

Days of Wedding

Denise doesn't enter the club right away but stops by the mango tree. When she climbed it as a girl, the fruits hung from the branch, moving in cadence with the wind, while the kids threw pebbles and waited until they fell to the ground like dynamite, tearing the skin with their fingers. "C'mon, let's get a table," Cecília says, pushing her inside. Her mother is tall, with an elongated back. Side by side, they are disproportional. Denise feels very petite whenever she comes to visit her family.

When they walk into the salon, a wrinkle stretching along Denise's large smile makes her even more aware of her age, the sun already damaging her skin. Being forty and unmarried is a curse to carry on a day like that one. The ceremony in the garden is gregarious, but sweet. Not everyone comes, naturally. Her grandfather, still not accepting homosexuality as a valid choice, refuses to appear but sends the couple an invitation to the community fair. He believes the organic market is something that will appease them.

Uncle Tom rushes in with an artificial rose in his lapel, busy, holding the bouquet in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other. "I am glad you came, doll," he says, as he passes by her. His marriage to Rob has saved him from becoming another divorcee in the family, but nobody mentions the list of failed marriages anymore. He has lost weight too.

Around them waiters held large trays of canapés with *fiapos* of mangoes, matching the tropical decoration of the room. The man with the dark suit is Robert, the other groom, but he isn't so loaded with preoccupation. His history was shy. He was an orphan, and had been raised by an aunt. Not many relatives of his were present there.

Their official story was cute. They had met in the line-up of a supermarket, both trying to get a turkey for New Year's Eve. It was a chaotic time of the year in Rio. At that time, he was married to a woman, but it didn't last. His sexual preferences were stronger. "Are you sure he fits you in everything?" His mother asked. She posed the question as if inquiring about a garment. Denise always felt intimidated by her mother's approach to marriage, a resolution made to match.

Coming back to Brazil without her own family to account for was an issue. Even though she was a nurse since eighteen and lived life abroad without demanding too much attention, she still felt insecure. When she moved overseas, she never imagined she would reach forty without meeting the right man. But then again, it was her mother's voice in her head. "Soon you won't have too many more chances," Cecília had alerted her.

Now, on a cloudy day, in a gay marriage, she recalled the last date she had in Canada with a Brazilian guy, in the modern art gallery. They were watching a show

about Monet. It hadn't worked out. The man wanted a wife, but she wanted to be a free woman.

"I don't know if you remember me. I'm Daniel," the stranger says, sitting beside Denise with a curved back. She is deep in her thoughts when he approaches her, but raises her eyes out of politeness. From a distance, Cecília, her mother, continues to give instructions to the guests arriving, as if everyone still needs guidance at that point in the party. The man at the edge of the table has wide cheeks, stiff like wooden doors, slightly bald, with profound eyes.

"The weather is harsh. Hot like an oasis," he says, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. She hesitates, her arms sweating and staining under her dress.

She doesn't know who he is. "I'm sorry. Are you a member of this club?" She asks, avoiding eye contact. Maybe he had entered the party by mistake.

In downtown Toronto, people always confused the gym with the community center, not often knowing which areas they were allowed to circulate.

"You live somewhere else, don't you?" He asks.

She feels safe around him, for some reason. His face is peaceful, and he doesn't seem to have any relatives in the room. That must be it.

“My daughter, Elisa, is gay too. She just baptized my granddaughter in the Methodist church and now lives with a woman. It is not my first time in a wedding like this. But I get very sentimental in these events, especially after they moved to the countryside and my wife died,” he affirms.

He takes a small silver bottle from his pocket and pours the malt into the orange juice they have just served on the table. He holds the cup with a slight tension in his neck, making an effort.

“I've never remarried. What about you? What's your story?” He asks, looking around, as if searching for someone.

“Is that whisky?” She asks.

He puts some in her glass and moves his chair closer.

“I am not married. I met a Brazilian guy in an art exposition once but it didn't work out. Long distance relationship,” she says in Portuguese.

Denise likes this new sensation of being unknown, the recipient of a curious gaze, detached from the familiar. There is a loud buzz in one of the speakers. Far away, on the stage, Robert begins the speeches, thanking everyone for being there. Eventually, at some point, Tom cries when everyone learns about how they met.

“In our first dinner, he made me a chicken casserole with some leftovers from the weekend. Despite not eating meat very often, I made an exception,” he affirms, raising his champagne glass.

That’s when the man, the stranger, hits the table, with violence. He is talking to her.

“When I was with my wife, we wanted everything to work out. If it wasn’t for your mother,” Daniel says, holding his hands together.

He stares at her as if waiting for a response. He seems different now, like a man’s man, brute, with sarcastic tone, no longer friendly.

“I think you are mistaken,” Denise replies, feeling afraid and tense all of a sudden, the mentioning of Cecília’s name causing uncertainty.

Her mother arrives at the table with some roses in her hand, out of breath.

