

Word count: 2,775

SAUDADE

She was a woman people thought of by her smile. Like a cetacean breaking the surface, it would emerge, and all would turn to admire it. But then, just as suddenly, her lips would relax, lapping over the teeth again—and the thing would be gone. Still, the gazes would remain fixed, waiting in case the wonder should repeat itself.

“You have a beautiful smile, Natalie.”

Her lips curled into her cheeks but the teeth stayed hidden. She dropped her chin so she could look up at him, as if in collusion.

“You’re clearly enjoying yourself,” she said

He threw his head back and let out a booming laugh. “And where’s your Nathan this evening?”

“Couldn’t make it.” Her eyes dipped. They found the beer in his hand. “And where are the drinks?”

There is something about a room that, when done properly, can unfurl a person, can set one at peace. Natalie knew of these things, she studied them as a gourmand studies ingredients: with care, with measure, and with almost insatiable greed. The stacks of records, bookended by chipped bricks. The chenille pillows in the bay windows. The black of night peaking beneath the ocher roman shades. She took in the room’s secrets and made them her own. Already, she was enjoying herself.

Behind the island, cooking, she saw George. His large body was controlled, small movements full of energy. His hand closed the oven and then hopped off, stirring his words in the air. His voice

resounded, full and distinct, like an actor’s off the wooden stage. He saw her from across the room and his dark eyes sparkled, his smile widening. She smiled back, eagerly. She loved George. He was in the middle of some debate now, she would wait until he was done.

The man was slight, and somehow callow. He spoke to George with a passion both earnest and misunderstood.

“No, I’m not saying it was never true—who knows if it was true. But I don’t really think it matters if it was true. Say you don’t believe in God, maybe, so you think that religion isn’t true, and ok—maybe you’re right or maybe you’re wrong. But for thousands of years this is what everyone believed—that there was a God, and that this God had laws. And they believed it in a way we probably can’t even fathom now! How few of us know what it means to live our lives for religion! This is what I’m saying! Whether God ever lived or not is irrelevant—he’s dead now. And it’s not dead yet, but *love*, too, is a dying thing. Already what we mean by the word has changed—soon it will be but a thing of history.”

They called him Fedya. A mere boy, Natalie thought. His bright eyes darted anxiously as he spoke. They scanned the floor and people’s shins. They met Natalie’s for a moment before scampering off. She kept watching, waiting to meet them again. They were beautiful eyes, rich despite their brightness. So young, though.

“And so what word will replace it?” George asked.

“Nothing will replace it, just as nothing has replaced God. We simply will no longer need it.”

“But then that’s all it is now? Something we need, an addiction?”

“I don’t mean it pejoratively,” the boy said. “I mean it practically. It is something we need because, for now, it is something necessary. But when it becomes unnecessary it will be something we discard, something dead. It is the simple logic of the causality of existence.”

He didn’t believe it, Natalie was sure. Perhaps he thought the argument sound and, not finding a way out, had claimed to accept it. But he would leave it soon enough. He would find a better one. We choose what to believe like we choose what to love: first because we want to have it and then because we cannot leave it, because we are entrapped by it. It takes a revelation to free us. Or perhaps a schism.

“And what of sex?”

“It has existed without love before, it can do so again.” The boy shrugged, quickly, nervously.

“Sex without love is as common as it is practical.”

“Yes, but love without sex,” Natalie said, “that’s as useless as it is boring.”

The laughter erupted around her.

“Natalie, how we’ve missed you.”

The people moved about the room like fallen leaves dispersed by the wind, stochastic patterns shuffled by an unseen hand. Among them Natalie’s movements were free and, invariably, full of grace. The way she held her beer, the way she put the needle on a record—as if just discovering the object but mastering it immediately. The way her fingers skipped down the first knots of his spine, lambent over the colorless hairs.

“You need another drink. Here.”

The ice cubes knocked against the glass as it was extended to her. Soon they would melt, diluting the drink. She felt an urge to grab it and gulp it quickly.

“Oh no, is that one of George’s concoctions?”

“The man is an artist, a magician.”

“The man is a scoundrel. I’d be on the floor before I finished the thing.” And then: “My god, it’s delicious.”

George was warmth. Maybe this was why he seemed to live in the kitchen, the slow heat of it refueled him. Once, Natalie thought perhaps he was this way with everyone—avuncular but pure, boyish but antiquated. The thought was horrible and she’d banished it immediately. Our perceptions of some identities are fundamental to the myth of our own.

George was delighted to find her drinking it.

“I’m calling it Liquid Enlightenment,” he said. “Do you like it?”

