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Porto

ONCE I FELL ASLEEP *in a land of snow and cold lakes, my birthplace. I was young. When I awoke, I was married. And had already learned to see through one set of eyes. Out of the distance came a sweeping vista of low-lying mountains, silent ancient windmills, and a glittering, beckoning sea. Mistaking the future for now, I fell back into dreaming, dressed my body in blueprints, imagined gardens in the red clay soil: sweet-smelling bougainvillea, wild rosemary, and thyme.*

Olivia adjusted herself in her seat, folded then unfolded her arms, looked over at Graham. She was restless, and stiff; wanted to say so—didn't.

In my house in the Algarve I have a bed draped in white gauze, and a view of the sea. When the sounds of night recede (the crowing of a cock in the distance, the intermittent barking of dogs), the sounds of day arrive at my window: a conversation carried on the wind, the crunching of tires on gravel, the insistent buzz of a fly trapped on the sill. I long for a place without you in it.

They had been driving north for three days, stopping only when necessary. She hadn't wanted to do it this way, would willingly have taken a connecting flight from Faro. The journey became an opiate of long horizons, endless skies. In the Alentejo plains, towns rose up like mirages from the flat earth. Near Lisbon, acres of red cork forest; *Lisboa*, city of secret gardens, of fado sung

late at night in the tumbling streets of the old district. Fátima, Coimbra, Porto ... *it is here, in Porto, that we shall leave each other.*

Porto grew up around the Pena Ventosa, planted its cathedral on the windy peak. Narrow, cobbled streets fan out from the river, ascend, conjure visions of pilgrims telling stories. Morning comes to the city like a hot finger, stirring up the night. The air is still wet from the sea.

Lights are burning in the Bolhão market. Heaving crates of fruits and vegetables, vendors arrange and rearrange, build pyramids out of oranges, lemons, and leafy green cabbages. Chickens huddle in cages, muttering, suspicious. Comatose on marble slabs, a morgue of bright-eyed fish. Stiff flat boards of salt cod hang from wires, works of art in grey and gold.

Two hundred feet above the black waters of the River Douro, an early train ambles across the Dona Maria Pia bridge.

April glistens on ancient walkways like rain.

Rua do Almada winds surreptitiously through the centre of town. Olivia presses her finger to the map. She has marked No. 131, Hotel Internacional, a refuge, she has been told, from the howl of the fully awakened city, salvation for the road-weary traveller in its monastic stone arcades, long circular staircase, and central courtyard. Preparations begin before dawn, she has heard, in the hotel's restaurant, O Almada.

Olivia and Graham have arrived early. The night clerk, still on duty at the front desk, seems glad to have something to do.

They are given a room on the top floor of the hotel. The bed is narrow, made of dark wood. A small crucifix hangs on the wall above the bed where the plaster has cracked. A long sideboard, also of dark wood, runs the length of one wall. A white basin is set into it. Over the basin, hand-painted blue and white tiles inscribe the harvest, sheaves of wheat, people gathering. Graham has thrown himself onto the bed. He is weary—exhausted. He is soon snoring softly.

Olivia is not sleepy. The floorboards creak under her feet as she moves toward the only window. It is small, elbow height. She releases the latch, opens the window out, lets the city in. She rests her arms on the sill. In courtyards, on rooftops, in carved cathedral niches, pigeons murmur, shuffle, and fuss. Below, a bakery opens, metal doors flung wide, clanking back and forth against stone walls. A cloud of steam explodes into the cool morning air: the night shift

exhaled from the darkness within. Arms and faces gleaming in the half-light, the men linger in the narrow street, bent over their cigarettes, while the women scatter north and south in twos and threes, waving, laughing, leaving behind the echoing click of their footsteps.

A bicycle skids to a halt on polished cobblestones, tin bell chiming; muffled voices converge in urgent conversation. From the distance, the great booming bells of the cathedral descend on the waking city, beckon the faithful, announce the beginning of day.

City awakening, city of pasts: street lamps dim to the memory of old night; shuttered windows open like eyes.

Graham sat up suddenly, shaking the sleep out of his hair. Reaching for his watch, he looked at Olivia. "We haven't long!"

"A day, Graham. We have the day. My flight doesn't leave until ten tonight." She removed her map of the city from her handbag. "You know, you didn't have to come."

There was no answer for this. Graham pulled on his shoes. "Let's go out," he said.

