Café Nicola, but felt like a huge strand of the sea as if Henry were on a desert island that she could only guess from the brume of her shore.

"I told you I don't drink beer, darling. Please, sir, bring me a caipirinha with extra sugar. And we will share some *bolinhos de atum*."

Henry was not paying attention to her exchange with the old waiter who had served the outdoor area of Nicola for the last four decades. Andréia knew Henry had to be as hungry as she was after their long, secret lunch that had not implied any food.

"I don't remember that. Why is it that you don't drink beer? Very strange. It's older than wine, you know? An elixir of youth and happiness. You have to try it."

Walking on the tightrope between deception and admiration, Andréia took the wrong step into admiring Henry for his ability to leave the somnolence of just made love so well hidden in the sheets of the Residencial Camões. Andréia was still struggling to emerge from

the haze of his touch behind the red curtains of the ancient hotel, from the exhaustion of trying to satiate a desire that they both had nurtured illicitly in the corridors and elevators of his reputable office at the bank. She still seized on her tongue and gums the taste of Henry's shoulders, the zest of his chest, the surprising sweetness of their violent kisses, and the saltiness of the one single tear she let go during the second that her conscience disappeared in the ivory sheets in an inconspicuous building that had been cocooning lovers and travelers for almost a century.

“I told you the story. Remember? *Senhor Lito*? The tailor who lived in my building when I was a little girl?”

“Tell me again.”

The old waiter appeared behind Henry with two tall glasses and a plate with six golden tuna croquettes that deviated Henry's attention one more time and made Andréia smile with tenderness. She was right, he was hungry.

“*Senhor Lito* was an old Jewish tailor who rented the shop and little apartment on the main floor of our Alfama building. He was the most peaceful man I've ever met. Always happy. He didn't seem to have any family, only one gray terrier he called Melo”

“Was he single? Jewish and single? Very strange, you know.” Henry ended his question before wiping the foam on his upper lip.

“Why do you ask that? I don't know. But I tell you, he was the only adult man around whom my grandmother wasn't tense. He was always ready to help her carry her grocery bags to our fourth floor. He had a piece of candy ready for me every day after I came from school. ‘One sweet for you and one treat for Melo,’ he said and with a magic pass, he produced a red

round candy for me and a pellet for his dog. Sometimes my grandmother left me in his shop if she had a late meeting at the museum, some official visitor or the President showing around the Castelo to ambassadors and foreign queens.”

“He seemed like a good man.” Henry was looking surreptitiously at the only menu the waiter had left knowing, thanks to his deep experience, that a couple like theirs looked too clandestine and full of desire to just eat six *bolinhos*.

“He let me play with an infinite collection of buttons. We gave them names. And if it happened to be Shabbat, he let me light the candles while he blessed the challah. Then he shared his worn-out stories of Lebanon with me. And he always had the sweetest dates for dessert. I wasn’t allowed to share those with Melo.”

“So, what does all that have to do with beer?” Henry looked at Andréia with a smile that could have portrayed interest or boredom. She ignored a new grain of doubt descending into her heart and choose to believe the first.

“Well, he had an odd ritual on Sundays. He sat by the door of his shop and drank beer in a very strange mug.”

“What do you mean strange?”

“He had some relative or friend that lived in Senegal and had sent him a set of six mugs that he kept on a high shelf in his kitchen. Each one of them had the shape of a head.”

“Like a totem? Henry was picking the last particles of the salty croquettes when the waiter came to take the second order. “One more of this and another Pilsner.” Andréia wanted Henry to forget his last question so she did not have to describe the mugs. But her good luck had also been left at the hotel.

“Totems then?”

“No... tribal faces... native faces. You know what I mean. Black ceramic depicting the feature of six men from a local tribe.” She made a pause, trying to interpret Henry’s moving eyebrows. “Don’t judge! This happened more than twenty years ago and I don’t even know how old those mugs were. I was around five.”

“Ha ha ha ha! So this exemplary man was drinking beer out of the skulls of native Senegalese people in the open street?”

“Henry...”

“And that’s why you don’t drink beer?”

“No, That’s not the reason.” Andréia moved toward Henry the new plate of *bolinhos* that the waiter had silently placed on the table. “When my grandmother and I went to the market every Sunday, she stopped to talk with *Senhor* Lito like all the neighbors did. It was one of the rare occasions during the week when I saw my grandmother smile openly, sincerely. Every Sunday while *Senhor* Lito made my grandmother smile, he offered me a little sip of his beer from the *pretinho de Senegal*.”

“And on top of that, he offered alcohol to a child?” Henry’s indignation felt fake, intoned through a mask, a full mouth, and a twisted smirk.

“I suppose. But I don’t think you get it. It was an offering from the heart. A seal of friendship. I hated the taste of that beer. I still can feel it flooding my mouth like the juice of dead flowers and sour roots. It tasted like the inside of tree bark. But I took my sip every Sunday, because it made my grandmother look calm and *Senhor* Lito gave me a sweet pat on the shoulder, sweeter than this caipirinha, almost as sweet as your words in my ear an hour ago.”

Henry turned his chair and confronted the south end of the touristy Praça Dom Pedro IV that Andréia had never found interesting. He gave a sigh of satisfaction and when Andréia thought that some soothing words were coming, he just said, “Shall we ask for the check? I promised to pick Maggie up from school today and Rita gets mad if I’m late.”

The third atom of doubt joined the previous ones in Andréia’s heart, invisible grains of a future heavy lump of bitter sugar. Too bitter to swallow, yet sweet enough to confound a noble soul. Still too small to compete against the salt of a pleasure tear and the spiciness of incipient love.