“To think I have always fought with your father over little things,” she says, meditating out loud and calling the waiter. “Some water, please.”

Daniel looks at her in silence but Cecília doesn’t acknowledge his presence. Denise pretends there is nothing going on. “They are a great couple,” she comments, fixated at the stage.

“Hi Cecília. I was talking to your beautiful daughter. My wife is dead, did you know? You shouldn’t have told her us about us. She never recovered from it,” he says, no longer interested in Denise.

“What are you doing here?” Her mother says, yelling but soon diminishing her tone of voice. His words are loud and a lot of people begin to look at their direction now. Suddenly, Cecília pushes the man away but he doesn’t move. Denise feels like running.

During her childhood, people used to call her mother words, “whore,” but she pretended not to hear it. Cecília grabs his arm and finally disappears with him somewhere in the salon. Like in the past, things happened without plausible explanations. There was no sign of further violence, but the silence held aggressiveness. Perhaps the man just wanted to scare her mother.

Denise recalls the weekends when she would come to the club and play hide and seek, trying to get away from the fights her mother always had with her father, his jealousy and her infidelity always an issue.

She wishes she could make the memories disappear, or change the past. The room now appears darker; the velvet curtains an oddity among so many yellow vases on the tables.

“How did he get in?” She asks, when her mother returns, nervously shaken.

“It doesn’t matter,” Cecília replies.

The man had been escorted out of the salon without anyone noticing. Like in her memories, things would happen and disappear, without any rational logic. She didn’t know, for sure, if her mother actually slept with other men, or if her father even mattered. They remained married for twenty-five years, until he died last year. Denise wants to ask her mother about the strange man, was he in love with her, but Cecília walks towards the band, inviting Uncle Tom to dance.

It begins to play a fast samba, and he puts his head on her shoulder, as if crying. Out of breath, Denise leaves the salon and ends up outside, near the tennis courts.

“I’m sorry we didn’t have the time to finish our conversation,” Daniel says, on the other side of the fence. He is still holding the silver jug, now without his jacket. As a young girl, Denise used to go for long walks near the courts, but the place looked smaller today, with less clay. She didn’t have a lot of friends then nor does she have them now.

“I am an old friend of your mom,” he says, moving away. “It doesn’t matter, I drank too much, and I should have just congratulated your Uncle Tom. He was an old friend of mine. But sometimes the past comes back and gets on the way,” he says, continuing to walk and excusing himself.

Agreeing with what he says, she wishes his truth or his side of the story would come through, so many questions and doubts about her mother within her. Once there was this man, who lived in a house by the river. Her mother used to go there many times a week.

“What do you think you are doing?” Her mother asks, when Denise returns from outside.

“I just went for a walk,” she says.

Uncle Tom approaches the table to make sure everything is ok.

“It is strange how things have their own destiny in this family,” Denise says.

“You don’t know. You don’t know anything,” Cecília replies.

“It is my party, let’s forget about it,” Tom says.

They exchange looks and her mother walks away. Denise hasn’t been in the country for far too long, but the secrets don’t seem to go away very easily. The spontaneity of the beginning of the party disappears as soon as she finds herself in the table once again.

“I was hoping you would meet your soul mate here,” Robert comments, watching his partner dance with her mother.

“I guess love has many facets,” Denise comments. “Maybe I will find mine soon,” getting up to serve from the food.

“Denise?” Cecilia says, when she is standing in the line-up.

There are barbecue and tropical salads being offered in the buffet. She raises her eyes from her empty plate.

“Hi,” Denise answers, her hands crossed, over her satin pink dress with pleats. Her mother embraces her from behind.

“I am sorry,” she says.

In the ceremony, she had noticed how her daughter had cried, happy and proud of her brother.

“It is ok. I am glad I came,” Denise says, reaching the end of the line and watching all the relatives circulate freely in the salon, beaming with life.

“Let’s sit,” her mother emphasizes, attentive.

People get comfortable. The Brazilian music makes her think about the musicals she used to watch on TV, while her mother danced with her father in the middle of the living room. The food tastes sweet, and accidentally, *um fiapo* of mango is trapped between her front teeth.

“You’re ok the way you are,” her mother says. “No need to change.”

The phrase is out of place, but welcomed. Tears come down her mother’s cheeks. Everything happens very fast.

“It is a good family we have,” Cecília affirms, with loaded emotion.

“Yes, it feels like it,” Denise says, unsure.

Later, sitting by the mango tree, her high heels deep in the earth, she is surprised and scared by the fruit that falls on her lap. The drop hurts Denise, but not too much. When she returns to Toronto, she will have lots of stories to tell her patients, even if they turn out not to be true.

Like fiction, her memories will change with the circumstances and time will make them into something new, incomplete, but full of words.

She tears the skin apart from the fruit and bites its flesh, a line of juice running down her cheeks.

