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### **Abstract**

What he told her. Usually, that his heart was no good. Sometimes, how he missed the sea. She takes the yellow-painted motor launch across the river and on the other side has salted cod, sweet lemonade. The air here is brackish. The waitress's mouth is painted brick-red. At the far end of the wharf men are bringing in jelly fish. The black nets filled with blubbery white.

ELLEKE BOEHMER

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What he told her. Usually, that his heart was no good. Sometimes, how he missed the sea.

She takes the yellow-painted motor launch across the river and on the other side has salted cod, sweet lemonade. The air here is brackish. The waitress's mouth is painted brick-red. At the far end of the wharf men are bringing in jelly fish. The black nets filled with blubbery white.

Lissabon, he said the name in his own language, touching it musically. He did not usually sing, not aloud. He silently mouthed the songs of the woman with the black eyes who featured on every one of his album covers. He played these records late at night and early in the morning, when the rest of the family was asleep. He played them softly. He said, I love to hear that voice. It contains everything, the whole world.

The churches she discovers in side streets are quiet. They are dusty buildings clogged with wrought iron and marble bric-à-brac. In them something is missing. He would have avoided the churches, of course. He avoided holy vessels of memory and spirit. He liked to burn his photographs from time to time. There were pictures of his youth, the tall house in Rotterdam, the years spent in the navy, Queen Wilhelmina in white lace shaking his hand. He used old letters for kindling. The last time, he added his navy epaulettes to the blaze.

One church she visits is damaged by fire. Pigeons are nesting behind the altar. A woman with a Pentax tells her, what a pity, such beautiful monuments in this country and they don't take care of them.

When he came home that day, knowing what he had suspected all along, he played his music at noon for the first time. Song after song the woman's voice was rich and strong and without hope. In a corner stood two children in summer dresses giggling. The man rocked from side to side at the record player, mouthing the words.

The area with the fado bars confuses her. The bars look alike. Each pumps songs of immense sorrow onto the street. She chooses at random. The man at the door takes her coat and seats her beside the cigarette machine. On the table is a bottle of Dao and a vanilla pudding in a wine glass. She and the two other customers make a short row at the edge of an empty raft of tables. Perched on the bar is an albino canary in a cage.

But after all, he did not make it here. He said one day, laughing, I'll get there though I die in the attempt. I have to make it, it's fated. I, a sea-

faring man from a sea-faring nation. Having sailed the routes of the old explorers. The Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It was '43, '44, about then. Patrolling around Aden and Jakarta, liberating East Timor. And then having not made it into Lissabon.

His attention wandered when he thought of these things. He hummed to himself. Out of that great city, he would add, sailed the white man bearing the astrolabe, influenza, unfinished maps of the world, the telephone. Up that river he came again weighed down with the heaviness of his ambition. Returning to a city which an earthquake had ground to dust.

The singer here is not comfortable. A few minutes ago she was laughing melodiously with the guitarist behind a wooden screen. On the dias she is unhappy. The edge of her red shawl dusts the floor. She croons a little and stands still, stout on black stilettos. The other two customers have struck up a conversation in English.

'You should take a vacation,' says one. 'You'll get used to it.'

Then, soon after he'd heard what he had to hear, he stopped playing his fado records. He stayed in bed. They put the pile of records within reach beside the bed. The album covers boasting of the woman with the black eyes and brick-red lips. He took no notice. He murmured the names of distant cities. Trust them, he said. After the earthquake they rebuilt all of Lissabon by careful design. However I'm told they got it wrong, the streets aren't symmetrical. It's hard to believe. I must go to see it some day.

She is joined by a Mocambiquan, a fourth customer, who smells of lemon soap. He is wearing a checked blue and red shirt and a cap. He says he is a student. Can he sit with her?

On the wall behind the Mocambiquan's head she notices a signed and framed photograph of her father's singer. The signature has run into the complicated embroidery of her gown. The singer's eyebrows are straight and black, she is not smiling.

The Mocambiquan tells her he comes here every weekend for fado. The singer must be made drunk, is his opinion. The music is African really, and she is not, she doesn't feel it. He orders two bottles of Dao, he gives one to the musicians behind the wooden screen. On the table he spreads red and black pamphlets, and pens and a notebook. He adds an extra vase of flowers taken from an empty table.

She thinks she hears him say the singer behind the screen was once his lover. Then he is explaining the pamphlets. The place has very quickly become loud. The singer is suddenly singing with great power and steadiness. The Mocambiquan points to a small button on his shirt, then jabs at the title of his pamphlets. These say, Free East Timor. She shakes her head, she is having trouble hearing him. He says, mouthing the words, take bus route 25. She realises he is asking her to join him tomorrow on the beach, at the old Coke kiosk. There, the surf is good.

But vinyl does not burn easily, they discovered. The album covers and the photograph of his destroyer did. He laughed to see the flames dance in the big metal waste bin. He laughed also when he broke the photograph frame on the floor. He added to the bin rubbing alcohol, old letters and a yellowed journal, his navy epaulettes, and the broken photograph frame. But he had his children light the matches. Two matches. Hers was the second. She saw the red lips of the woman leap into flame. Then they watched him laughing and retching into his pillow, and laughing again, and beating a silent tune with both hands on the mattress.

The Mocambiquan draws a map to make clearer the route to the beach. The singer has come to sit at their table. She looks at him with an expression of deep hopelessness. She watches him draw. Then she speaks, he translates. This is a difficult city for a stranger to find their way and feel happy, he says slowly, watching her lips. Because it was rebuilt askew. It is a city full of junk, and bad singers, and aging dictators, he adds, built askew.