“It’s miserably delicious.”

“Do you want to know what’s in it?”

“I’ll throw it in your face if you tell me.”

He kept moving as he talked, like an athlete drilling. The oven to the stove to the cabinet to the fridge and back to the oven. Everyone offered to help but he refused them. He worked hard enough so that it seemed natural, fated. He was not working for them, he was working because he must. But they were a grace, they were there to entertain him throughout his labor. He thanked them with food and spirits.

“Where’s Katharine?” Natalie asked.

“Somewhere.” George rose from the oven, inspecting the crowd. “Entertaining? Hanging coats? Most likely performing some immensely important act that has completely slipped my mind.”

Katharine was a fine woman. She wore forgettable clothes and had changed her hairstyle twice during her lifetime. George must see something in her we don’t, everyone said. Sometimes Natalie thought she saw it too—late in the evening when Katharine’s eyes would squint, her wine glass close to her mouth, watching someone speak, not listening but still understanding, as if by reading the lips. But then Katharine would yawn and excuse herself, heading off to bed.

“And where is Nathan?” George asked.

Natalie sucked in an ice cube and snapped it, biting hard so the cold shock ran down her jaw and to her neck, even.

“Couldn’t make it.”

“We get you all to ourselves, then.”

Natalie smiled. “What’s for dinner?”

The lives these people must lead. Reading before bed, strolling through farmer’s markets, engaged in a profession challenging, fulfilling. Tonight, Natalie felt as if she were one of them. Her laugh fit easily into the surrounding din. It felt brilliant, like the last rays of light streaking across the sky before the horizon gulped up the sun.

“But you know which one I mean then? Have you seen it? Don’t, it’s miserable.” Somewhere, George had found an apron. The frilled straps barely fit around him. “I’ll probably see it again, though, certainly when they make a sequel.”

He was bending over to peer into the oven. His eyes squinted suspiciously. “I don’t know why it is, I’m addicted to those sorts of things. And I’m a complete fool when I watch them. I imagine myself performing all the stunts, hopping out of cars, jumping off of buildings. I practically take notes during the fight scenes. I guess that’s the whole point, though.”

“Escapism,” the man next to Natalie said. He had a ridiculous mustache, waxed into oblique daggers, which quivered whenever he spoke.

“No, not quite,” George said. “That implies it’s about pretending to be someone else. I don’t want to be the star—I want to be me, doing what the star is doing.”

“But you’re worried you can’t,” Natalie said. “That you wouldn’t know how.”

“Yes, that’s it! But I’m worried because the films make me worried. They show me these things—ludicrous things, most of which defy the laws of physics—and they make me worry that I couldn’t do them.”

“Yes, but then they comfort you and tell you that you can. The story details are like tricks they teach you—how to run from a villain, how to save the girl—to reassure you that you could actually do it.” Natalie lifted her drink. “Reassurism.”

“We should write a book!” George was exuberant. “But so they make you feel the same way, then?”

Natalie shook her head, smiling. “Not with your action films, no, but certainly other things.”

“You’ll get the perfect job? You’ll find the man of your dreams?”

The mustached man stood from his chair. “You’ll be the smartest one in the room.”

He stumbled and caught himself on the island.

“One too many Liquid Enlightenments.”

“Now you understand the name,” George said. “After a few of those, you have the revelation that the world is, in fact, spinning.”

They danced, most of them, like one would dance with children. Small half steps in a rhythm only tangential to the music. Sometimes an honest movement would be put forth, something visceral and unabridged, but the sequence would end with self-deprecation and a smile. Natalie felt no mistakes could be made here and she let her body sway as it liked. Her dress sashayed against her knees. Her heels made dimples in the carpet. She felt it was a night of pleasant abandonment.

“You dance wonderfully.”

She’d found a large chair and was resting lowly in it, so that her head was against the cushion. She opened her eyes to look at the man speaking.

“Thank you.”

He was of good height but with very narrow shoulders. He was not Fedya but he resembled him, as a box resembles a cube. She looked around herself and found large, well-stocked bookshelves. They filled her with satisfaction.

The narrow-shouldered man laughed. “Did I wake you?”

“No,” Natalie shook her head lightly and sat up in the chair. “Not at all.”

“Would you like to dance some more?”

“Not just now.”

“But another drink?”

Natalie nodded, smiling, and stood up. Her hand was on his chest, suddenly, leaning into him, her head almost knocking his shoulder. The man laughed again and raised a hand to steady her. It rested on the back of her neck.

It was like ice.

