

TALKING WALLS

It was one year, to the day, since my mother's stroke, and nearly three months since I arrived in Lisbon, my face pressed against the window when the train pulled into the city. How free I felt leaving the station, riding in a taxi and watching the stocky Portuguese people on the winding, cobblestone streets. "*Lisboa!* I did it, I made it," I thought. But on this anniversary night, as I sat in my rented room in an empty three-bedroom apartment and slowly drank a bottle of port, I wasn't exactly celebrating.

I had left my sick mother alone in America. She was bedridden after the stroke so I moved into her house and nursed her. It was so much work. I cooked, cleaned, brought her little things, helped her to the commode. I rented a hospital bed that I put in her living room, so she wouldn't be cloistered away in a side room. My girlfriend left me. I stopped writing. All I could think about was running.

Once I made a decision, I stuck with it. I checked her into a nursing home. "It's a death sentence," she shouted, but I stayed firm. Then, I sold everything I owned, all my kitchen items, a car, my books, and I packed a few clothes and a typewriter and I walked away. At the time I was certain it would liberate me, and for a short time, it did. I must admit, she hadn't been a good mother.

I neared the end of the bottle, sitting in the candlelight, my feet up next to the typewriter on the table. I loved the syrupy wine taste of port. On one end of my window's view, past another apartment building and over a wall, I had a glimpse of distant lights shining on the gray bay and the cargo ships and huge cranes by the docks. I waited until my buzz was just right and I lit a cigarette and I felt at peace. The smoke filled all my empty places. It took a titrated formula to get there, and I knew I would pay in the morning, but that little relief was what I needed.

Then, I was startled by a man's voice, an African American by the sound of it, so loud and clear. The man wailed, but I was alone in the apartment.

"Please baby, please, don't leave me." I stayed very still and listened, not moving a hair. The voice came from the walls, and yet it wasn't sound that was muffled by a foot

of wood and plaster, it was alive and clear and in the smoky air. “Just three months and my contract’s done, and I’ll be home.” By the way he projected, loud, and the way he paused, holding his breath, I got the feeling he was on the phone. I slowly reached for the ashtray and tapped my cigarette.

“How long you been seeing him?” he said. His tone became deeper, bracing, and with a note of despair, he said, “do you love him?” I blew out the candle and undressed and got in the bed. I lay there, barely breathing, eyes open.

“I know what I said. The job got pushed back. I’ve gotta finish what I came to do, and then I’ll be home.” Soon he was crying. He choked back tears, “please, don’t do this.”

I awoke in the morning feeling heavy, not just from my hangover but also from the weight of that other man’s grief. All men cry at the feet of women, but we pretend to other men like it doesn’t happen. I felt a little shame for listening in on someone’s intimate moment. I rallied myself, made some coffee in the cold kitchen, and sat down at the typewriter to work. I punched the keys for about two hours, the way I did each morning. There was a satisfaction in working, but it didn’t last long. The work read too perfect, emotion-less, I exposed nothing of myself. I knew it, but I couldn’t be open.

The day of my mother’s stroke, I had an errand to run and stopped by her house. She was conscious on the floor but crying and unable to get up. The doctors found a small bleed, the size of a penny, in her brain. She could barely walk. She held onto railings when I told her to let go. I had to tap her leg to get her to step.

She bullied my father when he was alive, and as I became her caretaker she treated me rudely. “The food tastes like cardboard,” she said after I spent the afternoon cooking. When I shopped for her, everything was wrong. She didn’t tell me she only used certain brands. Kingbird Farm chicken, Da Vinci multivitamins, Fenway Alaska salmon. She wanted cucumbers and when I brought them to her she groaned. She only ate English cucumbers with the tiny seeds, I learned, because the bigger seeds in regular ones made her burp.

“Stupid,” she said.

“How can I know that if you don’t tell me?” I said. “I’m not a mind reader.”

“I told you,” she said.

“You didn’t.”

“I told you,” she said. I was so angry because I knew she believed that she had told me. After we fought, it took days to free up mental space. I couldn’t write anymore.

“I need help, I can’t do it all,” I said.

“Who?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said. “I need to start looking.”

“Anyone who helps me must first be my friend,” she said. “I can’t force it. I won’t have strangers in my house.”

“But Mom, you need to think about me,” I said. “Let’s try a few people, and see. You’ll be in control of who we hire.”

“No! No! No!”

I hit the table. Then she wailed like a baby, “I knew I would end up alone.” I stepped outside and smoked a cigarette. When I returned I said calmly, “Don’t worry, Mom, I won’t leave you.” In time, those words became a lie.

