

Elahzar Rao

Saudade

They once pronounced you dead, but you left the morgue days later wearing the same dog tags that were found on the body in Angra do Heroismo. And when you came home that day, the square, stone house was empty, as if no one had lived there for a very long time. Now, still lying on your back, you realize you must have only come to an unfortunate end because you made the wrong choices. But it's not over yet. You can figure this out. Close your eyes and think about what could have happened.

Start from the beginning. You didn't want to stay where you were; no one your age did. The place where you were born and raised is not what it used to be. The last textile mill left in town, which had also been one of the last still running in all of New England, had shut down. A few of the old men who used to work there now worked in the supermarket warehouse with your father, who once owned his own grocery store. He was a manager at the warehouse by the time you graduated high school, and you worked under him for a little over two years afterward. Had you gotten the football scholarship you wanted, you would have gone off to college like some of the others. And you weren't sure which big city to look for better work in or whether you really wanted to squeeze into a big city at all. Finally, with the approval and even encouragement of your father, you enlisted in the military, choosing the Air Force, which seemed to be the safest branch of service.

But you would not leave Beulah. She had been with you throughout most of your last year in school, and a year after you both graduated together she was still wearing your maroon-and-manila varsity jacket, which puffed out around her slen-

der torso in a way that made her look like she would float if she ever fell into the lake where you used to take her to watch the moon rise. You were glad she wore it. Letting her wear something that belonged to you let others know that she belonged

When you finally returned home on your first leave, she was standing with your parents outside the gate of the airport, waiting again to hold your face against her perfumed cheek and a silken wave of her auburn hair.

to you when you weren't around. You didn't want to be away from her for long. You asked her to marry you before you left for basic training. She cried and said yes, and she married you before you left. She cried again when she visited you at the end of basic training and leafed through your closely cropped hair with the soft tips of her short fingers as you explained to her that you would have to remain in Texas until you were finished being trained as a crew chief. When you finally returned home on your first leave, she was standing with your parents outside the gate of the airport, waiting again to hold your face against her perfumed cheek and a silken wave of her auburn hair. Several days later the two of you moved to the place that was printed on your orders and where neither of you knew existed before.

You were stationed in Lajes Air Base, among the scatterings of land off the coast of mainland Portugal known as the Azores. You now lived and worked on the island of Terceira, where you could, by traveling on foot alone, watch the sun both rise and set over the Atlantic in the same day. Here the water is always closing in, heaving, as it scrabbles up the cliffs from the surrounding sea, its briny, damp breath across the land until breaking out into thick, heavy droplets of blinding rain. But when the days are clear and bright, everywhere you look seems to awaken something inside you that sounds like the slow and graceful plucking of heavy strings on an old guitar. The whitewashed stone houses and Catholic chapels, colorfully trimmed like decorated cakes, glow across the rolling hills. Saintly grandmothers hang their scarf-draped heads out through the parted window shutters. Old men in wool caps play cards in the public square. Lovers insensitive to their youth and company sip beer on the beach or sweet wine under a table umbrella at one of the cafés. Families stroll quietly through the cobbled streets with extraordinary patience. You realize you

are simply in another small town. But here you have switched places with the other. Where you're from, it's the Portuguese who are more accepted than welcomed. Yet here they also, for the most part, keep to themselves. Likewise, you and Beulah only befriended the other airmen and sergeants and their spouses, talking and dining with them the way the officers behind aviator glasses talk and dine with other officers who pilot the planes that you and the other enlisted men guide back into parking spaces on the flight line before servicing. Most of the planes here—whether cargo, tankers, or fighters—are just passing through, stopping in a small town for you to check their engine oil and fill them up with gas before they continue on to somewhere bigger.