The elevator to the hotel lobby creaked and clattered its way to the ground. As Olivia and Graham passed the front desk, the clerk looked up, saluted a polite *Bom Dia*. Bending slightly at the waist, the doorman ushered them into the now blazing white street. They hesitated, backs to the wall, adjusting for a moment to the chaos of passing cars and people. Instinctively, she reached for his arm, then drew back. This uncoupling was a complicated thing. Better to have said good-bye three days ago, rather than draw it out like this. Well, he had someone to go back to. She had to start again. Still, she would be home. Home rose up in her line of vision like a big bird on a nest of eggs. She, Olivia, would hatch again, reincarnate herself. In some ways, she had never left home. *Dear Canada, I'm flying back to you.*

Graham waved the map in her face. "This way!" he said, weaving his body into the crowd.

In the shade of Porto's granite buildings, they cut across alleyways, sidestepped moving cars and motorbikes, struggled to avoid loose cobblestones, unexpected dips and cracks. Emerging in the bright open space of the Praça da Liberdade, Olivia paused. The wide avenue was filled with sunlight, flanked by colonnaded stone façades, wrought-iron railings and high sculpted wooden

doorways. People moved back and forth, in and out of shops and offices. In the square, old men sat in the shadow cast by a high-stepping stone horse. Children, screaming delight, ran among pigeons; rising, descending—a flurry of madly beating wings. Olivia felt her own wings flutter.

“Olivia!” Over a sea of small, dark heads, she followed the sound of Graham’s voice. He stood at the door of a pasteleria, waving at her to hurry. Olivia adjusted direction, adjusted her eyes to darkness.

The room was pitched in high vibrato, a chorus of dissonant sounds that struck the moulded tin ceiling, strummed the marble floor. At small round tables, clusters of dark-suited men in serious conversation; women, smoking cigarettes, trading confidences; the pungent aroma of hot sweet black espresso. A waiter slid over: *dois cafês com leite*. Olivia waited for the sucking sound of steaming milk to be released from the spigot, the chance to wrap her hands around the warm, shallow cup. Graham tapped out an imaginary beat on the tablecloth.

They were a handsome couple. Everyone said so. She was small and dark, he tall and blonde. Her hair was straight; she still wore it cropped, feathered brown tufts around her face. His hair was curly; she cut it for him. *Once I wore you under my skin. With each step, you rustled inside me. You put words in my head and I thought I was speaking. In Portugal, you built me a house. You gave me a garden, and Christmas in the rain, figs, almonds, and strawberries in May, a grove of ancient olives, silvergreen leaves shimmering in the breeze like thousands of minnows in a phosphorescent sea, and in the distance, the soft faint strains of a woman singing: uma casa portuguesa—four whitewashed walls, two arms that wait with promise of kisses. And a kind of emptiness began to come out of me I couldn’t name. It came out of me and out of cracks in the walls, out of rocks, and trees, out of women’s songs in the distance. Out of promises lost, and to come, out of the past, and the future, until I shared with the landscape the one mournful moment—the present.*

Sand ran down my legs. It was only you, slipping out of me.

Olivia reached across the table to still Graham’s hand. “We’ll write.”

“Yes.”

“You are my husband.”

"It hasn't made any difference."

I will not feel sorry for you. We gave our loneliness to each other as a marriage gift.

"You love her." *I only say this to be polite. She has taken over my chair in the garden, her long black hair and white dresses, confident beyond her years. But then, I had already vacated the chair.*

"Yesterday, maybe." Graham leaned back, looked at the floor, the window, Olivia. "And maybe not today." *And one more thing: "You always went away."*

"Only the summers. I only went away in the summers. It gets so hot. I melt in such heat. I needed to go home to breathe, to get back to myself. I have always needed to." *Leaving and abandoning are two different things. They only feel the same. "I always came back."*

"Yes." *But not this time.* Graham signalled the waiter, made motions in the air of writing out the bill. He turned to Olivia, looked at her with grey-blue eyes like polished marble. *There are no more words for this. For years, we have been speaking them.* "Shall we go?"

Over the high arched doorway a painted image of the Virgin cast blessings on the leave-takers. *Nossa Senhora, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death.*

Olivia and Graham passed under, and out.

Along the Cais da Ribeira, the banks of the Douro, market stalls spill their wares, tourists pore over trinkets and tee-shirts, children and dogs dodge buyers and sellers. Gnarled grandmothers sit chuckling and chattering under canopies, spidery fingers on patterns of cotton lace. There is Olivia, bent over one of the old women, examining a delicate web. Before she can reach for her money, Graham is beside her, bills in hand. It is best this way. Best that he pay. They move on, and the river swells its ranks, advances on the sea.