There was an African saying, I think from Kenya, which goes, a man who sees his mother naked is cursed. After changing my mother’s diapers I must be cursed for many lives. More than once, on the phone, she mistakenly referred to me as her husband. A friend told me, the living shouldn’t sacrifice their lives for the dying. When I locked up my mother’s house for the last time, before heading to the airport, I kept reminding myself that a man with goals would never let his life’s mission be thwarted by anyone. I needed to be single-minded.

That evening, Andrea, a young Belgian from my Portuguese language class came for dinner. She was tall and full and though in class she often wore her hair held back with pins, she wore it down tonight, parted on one side. Red lipstick made her lips plump. I didn’t know if this was a date or friends having dinner, partly because we made such an unlikely couple. Physically, she was tall with hips and gorgeous breasts, while I was a small, fit man, and dark. She was Belgian, and I was an Indian raised in America. But as soon as I came near her my pulse raced.

We ate at the kitchen table, spaghetti with sauce I had made.

“You live here alone,” she said, looking down the dark hallway towards two empty bedrooms.

"I pay only for the one room, but I have the whole apartment to myself."

"It's good," she said. "I am thinking I change my room. My landlady, she always wants to know where you are, always knocking, looking to see what are you doing. Last night I come in late from dancing, and she comes, looking."

"Were you drinking?"

"Yes, of course," Andrea said, and though I laughed, she only smiled a little, in response to me.

"Maybe a room I can rent here?" she said. Our eyes met, and I was thinking, how would I survive my desires sharing a space with her. Neither of us spoke for a moment.

"I can talk to my landlady," I said.

"Maybe it's something," she said. I picked the dishes and set them in the sink. We moved to my large room, where the metal Olivetti sat with a page in the roller, half-covered with words, on the table.

"Ah, a typewriter," she said, running her fingers over the keys. "I want to read some story."

"I don't know," I said. "It's not done."

"When you finish," she said.

"Yes," I said. She sat in an armchair and I sat in the chair at the table. I opened a bottle of port and poured some into two coffee mugs. I set the ashtray on the floor between us, and we smoked and sipped the sweet drink.

"Why are you here in Portugal?" she asked.

"I'm running," I said.

"From what?"

"From something I did," I said. I expected her to question me, but instead she nodded and a still sadness came to her face.

"I understand," she said. I stood and went to the bookshelf and pulled a dog-eared glossy magazine. I opened it and showed her a page with a story and my name on it.

"It is you?"

"Yes," I said. "A short story."

"What is this story?"

"It's about a rich American businessman who pays a lot of money to hunt big

game in South Africa. He shoots a lion, and he is so excited, but when he gets close to the beast, he touches its coarse mane. He sees it dead in all its majesty, but he cannot truly enjoy his success. He feels the tragedy of seeing an animal with such masculine beauty defeated.”

“Of course, men destroy beautiful things, only caring after making pain for others,” she said.

She turned the magazine to the cover.

“I know this magazine,” she said. “Always woman in underwear on cover. Articles about man’s things.”

“Yes, I suppose,” I said. “But I hit the big time, I was on my way.”

“OK, that is good, no?”

“It was good,” I said. “But I can’t hear my voice anymore.” I thought she was going to tell me it would return, because that’s what people said, but instead she just nodded.

“Maybe, you need time for quiet,” she said.

“That may be true,” I said. “I left my sick mother in a nursing home. I said goodbye to her and disappeared.” I remembered the last night I saw my mother, looking so diminished in her metal bed under fluorescent lights at the facility, the back of her head bald from lying down for so long. The fight was gone from her. I never told her I was leaving, but when I said goodbye, my eyes filled up. I couldn’t help it. And she cried too, but only in response to seeing her son troubled. She never asked why. “She may be dead by now, I don’t know,” I said.

Andrea’s face became tense, her mouth clenched with discontent. It wasn’t about me, she was thinking of something else. This must be how she looked when she was alone, I thought.

“And you? Why are you here?”

“I need time apart from Antwerp,” she said. She drew on her cigarette and winced.

“Do you mind if I ask why?” She rolled the ember of her cigarette on the edge of the ashtray. Her teeth came together and a jaw muscle rippled.

“Some bad thing happened to me,” she said, but she licked a finger and rubbed at a little stain on her pants. Then she just looked at me flatly, without pretense, but she didn’t speak.

I met her eyes. We gazed at each other across the room with complete openness, unguarded, vulnerable. And then, a door slammed and we both jumped.