Beulah was alone while you worked during the day. There are simply not many jobs here for English-speaking civilians. But you took her around, especially on the weekends that you didn't have to work. One day you walked with Beulah hand in hand through Praia da Vitoria and saw a roaring, shifting crowd on one of the main streets there. After the two of you joined the fringe of the crowd, you found yourselves watching an Azorean bullfight. In the clearing formed by the huddled locals, six men in white tunics and black porkpie hats held the end of a long rope that was tied to the broad neck of a dark brown beast who was being taunted by those around him like some new kid being picked on at school. One young man, with thick black hair and a mustache and a short-sleeved shirt unbuttoned halfway down his sweating chest, raced around the snorting bull like a mosquito, poking its flanks and even for a split second at a time grabbing the hilts of its horns, whose points were safely blunted by leather knobs. The crowd cheered for this man louder than they cheered for any of the other taunters, who were careful not to get as close to the bull. Later, after the handlers reeled the tired animal back into his wooden crate, you saw the most lauded taunter embraced and kissed by an attractive young woman with long black hair and a windblown dress, and for the first time you wondered if you had married too soon. Then you looked at your wife and could've sworn that she was gazing at the bull taunter with admiration.

That same night, in the bedroom at home, Beulah told you she wanted a baby. You were using condoms—she had said she didn't like the way the pill made her feel. Now she was asking you to stop using them. But you never stopped using condoms with her, though that didn't guarantee anything. You told Beulah that night that you'd rather wait and have a baby on American soil and that you were both still very young and had plenty of time to do things later. An argument followed and ended with you both lying on the bed facing away from each other. The following morning, Beulah got up before you. She passed you in silence, her auburn hair wet-

ted black and her terry robe clutched tightly over her breasts. But she had left you a message in the bathroom. I STILL LOVE YOU was written into the fogged mirror above the sink. Still love you. For a long time afterward the mirror was not tow-eled over, and these words reappeared every time the bathroom filled with steam, though they grew fainter and fainter each day.

Here's where everything changes. It was a Friday before a three-day holiday weekend that you didn't have to work on. You had convinced your supervisor to just this once let you exchange half a day shift with an airman on swing shift. The airmen would come in early and replace you at lunch, and you would in turn extend his weekend by working a few extra hours past your shift on Tuesday. When you came home early, you would further surprise Beulah with the hotel reservations you had already made, and then the two of you would quickly pack some clothes and catch the afternoon ferry to the bigger island of Sao Miguel, where you and your wife would be able to enjoy three full evenings together. The other airman came at eleven o'clock. You thanked him and he told you to have fun before you left the break room and hurried on your bicycle through the guarded checkpoint of the base and across the street into the military housing complex. When you arrived at your house, you noticed that the small white car you were leasing was not in the driveway. You went into the house and into the bedroom to begin packing until Beulah returned home with the car. But while you were going through the closet, you noticed that your wife's yellow dress, which always hung together with her red and black dress, was missing. This dress, like the two others, she only wore on special occasions. You stopped packing, put on the rest of your civilian clothes, and went back out to your bicycle.

You pedaled around Lajes, looking for the small white car. When you didn't find it there, you took the road south to Praia da Vitoria. In Praia you bumped over the cobblestones for about half an hour before you found the car parked and empty by the curb of a narrow street between two row houses. And when you looked around the corner of one of the row houses you saw your yellow-dressed wife across the street, sitting at a table outside a café. She was not alone and you recognized who she was with. The young bull taunter with the thick black mustache was smiling with the corners of his eyes at your wife, who was throwing back her head in laughter while touching his arm from the across the table. You turned away and rode your bike back to Lajes, passing a few children on donkeys as you were passed by a few droning cars disappearing into the hills and bends of the winding road.

You were sitting in the living room with the lights off when Beulah came

home just before you would have usually come home from the flight line. When she noticed you on the sofa, she said you scared her. You told her she was dressed nice. She told you she wanted to go somewhere nice for the three-day weekend. You told her you didn't feel like going anywhere, and you didn't. The long weekend went by slowly.

On Tuesday morning, when you were already dressed in your ironed fatigues, you told Beulah, who was still half asleep in bed, that you had to work late that day. She rolled her head toward you on the pillow and asked how late. You told her at least seven o'clock. She said okay and turned her face away as if to go back to sleep.

That same day, shortly before three o'clock, you told your supervisor that you had to go home. He reminded you that you had to stay until seven that day. You told him that Beulah was so sick that neither of you had been able to go away that weekend. The technical sergeant sighed and shook his head and finally agreed to let you try to work it out with your swing-shift replacement. Then you called up the other crew chief who didn't have to come in until seven that day and asked him to come in at his usual time of three o'clock. He finally agreed to do it after you promised him more than once that you would stay late for him for the next two days. You were already sitting on your bicycle outside the break room when he arrived. You thanked him as he frowned and then you quickly pedaled home.