It was horrid, Natalie shook from it, and the man retracted his hand. That was worse. Oh, my God, the bitter reality. The sorrow ran round her like a beast of the long-forgotten gods—and swallowed her up. It had happened. It had happened.

“Are you alright?”

The patterns were shuffled continuously, the characters being moved about sporadically. A gaudy laugh near the doorway, and then skipping down the hall. A heavy watch glowing in the soft lamp-light, now shaken loose in the kitchen glare. A décolleté dress dividing the room.

In the window bay, Natalie found a small woman, like a plump little bird perched on a ledge. Natalie talked to her freely, her hands swirling in the air. The bird held her wine glass tightly in front of her. She lifted her head.

“—It’s Patricia,” the bird explained.

Natalie’s hand rose to her mouth. “I’m sorry, what did I say?”

Patricia shook her head and ran a hand through the air, washing the nonsense away. Natalie relaxed, leaning her forehead against the cool pane.

“He has a silly idea about love being *dead*.” Natalie said the word fully, spitting it out.

Patricia nodded, carefully, her nose bobbing at the glass.

“Like God being dead, he said, but God’s not dead either.” Natalie let out a sigh. “But even if he were, it’s not the same thing, not at all! People have always loved people, they haven’t always believed in a god, have they?”

Patricia opened her small mouth, drawing in air to speak.

“No, that’s foolish,” Natalie said. “Pure drivel.”

Patricia closed her mouth, nodding instead.

Natalie lifted her head from the pane, facing Patricia fully. “Oh so you think you know?” she asked, smiling. The words formed in her head, shining with wit and strength, and she let them fall out as they pleased. “You think you understand what I’m saying? You’re one of those girls who nod at things, as if, oh yes, you understand, so you’re equal to the thing.”

She waited for her to respond but Patricia kept her gaze forward. Natalie smiled more brightly.

“Oh but Kendall that’s just fine, we’re all like that in some way.”

Patricia’s eyes bounced to Natalie, and then back before her. She nodded again.

The sound of glass breaking shattered the air, but laughter quickly chased it away. Everywhere there were small circles of people, like boulders in a stream, ignorant to the itinerant drinkers damming up around them. Natalie fought through the elbows as she circled the room, her body squeezing against the others. Conversations flitted around her, ridiculous words divorced from meaning—words which clung to her as she swam past them. The aggregate mess of nonsense enclosed around her. She could feel herself ceding to it. Finally she found Fedya by the record player, bent level with the disk as his finger placed the needle.

“But you don’t believe it! I know you don’t, I can tell! Look at me, I can tell!” She was excited by her denunciation and leaned in close to him. She smiled vibrantly, a sanguine glow across her face.

“But I don’t believe what?” Fedya smiled as well, his eyes staying on the record, skipping across its surface.

Natalie thought for a minute, trying to remember his phrasing. The memory of the emotion was too significant—it eclipsed the words.

“About love.”

“About the death of love?”

“Yes!” Natalie clapped her hands together.

“What don’t I believe?”

Fedya’s eyes met Natalie’s and it shook her. The clarity of them ran through her like rain water through a drain pipe. Everything would be washed out at the other end, exposed.

“My god, what is this,” she said, closing her eyes as she listened. “This is . . .”

“The chaconne.”

“Yes!”

She stood to sway to the music, her hand gliding through the air, half conducting, half dancing. At times one hand would rise, as if to hold the neck of a violin, and then her other would meet it, as if with a bow.

“Here!” she said.

Fedya’s brow crinkled.

“This part is near impossible.” Her eyes were shut tight. “How his hand has to jump up and down the neck.”

She demonstrated the motion, one hand hopping about the imaginary neck, the other sawing vigorously.

“How easy he makes it sound.”

Fedya’s gaze did not leave her.

“He’s playing the piano,” he said.

Natalie’s hands fell to her knees. Her frame bent heavily over them. The laughter squeezed tears from her eyes, it made her body shake. In between the violent bouts she gasped wildly for air.

Later, there was a moment when she came in, towel tied around her neck, and, before all of them, sang the Hills of Donegal. No one spoke throughout it. Her breast swelled with emotion at the second verse, shortly before she forgot the words. One person clapped and a few laughed haltingly. A woman placed her hands on Natalie’s shoulders but Natalie shook them off.

The bathroom light was plain on her face, pragmatic and execrable. Her throat was sore and her nose full of foul things. It was unbelievable how she missed him. She would make herself strong without him. She would be a thing people envied. She would be a thing failed.

She fell asleep before dinner was served, collapsed on the coats in the dark guestroom. A blade of light from the hall, harsh across her thighs. As they left, the others had to pull their things out from beneath her.

THE END