The sound was right there, in the room. I heard the voice of the African American man from the night before, and his footsteps followed by a woman in heels clacking across the concrete floor. Andrea sat up.

“Someone is here?” she whispered.

“No,” I said. She pointed at the ceiling.

“Upstairs?”

“No,” I said.

“Baby, I been waiting all night for this,” the African American said. He spoke softly, but his voice was clear and amplified.

“How do you know I have something for you?” The woman said. She had an accent but her English was good.

“I’ll take what I can get,” the man said. The woman made delicious sounds and we could hear their lips smacking in kisses.

“What is happening?” Andrea whispered.

“I don’t know,” I said quietly. “The walls do this sometimes.”

“Who are they?”

I shrugged. I sat on the edge of my seat in the candlelight and Andrea leaned back in the armchair, her face disappearing in the shadows.

The African American and the woman were rustling now, kissing and caressing each other, their hands shushing across clothes and skin.

“Take these off,” she said. His belt buckle clinked and fell to the floor. Soon, they were doing it. Andrea’s hand went to her lips, her mouth an O shape, and she raised her eyebrows at me, sheer delight in her eyes. She took out a cigarette, her face keenly focused on lighting it quickly.

“Maybe we should go,” I said, but she waved abruptly at me and sat back, calmly folding her legs. The woman moaned and there were layers of wet sounds, breathing, creaking, all in rhythm. I lit my own cigarette. Andrea giggled noiselessly, staring down, shaking her head. It made for a strange tension between us. I also giggled, but out of embarrassment that it was happening in my room. They climaxed with the woman’s

soft cry and his sudden grunting exhale, and then there was silence. Soon, they were talking in normal tones.

“Oh my,” Andrea said. “Your neighbors? How are they so loud?”

“It’s not neighbors,” I said. “It’s the walls. Maybe the man lived in this room before me, that’s what I think. He has a girlfriend in America, who seems interested in someone else, and now, it looks like he’s decided to have an affair.”

“Before, you heard them?” She asked.

“Just him.” I stood and drank the rest of my port and set the mug on the table and went to the window. She came and stood very close to me.

“There is the water,” she said. My hands were shaking. She was many inches taller than me but I felt so alive and attractive next to her. We stayed like that and I was keenly aware of her calmness next to me. She touched my back, massaged my shoulder and ran her fingers through my hair.

“The last bus is leaving soon,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, pulling her hand away. But then she stepped even closer, looming over me. “You do not like me?” She smiled, her lips moist.

“No,” I said. “I like you too much. I need time.”

“We are funny,” she said. “I am the man and you are the woman.”

“No,” I said, my voice wounded. “I am a man.”

“I know,” she said, in almost a whisper, her flirtation all gone. “I am making jokes.”

Outside, it was a relief to breathe the fresh air. We walked lightly in the dark along the high wall of the national cemetery to the bus stop. The coffin shops that lined the other side of the street were all closed.

“It’s a nice night,” I said. It was cool but not drizzling and the sky was clear.

“Tomorrow I am going out with friends,” she said. “You will come?”

“Sure,” I said.

When the bus arrived, all lit up like a submarine with windows, I held her hand as she stepped up. Her fingers lingered across my palm and she blew a kiss.

The next night I met Andrea and her friends at a dark wood bar in the Bairro Alto, a neighborhood up a steep hill from the central Avenidas das Americas. A funicular on

a track and big link chains took me up. Andrea smiled so suddenly when she saw me that I jumped inside. She sat on a bench at a table with two guys and another girl. I think the two guys were Italian. One of them had wet stuff in his wavy hair he slicked back; the other's was curly and dark. There was a young woman with them, shy with short hair, whom Andrea introduced as her roommate. I couldn't hear their names well through the din. There was a candle and a carafe of red wine between us. The place was filling, people stood and looked, others leaned close and chatted.

Andrea and I made small talk across the table, but when her roommate went to use the bathroom, Andrea picked up her wine glass and moved next to me. She sat right up against me, her leg pressed on mine. Her eyes were bright. We talked about our language class, hands cupped into each other's ears. We talked about how much Portuguese we were speaking in public, and she said she was trying every chance she had, and I told her that was great and I wasn't so bold. Between words, our eyes met, our mutual joy out in the open.

"If I live with some Portuguese family, then maybe I practice more," she said.

"Living with me wouldn't help your Portuguese," I said, smiling.

"No, but it is good for my English," she said.

"You know, I met an American at a bar who told me he had been in Portugal for two years and had never once been invited into a Portuguese family's home," I said.

"Ah yes, Portuguese are private, keeping away," she said.