It was a quarter after three when you got home, and the car was not in the driveway again. You walked through the small empty house and into the bedroom, and you folded apart the shuttered doors of the closet. The red dress was now missing. Your heart felt like it dropped into your stomach and you wanted to assure yourself that you weren't jumping to any conclusions. You went into the bathroom and turned on the hot water in the shower and sink. The bathroom filled with steam until your face was blurred in the mirror above the sink. Expecting to see I STILL LOVE YOU reappear again in the silver dew, you instead saw in its place the word BISCOITOS. You and Beulah had been nearly everywhere on the island at least once. Biscoitos is the place where one Sunday morning, when no one else was around, you and Beulah had gone skinny dipping in one of the lava craters that was filled with warm saltwater.

You turned off the water and left the house, crossing the lawn to your neighbor's house, where another young couple lives. The husband there was a senior airman in security. You've drunk beer and talked football with him. He also worked the day shift and answered the door when you knocked, calling you buddy and asking what's up. You told him Beulah was off somewhere with the car and you

needed to run some errands in town. He quickly agreed to give you the keys to his small green car. You told your neighbor you would fill up the gas tank before bringing his car back and then you drove off the housing complex. You turned onto the main coastal road and headed west, following that winding path that shaves deep through the rocks of the forest, leaving the long roots of short trees exposed like entrails in the waving cross-section of land. You were driving fast and soon the trees grew sparse and the jagged boulders thicker and darker until the earth before you looked like clotted blood. Then you were in Biscoitos, slowing in and out of shallow valleys, searching for a small white car among the blackened range of petrified lava.

You found the car parked and empty and leaning into a ditch on the side of the road. You parked the car you were driving in front of the white car. After you cut the engine, you stayed in the green car and heard nothing but the wind. Then you got out of the car, closing the door softly so that it wasn't latched all the way. You walked slowly in different directions and then stopped when you thought you heard something. Again you heard what sounded like faint voices and maybe a splash coming from the other side of a tall mound. Rather than going around, you crept up the dark stone incline on all fours and carefully raised your eyes over the crest. There they were. The bull taunter was already in the pool, his top half resting on the black glass water like a bronze statue of a naked bust. Beulah, still wearing her bright red dress, slowly waded toward him. As she got deeper, the red dress opened all around her. Then she stopped and lifted her bare arms straight up, and all at once she sank straight down, disappearing entirely through the shoulder straps while the dress remained floating atop the pool's surface like a giant red water lily. When Beulah shot back up through the water, her pale wet flesh was glowing in the afternoon light. And when her thin white body was enveloped by the taunter's dark arms, you turned your face away and hurried back down the stone hill.

After you got back into your neighbor's car, you didn't drive straight home. Wanting to keep driving while you thought about what you just saw and what you would do about it, you turned onto some narrow dirt road you thought was leading south. You didn't have to worry about getting lost. Follow any road on the island long enough and you'll run into the main coastal road that will circle you back to Lajes. That's how it always works here. No matter which way you go, you end up back at the beginning.

Before reaching the coastal road you found yourself traveling through the deep green pastures that are fragmented by low walls of stacked lava stones in a way that makes the assemblage of properties look like a distant aerial view even from up

close. Some of the pastures had Holsteins grazing in them, and some of those also had dairy farmers in them. You slowed down to look at the black-and-white cattle and the dairy farmers and the deep green pastures. You were slowly driving around there, thinking about how different things might have been if you or your parents had owned some piece of land back home, when suddenly you noticed someone that you recognized. The windblown woman with the long black hair, who you had seen kissing the bull taunter in Praia, was now standing in one of the pastures with a toddler tugging at the hem of her dress.

You pulled over to the side of the road, got out of the car, and waved. The woman looked at you curiously and cautiously approached the other side of the low wall by which you were standing. The small boy followed along, still holding onto the woman's dress to keep his balance. Standing face to face, she gave you something of a smile, and you asked her about the bull taunter you had once seen her in town with. She said he was her husband. You asked her if she knew where her husband is now. She said he was fishing with the other men off of Port Judeu. You told her she was wrong, that her husband was in Biscoitos with your wife and it wasn't the first time they had been together. The woman's brow furrowed and her lips quivered. In a broken, angry voice she told you to go away, and then she swept up the toddler in her arms and ran toward the other side of the pasture.

