

Alfamadog

by Rebekka Korthues

It was that special ache between heart and stomach that made me stop things. That ache that cannot be caused by the mere knowledge that you have steered your life into a completely wrong direction. To feel this pain, you also need to have no clue why and how it happened and, worst of all, to be fully aware that it could happen again at any time, defeating the very dreams you had for your life. I was my own worst enemy. I had to be taken out. I quit my job at the advertising agency which had left me with only a hatred for neon lights, a fear of ringing phones and a disgust for my subservient self. I spent endless hours on the Internet and on the Berlin subway, looking for something or someone to tell me what to do next. When nothing came, I decided to go away. If I was to do nothing, I might as well do it in a place I did not despise. Also, I missed a certain dog.

I flew to Lisbon, where I had spent many a summer vacation in tranquility and with the feeling of an exciting, self-made future sitting right there on the palm of my hand. Lisbon, the White City, filled with a light almost too bright, and playful winds. Full of musty smells and black garbage bags. Full of old people and dogs. It is a city in decay, a city that has grown too old to leave its apartment by itself, a city where old ladies let down wicker baskets from their windows to be filled with dried fish, wine and bread by the neighborhood kids.

I moved into an ancient rotting house in the cat-infested shadow of the Old Castle, and took a job as cook in a little café. During the day, I toasted white bread for old gossips and fried hamburgers for tourists using the vacation alibi to down pints of beer at noon. During the nights, I stood at my window, smoking and watching the street, emptied now of drug dealers and fierce old women. I was waiting, still, for something to come to me, be it hope, a plan, or at least the final determination to give up on both.

Sometimes I went out in Alfama, the area around the café. A movie set made up of conglomerate houses, alleys so narrow you

can hardly turn around, and crooked stairways. Since my first visit, years ago, I could never stroll through this unreal bairro without feeling the urge to knock on the *façades* to check if they were made out of paper mâché. And without being on the lookout, on some level, for a certain dog — Alfamadog. Everyone in Alfama knew this big, beautiful yellow-white stray dog. He was a frequent guest in people's homes and in bars, where he napped under tables, warming the guests' feet. Sometimes he suddenly came running around a corner, sometimes he just strolled around casually, marking his territory, granting audiences. He was never dirty and always free. He was always nice to you, but he would never love you. What can I say? I have never been known for letting an opportunity to get hurt just pass me by.

One night, that summer, I left work late and went home, slowly and with heavy steps. I had a lot on my mind and even more weighing on my shoulders. With too few numbers on my bank account and too many on my face, I dreaded the future more than ever. In front of the grey macho cathedral lay Alfamadog. I sat down, petted his head, and poured a bit of water on the ancient stones. He enjoyed it and wanted a refill. He got it, in exchange for having to listen to my lameass human worries. When there was nothing more to say, I got up with a sigh, mumbled a goodbye and made my way up the hill. I heard a sound and turned around. The dog was following me. "Watch out, we are about to leave Alfama, Alfamadog," I teased. He looked at me with tired disdain. He had heard that one before. So up we walked. I talked, and the dog listened, and sometimes he just ran off into the darkness. Everytime he disappeared, I felt a sting. But he always came back. He walked me right to my front door. I opened it with a lighter heart. "Wait," I told the dog, "I am going to raid the fridge for a late night snack. You've earned it." But when I leaned out of the window some minutes later with a slice of ham, the dog was gone.

For weeks after that, the dog was not to be found. It disturbed me, but I had other things on my mind. A new dampness in the house, courtesy of the recently arrived fall, and the constant rustling

of mice in the background. An open suitcase on the floor of my room. A plane ticket back to Reasonville. A pressure on the ribcage. I went to a bar with friends for goodbye drinks in Alfama. Cherry liquor and cigarettes. Under the table, I found the dog, sleeping. When we left he got up, looking up at me almost reproachfully. He followed me, and I felt serene. Then, suddenly, he smelled a cat under a parking car and abandoned me. Just like that.

Only reluctantly I continued my way home. Looking over my shoulder, hoping the dog would come running after me. He did not come. In front of my café, I stopped at some steps, suddenly without strength to climb them and continue my way home, to the suitcase. I even found myself crying. How ridiculous, standing there crying and waiting as if for a man. Wanting to be special to a stray dog. But I was convinced that that night, when he had walked me home, he had sensed that I was lost, and hopeless, and needed someone to walk with me, to keep me company. So what if that was bullshit? It was a straw, and I would hold on to it. Some people think it is better to know the ugly truth. I am not one of them. I decided I would not budge. I took off my jacket and placed it on the steps. And I sat down.

After a while, my colleague the bartender came out with a mug full of wine. "Are you OK?" he asked. "Yes." He sat down next to me, with the sigh of a man who has been on his feet for too many hours. I got restless and looked around to the dark cobble street that led deeper into Alfama. What if he kept the dog away? "What are you looking for?" I had to laugh at the absurdity of the question. "I wish I knew." - "Are you waiting for something?" - "Yes." - "What?" I snorted again. "I don't really know." I had irritated him. He got up, but left the mug on the stone steps next to me. "You wanna come in? It's cold. You can help me close up." - "No, I think I am just going to stay here." - "What for?" - "Not sure. But as I said. I think I am waiting." He shook his head. Crazy German. Then he shrugged me off and left. He had real things to do.

I stayed on the stairs, shivering. When people passed by, drunk and on their way towards drunker, I pretended to be sleeping. At

some point, I must have fallen asleep for real. I woke up to a clear blue sky and the crisp air only Lisbon can offer. Cold, except for my feet. I looked down. Sleeping on them lay Alfamadog. I carefully pulled them away from under him. I let him sleep and went to the airport.