"I think it's because they lived under a dictatorship for all those years," I said. I thought about how the city reminded me so much of San Francisco, a city with hills on a bay. But here, when it rained, the pastel colors of the buildings made everything so gloomy.

"Yesterday night, when we talk," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"I never told what happened for me in Antwerp," she said. "Today I am thinking, I can talk this with him."

"Please do."

"Not now, some other day," she said. "It is something difficult, some bad things with some men."

The crowded room was open in the middle. A number of short thick men lined chairs in a semi-circle on one end of the floor and someone brought out a worn nylon string guitar and a man with a hat started playing and singing fado songs. They were melancholy songs about loss and Portugal's fall from glory since she was a world power. We sat without speaking and drank wine and listened to the songs. Each singer passed the guitar to the man next to him, who sang another one. A man from the crowd called for the guitar and he sang a song from his bench. Andrea's arm and shoulder were against mine and that was all I could think about. She leaned right up into my ear when she spoke and after a few glasses of wine I was leaning into her neck to say little things.

Soon, people were dancing. Someone asked Andrea's roommate to dance.

When Andrea left for the bathroom, the two Italian guys smiled keenly at me with moist red eyes.

"Hey man," one of them shouted. "You are going to get pussy tonight. You have condom?" The other one winked big. I couldn't tell if they were putting Andrea down or congratulating me, and I just shook my head at them.

"Do you want to dance?" Andrea said, when she returned.

"OK," I said. But when we stood to dance it didn't work because she was about four inches taller than me. It was awkward to hold her close and strange to slow dance at a distance. My size rarely bothered me because I felt neat and handsome and in my mind I perceived myself as a big guy, but now I was painfully aware that my small size made me inadequate. I stepped on one of her feet. We sat back down, but she didn't sit as close and she looked a little bummed. Then, a tall well-dressed African man walked across the room towards us.

"Do you mind if I ask the lady to dance?" he said to me, leaning to be heard. I could smell his cologne. His shirt was satiny and his face was open, without being innocent.

"Do you?" she said to me. I was surprised that she asked me.

"No," I said. The next song was lively and I watched them dance. He had rich dark skin and a strong body but he moved light and graceful. The song after was a slow one and they danced closer. She rested her head on his chest. They were both beautiful and fit each other perfectly. I resigned myself to letting go. One of the Italian guys waved

at me. The shorter one with the gelled hair shouted something I couldn't hear, but I thought he said, "don't let the African take her." The other one was raising his eyebrows and nodding his head towards the dance floor. I went outside and smoked a cigarette.

When I came back in Andrea sat down next to me. I smiled at her but my lips were tight and miserly. She too smiled uncomfortably. The openness was gone. She sat and stared across the room, tapping her fingers on the table. She took a sip of wine and pushed the glass away.

"I am feeling not so good," she said. She stroked her stomach. "I must leave."

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry. I'll walk you out."

"No, no," she said. "It is OK."

"I'll walk you out," I said. When we stood to leave I caught one of the Italians looking pleased.

Outside, people spilled from the bars. Two drunken women in heels stumbled on the cobblestones.

"I'm sorry you are not well," I said. "Did you drink too much?"

"No, I am away from bed late too many nights," she said. "This is fine, I will be fine."

"I'll find you a taxi," I said.

"It's fine, really," she said. But at the corner was a line of taxis and I waved one over. We kissed formally on each cheek and I opened the door for her. The taxi drove off and she waved.

I thought about going back to the bar because my heart was twisted and I thought more wine would help. But when I neared the bar I remembered the Italians in there and I couldn't face them. I walked around and peeked in at various bars. One was too quiet, with just one young couple who glanced expectantly at me when I walked in. Another place was too rowdy, with raucous men drinking. Truly, I longed for the melancholy yet crowded candlelight vibe of the fado bar.

I walked a big loop around a few blocks, when up ahead on a corner, I noticed Andrea and the tall African standing. They faced each other and talked. I stopped, stunned. He took her hand and led her across the street and down a lane. By the time I cautiously made it to the corner and looked after them, they were gone. There was no point in staying out any longer. I found a cab that drove me home.

Lying in bed, the walls started talking again. The African American man spoke straight and hard.

“I met someone,” he said. “No... I just met her... how can I be in love with someone I just met? ...Well, you already left me... I wouldn't have done it, hadn't you done it first... Now, your playin'? How can you say it was nothing when you made it sound serious?”

After a time he put the receiver down and he sobbed and sobbed. I hated him for crying now. I covered my head with the pillow.