The cafés along the water's edge begin to fill. It is one o'clock. Olivia and Graham find an empty table, order fish, and beer. On the other side of the river, in the Vila Nova de Gaia, port wine makers give tours to curious foreigners and tell of days gone by, when the great port barons from England and Scotland grew rich and fat, and the River Douro delivered cask-laden vessels with arching prows to the warehousing docks. Now, a newly painted *rabelo*, chained to the wharf, oars tightly drawn, rocks casually in

retirement, gleams in the midday sun—black, yellow, blue, an advertisement for the drink of kings. Next to their table, an English family shares plates of chips. Olivia feels warm, and dreams of gypsies. Graham has picked up a copy of the *Sunday Times*. It is Wednesday.

Later, Olivia felt that their walk had been too long. The sun was too hot, they had come too far. She could feel streams of sweat rolling down her back. The hill was so steep, the street had been terraced to ease the climb. Children stared silently from doorways, large dark eyes; women, aproned, leaned on windowsills. Laundry hung suspended over balconies, sombre flags in the still air. Small wizened heads, old men and women, peered through tiny shuttered windows. In the Rua das Flores, merchants began to re-open for the afternoon trade. The world is plaster-washed in olive green, yellow ochre, and rust. To the south, the Algarve—a distant roar of crashing surf, of white-capped waves like whips on rocks, undulating hills, and old stone walls that wind around and up and down to hold the hills in check. Walls divide and measure land, while hills, like friends and lovers, rise and fall.

Olivia stopped to catch her breath. She looked down past the maze of stone stairs, past the multi-storied houses clinging to the sloping streets, down to the river snaking its way out to sea. On the horizon, freighters lazed in the afternoon sun. Eastward, toward the Vale do Douro, a bright red sculler made its way upstream, eight determined rowers marking time. On the quayside, lovers leaned together, dangling legs over fast moving waters.

Graham had climbed to the next small landing.

Coming?

Olivia turned her back to the river.

The slanted rays of the afternoon sun made a circle of light on the floor of their room. Olivia packed slowly, rolling and folding, folding and rolling. Under the shower she is lost in the sea, green and silent, gliding beneath the surface on the back of a turtle. Emerging in a cloud of steam, she finds her husband dozing on the bed, the stillness of the room punctuated by soft gurgles of pigeons on ledges. She climbs in beside him, spoons her body into his. He moves slightly, away from her heat. Pressing her hand into the space between his shoulders, she paces her rhythm to the swell of his breathing. He reaches back with his arm, gathers her

up like cut grass. *Your perfume is made of the smell of you and I am filled with it I am inside of it and you in me.* Memory drifts across her eyes and sings to her in far-off voices, covers her in cool waves. *I am the samba, milk of palm I am your mouth on mine, the breath, the leap. Gliding on hot winds I am the lover, arching sky filled up with flight*—we are the dancer, circling, moonless night.

Olivia and Graham built a house in Portugal, of old angers. Stone by stone they walled each other in. At Christmas, in the rain, they dug a small pine, and hung its acquiescent boughs with red ribbons. Olivia cut a string of paper angels and hummed “Silent Night” over the wail of wild dogs in surrounding pastures, while Graham moved clay pots around the floor to catch the rain seeping through the roof. During the day they combed the olive grove for dead branches, so good in the fire, and drank brandy to keep the night away. And Olivia found herself dreaming of home, of spring, of daffodils, and of rivers swollen with the cold new waters of melting snow.

Olivia and Graham built a house Sleep now Sleep.

Near the airport, the hills of Porto level to miles of insipid highway bordered by scrubby trees and stunted square buildings. In the fading evening light, even the buildings soften.

They pass the drive in silence. She goes over lists in her head: passport, ticket, money, books. She looks for a sign: *Partidas*. Graham pulls the car to the curb, leaves the engine running, takes her hand.

“It will be easier if I don’t come in with you.”

“Yes.”

I want to press your hand against my face and speak the words of love I can’t remember. I want to know if, in the end, one can forgive, and what, if anything, can one forget and what, in the forgetting, will be remembered.

Instead, she kisses the tips of his fingers, unlatches the door, stands ready on the pavement. Graham hails a porter, transfers her belongings from the trunk of the car.

An aircraft roars overhead, bending in unison all the long grasses.

Across the world, Olivia hears morning, and moves toward the sound.