By the time you got home that night Beulah was already in bed, apparently sleeping. You took off your shoes and lay on top of the comforter facing away from Beulah. The alarm clock seemed to go off right after you finally fell asleep. You hit off the alarm and slid off the bed. Beulah stirred under the comforter but kept her eyes closed. You went into the bathroom and took a hot shower, noticing afterward that the mirror was covered with nothing but steam. Beulah stirred again when you came out of the bathroom but kept still while you ruffled on your wrinkled fatigues and laced up your boots. Her eyes were still closed when you left the house.

You were glad you had to work late in the evening that day, and you even stopped by the Class Six store on base for a six-pack of beer, which was something you never did before on your bicycle. Beulah was in the living room watching television in the dark when you walked in. She said hello and told you she had already

When she noticed you on the sofa, she said you scared her. You told her she was dressed nice.

eaten and that there were cold cuts in the fridge. You made a sandwich, opened a bottle of beer, and sat at the small round table in the kitchen. Beulah continued watching TV while you ate. You could see the back part of the side of her face flickering in the bluish light of the changing scenes. When you were on your second beer, Beulah left the TV on and went into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her. You took her place on the sofa and finished the other beers, falling asleep in front of the TV.

The next day was similar to the day before. But after you took a shower in the morning, you saw the name of another town that had been finger-scrawled across the mirror—SAO MATEUS. And when you came home from the flight line late in the evening again, cradling a twelve-pack of beer from the Class Six under your arm, Beulah was on the sofa watching television again. She asked if you were working late again tomorrow. You lied that you were and walked to the kitchen. While you were putting the beers in the refrigerator, Beulah went in the bedroom, leaving the TV on and closing the door behind her again. For a long moment you sat in the kitchen, listening to the Portuguese voices that were buzzing out of the television set. Then you stood up and walked to the bedroom door and slowly opened it. Beulah was not in bed. The bathroom door was closed and the long phone cord that had run to the top of the nightstand now ran under the closed bathroom door. When you stepped closer to the door you could hear the hissing of running water filling the pauses in the televised voices from behind. You left the bedroom, closing the door behind you. Then you took all the beers out of the refrigerator and left the house with them.

You went again to your neighbor's house, where the senior airman in security lived. The stocky young man with a red face and crew cut answered the door in his undershirt. You apologized again for having taken his car back so late the other day and told him you brought him beer. He laughed and said he hadn't minded and told you to come on in. You walked in as his blonde wife came into the living room from the opposite side. She smiled and said hello and asked you how Beulah was doing. You told her Beulah wasn't feeling well and went to bed early. Your neighbor's wife said that was too bad and then asked if you were hungry. Her husband quickly echoed the question and you told them you could eat. They were having a late barbeque. While the wife put the beers in the fridge you followed the husband out onto the smoky patio behind the house and creaked into a lawn chair. Then the husband fixed you a plate and the wife brought out three bottles of beer.

After you finished eating under the soft yellow patio light you drank a couple

more beers with your neighbors, all of you talking about life back in the States and laughing against the quiet dark. Then, when the time seemed right, you excused yourself to use the bathroom, which you knew could only be reached through the bedroom. You went into the house, closing the back door behind you. Then you went into the bedroom and quickly searched for what your neighbor had shown you before. The nine millimeter pistol was in a holster that was hanging in the closet like a clothing accessory. You took the gun out of the holster. Your neighbor wouldn't notice it missing right away; you'd only seen him wearing the rifle, which was now leaning up against a corner of the bedroom. You took the pistol into the bathroom with you. Then you pushed the release button, slid the magazine out of the stock, and saw that it was full. You were fitting the gun into the side of your sock when you heard the back door open. You pulled your pant leg over the bulging sock and took your foot down from the toilet lid. Then you flushed the toilet and turned on the faucet for a few seconds. When you came out of the bathroom your neighbors were in the kitchen, putting dishes and leftovers away and bringing out the last beers. But you told them you should really get back home and check on Beulah. They said they understood and told you to come by with Beulah when she was feeling better. You told them you would and said goodbye before cutting back across the lawn to your own house. The television was still on when you opened the door. After tucking the pistol under one of the sofa cushions, you turned off the TV. Then you pulled off your shoes and lay on the sofa, waiting for the window curtains to glow.