“Shut up!” I shouted. But no one was listening.

The next morning I awoke slowly. I made my coffee and smoked a cigarette and punched the typewriter keys for a few hours. In the late morning I took the bus to another part of town where there was an art museum that Andrea had told me was worth visiting. There were some good things there, many lovely Madonna and child paintings, a Rembrandt, the English painter Turner, and French artists, Manet, Dégas, Renoir and Monet. Afterwards, in a little library I found an art history book by Kenneth Clark and read from it. I grew sleepy and went outside, and then, I spotted Andrea sitting on the steps smoking. I was going to avoid her, but she saw me. She waved. I went and sat down next to her. Her wavy hair hung limp and her skin was pale.

“This is a coincidence,” I said. She half-smiled but returned to frowning. She faced a little grassy hillside and the street in the distance.

“How are you feeling?” I said.

“Terrible,” she said.

“Sick?” I said.

She shrugged, shoulders slumped, knees against her.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“About what?” I said.

“For last night,” she said.

“What about it?”

“I leave, left you there,” she said.

“It's OK,” I said. “You were not well.”

“Yes, correct, I am not well,” she said. But then she searched my face. She looked right into my eyes. She put her arms around me and rested her head on my shoulder.

“Andrea, I saw you last night,” I said.

“You saw me?”

“I saw you with the African man, after I left you in the cab. I was out walking and I saw you both on a corner.” She glanced at me and she must have seen the resolve in my eyes because instead of defending herself she sighed and stared blankly away.

“You lied to me,” I said. She crossed her arms over her bent knees and rested her chin there glumly. We sat in silence for some moments, while I wrestled with a tug of compassion against her betrayal. She lifted her head. Her face was blotchy and red.

“Sorry,” she said.

“What happened to you in Antwerp?” I asked. She held her breath and then exhaled. She sat cross-legged with a perfectly straight back and mustered a dignity about her.

“I tell you,” she said. She stared out at the horizon, her eyes squinting and shrewd. “I walk home every evening from my work, in a kind of office. One night, Tuesday night, I work late, and I always walk through small park, you can say, there to my flat. Some men are drinking and I walk nearby and they say some things, hey baby, come here, talk to us, things like this. I say no thank you, but one comes and pulls.” She turned to me and she grabbed hold of my bicep, hard and rude. “He pulls me to the grass,” she said. “Then the other men comes. They have turns, one then another.” She drew painfully hard on her cigarette. “All the time, I am thinking, no, that is not happening, not to me. I am thinking of my father and my mother and my room in my parent’s flat.”

She wiped her red face with her fingertips.

“Now, I have problem with men,” she said. “I say, no, Andrea, this man is no good for you, but then, in the night I wake up in some strange bed.”

“I understand,” I said.

“You?”

“I’ve made mistakes to get back to feeling whole. I believe my mother was too narcissistic to be a good person, but then when I left I found it hard to see myself as good.”

“All my relations are now complicated, it will never again be easy,” she said.

“Me too,” I said.

We went over to the grass on the knoll. She walked like she was sore all over. The sun was out and we lay there. I closed my eyes. She turned on her side and her leg came up against mine. We lay like that, neither of us moving, our legs hot where they met. I turned to her and kissed her, and we made out like high school kids. She cried. I felt both excited and selfish for kissing her after our talk. But it was tender. After a time, we each may have dozed. Later, we smoked. The tension was gone. I said goodbye, my cheek against hers, and then I walked and walked to the center of town many miles away. On a stone plaza, a travelling circus was breaking down. I passed by thick-barred cages with tigers in them. I watched the big cats, one of them sleeping with flies around its head, another pacing crazy back and forth, a step and a turn, again and again. From downtown, I caught the bus.

At home, I sat in my chair. It was still light out but gray and the room was gloomy. I looked at the typewriter with a three-fourths typed page rolled in and pulled the machine closer. I pulled out the page and put a fresh one in. I set my fingers on the keys. Soon, the walls started talking, only now it wasn't the troubled African American. The voices were of a tenor-voiced man and an old woman. He called her mama, and she called him Osh-kar. They spoke Portuguese, but the tone of language conveyed information I thought I understood. Her dry voice came from near the wall, from bed height, perhaps with pillows propping her up. She asked for something. He whispered soothingly. He helped her up, giving a few words of guidance. They shuffled together to the door, and down the hall to the bathroom. She peed. They shuffled back, and he helped her into bed. She groaned, and he said shhhh, shhhh, shhhh. I clacked away, listening to the walls. How would it end for them? He should leave her, I thought, to live his own life.