

THE LISBON LOVER

By

Julie Dron

It was her usual Thursday evening walk through the narrow streets to her favourite restaurant. She wore her sensible shoes, avoiding heels that would slip between the Portuguese cobbles. Today wasn't strictly 'usual' however, because she was aware that she was being followed. Stopping to peer into the window of a gift shop, she saw him in the reflection of the glass. The man also stopped, pretending to gaze at the azulejos, the beautiful blue and white tiles that adorned many of the old buildings in Lisbon. She wasn't frightened, merely curious. Why on earth was he following her? What did he want?

Paul watched her as he pretended to take photographs of the pretty mosaics. She looked younger than he expected; at seventy she appeared quite sprightly despite a slight limp. He followed at a distance as she continued her stroll. Gentle guitar music drifted from various bars and restaurants, expressive music, as if oozing from the walls that had listened for centuries. She disappeared through a doorway, and he followed her down the stone steps into the basement restaurant, its coral-coloured walls, soft lighting, and candlelit tables radiating a welcoming warmth. Paul saw her settling into a chair, and he wound his way quickly through the tables before the waiter could waylay him. He stood before her and coughed, nervously.

“I'm sorry, I know this looks very rude, but could I have a word? I wasn't sure how else to approach you.”

She looked up at him expectantly, and he was thankful that she didn't look shocked or angry, or even worse, call the waiter and demand that he be thrown out.

“I'm a journalist, a writer, I write for a well-known London magazine.” He spoke fast, to get it all out before she chased him away. “I believe you are Helena Chevais? The famous actress who gave up her acting career, to join the Carnation Revolution, here in Lisbon? Back in 1974? Your boyfriend was one of the revolutionaries? I'm interested in writing a story, if...”

Helen was surprised. It was a long time since she had been called Helena Chevais, her old stage name. She interrupted him, interested in what he had to say, and indicated to the vacant chair opposite.

“Please sit and tell me more.”

Paul visibly breathed out, relaxing, scraping the chair back clumsily, falling gratefully into the cushioned seat. He took a card from his pocket and pushed it across the white tablecloth.

“My name, Paul. Paul Kingsley. I came across your story, accidentally, when I was researching the revolution. I found an old photo of you, in the London newspapers, back in 1974!”

He took out his phone to show Helen the black and white photograph. There she was, age twenty-three, against the grainy background. She was smiling, holding the stem of the carnation. It was red, she remembered, staring at the image, surprised to see herself. So many years ago, her blonde hair in the fashionable 70s feather cut, the petals of the flower tickling her nose. A waiter suddenly appeared at the table, and she ordered her meal in almost, but not quite, perfect Portuguese. She looked up at Paul and laughed.

“I'm ordering sardines and wine! Do you want to try this dish?”

Paul nodded, adding, “And please allow me to pay for this meal!”

After handing the menus back to the waiter, Paul explained that it would make a great human-interest story; the actress who gave up everything, to join her lover and the revolution in 1974 Portugal.

“...and of course, we can negotiate pay with my editor.”

Just then the waiter reappeared with the wine, pouring it expertly into the glasses.

“He played the guitar, my lover!” Helen suddenly blurted out, lifting the wine glass to her lips. Why did she tell him that? She hadn't thought about this in decades! She turned her head to watch the musicians entering the room. They were smiling and chatting with the audience who were waiting in anticipation for the fado to begin.

“Have you listened to fado before, Paul?” she whispered, “The music of Portugal?”

Paul shook his head. “No, never.”

“Listen and enjoy the food and the music. It's rude to talk during the performance. We can talk later.”

Helen loved the bright, higher tones of the Portuguese guitar, against the strumming of the acoustic guitars, almost as if it were singing. She had taken lessons, once, many years ago, but the guitar with its twelve strings arranged in six courses had proved too difficult for her. Instead, she enjoyed her Thursday evenings, soaking up the emotional fado performance.

She watched Paul as the singing of the fadista echoed mournfully around the small restaurant, a song of yearning while the strings of the guitars reverberated with the pain of lost love. Helen knew that Paul would not understand the lyrics, but she could see that he was already captivated by the haunting melodies. Paul was young, she guessed, probably the same age she had been when she first came to Portugal. She hadn't thought of that time, for so long.

Yes, she had been an aspiring actress in London. She had landed the role of Cathy in a production of *Wuthering Heights*, to rave reviews, a 'promising career' the critics had written. Then she had met Andre, a Portuguese student, *a music student!* he would laugh, although he never appeared to study. He had brought his guitar with him to London, his *guitarra portuguesa* with its distinctive round-bodied shape, busking in London tube stations.

His appearance suggested a medieval wandering minstrel, a charming yet slightly daredevil figure with a head of curly hair and large dark eyes. He would sit in her small bedsit, his fingers strumming the twelve strings, singing words of love in his native Portuguese. Then, one day he began to sob, clinging to the neck of his guitar, his tears falling onto the polished spruce soundboard. His mother was very sick, and he couldn't afford the fare home, he told her between his gasps for breath. She had hugged him, marching to the bank to withdraw a large sum for his flight and to help with his poor mother. He wrote down his address and phone number in Lisbon.

“Come to me soon, *meu amor!*”

After he left, her acting began to suffer, and eventually she took leave, booked a flight, and arrived in Lisbon one sunny April afternoon. She tried to call Andre on the number he had given her, but the number and the address didn't exist. Heartbroken and alone, she had stumbled as she stepped from a tram, which resulted in a broken ankle and four weeks in a Portuguese hospital followed by further weeks recuperating by the ocean.

Life in the London theatre carried on without her; her understudy filling her role and stealing the limelight, while in Lisbon the revolution had broken out on the streets. The photograph of her with the carnation had actually been taken the previous year during a holiday in Kent and had no connection to Portugal, but it had surfaced, and the rumours that she had fled to Portugal to take part in what became known as the Carnation Revolution began to circulate. The theatre did nothing to dispel the rumours, which were much more interesting than reality.

But this had been forgotten, decades ago now. She had remained in Lisbon while her ankle healed, and eventually married the doctor, Gabriel, who was treating her. A widower twenty years older, much against the wishes of his children. She never acted again and remembered little about the revolution as she had been in hospital.

Gabriel had passed away twenty years ago, a good man yet married to his work, and she had often been lonely. She glanced at Paul, who was now clapping, he had obviously enjoyed his first fado performance! She would give him his story, her version, the story that would sell, the myth propagated by the theatre, of love, of flowers, of music, of revolutions, of youth and hope. *Romântico!* She would enjoy spending more time with this attractive young man!

But the truth? No, she would keep that to herself!

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Julie started writing in her sixties and has since been published in a variety of online magazines and anthologies including *Syncopation Literary Journal*, *Wordrunner eChapbooks*, *Synkroniciti*, *The Wild Word*, *Amaranth*, *Blink Ink*, *Flash Fiction Magazine* and *Danse Macabre*. Nominated Twice for Pushcart Prize 2024.