The following morning, the clouds were so thick that little light sifted through the window curtains of the living room. But you got up from the sofa when you usually got out of bed. Beulah appeared to still be sleeping when you came into the bedroom. You crept past her into the bathroom and quietly closed the door. In the bathroom you cut yourself shaving more than usual and took a longer than usual hot shower. As soon as you pulled aside the shower curtain you noticed a full address on the bathroom mirror, beginning in oversized numbers and ending in ANGRA DO HIROISMO, the largest town on the island.

A little later that morning you were tying Beulah's hands and feet together with the telephone cord. At first she tittered and asked just what you thought you were doing. You told her you were protecting her. That's what you were doing. You were protecting her. But she got louder when you stretched her arms and legs further behind her back and tightened the cord. You put a sock in her mouth and wrapped it in place with a nylon stocking before putting on your dark blue overcoat and leaving your wife gagged and bound and flailing on the bed. After you took

the pistol out from under the sofa cushion and slipped it into the inside pocket of your coat, you walked out into the dark gray morning and breathed in the fresh dirt smell of a gathering storm. Then you started the car and headed to Angra.

The rain began falling as you were driving, first in light, sparse drops, then thickening and breaking more heavily across the windshield as you got closer to the town. You turned on the headlights and windshield wipers. The falling water flashed in front of the hood and the wipers buckled from side to side as your heart beat faster and the rain pounded louder against the car. Finally the sheltering world of Angra do Heroísmo rose before you like something that had been long ago carved into a white mountain. After you pulled into the thick of town your car drifted very slowly through the narrow streets, stopping now and then to let cars pass in the opposite direction or pedestrians run by under their wide straw hats. You made your way through the maze of row houses until you reached the part of town across from the docks. You parked the car on an almost empty street between two row houses, just a few blocks from where you needed to go. Then you pulled the collar of your coat over your head and hunched your way on foot through the rain. The fallen rain was passing under your shoes, spilling over the cobblestones as if they were rocks in a stream. You glanced up and noticed lone figures staring through some of the windows. One old man was even sitting halfway out on one of the wrought-iron balconies, the rain pouring past him from the rafters like a beaded curtain as he played a guitar with two hearts cut into the face of its hollow body. The slow plucking of strings faintly weaved through the clatter of rain and you recognized in the song what the locals call *saudade*, a longing for what could have been.

Behind the row houses and across from the empty piers and tottering sea, stood a few short square buildings, each with an iron number posted above a discolored door. After you found the number that had been written on the bathroom mirror, you reached into the inside pocket of your overcoat with one hand and knocked on the discolored door with the other. No one answered and you knocked again. No one answered again and you cautiously tried turning the rusted doorknob. The door was unlocked. You opened it slowly. The room inside was empty except for a made bed, a small round table with two ladder-back chairs in the kitchenette, and on the center of the table, a bouquet of red and yellow flowers leaning out over the brim of a black ceramic vase. You touched one of the petals of the flowers and felt that they were real. Then you sat on one the chairs, took the pistol out of your coat and laid it on the table. You sat like that for some time, listening to the hushed roar

of the rain and sea and waiting for someone else to open the door. Then it occurred to you that if the bull taunter came in and saw you, he might run back out before you would have a chance to do anything. You got into the bed with the pistol and pulled back the blanket over your face, thinking the bull taunter will think you're Beulah before he realizes too late that you have taken her place.

You lay under the blanket for what felt like hours before you heard the door open. You heard footsteps coming closer. Then there was a pause. Then the mattress you were lying on creaked and sank and you heard heavy breathing from above. Then you were waiting for the blanket to be pulled away when suddenly a sharp pain punched through your stomach. You opened your mouth to scream, but all that came out was the cry of an infant. Then everything started shaking. Though you remained under the blanket, your eyes were now somehow outside of yourself and you could see the whole room. You could see the bull taunter's wife, her long black hair still hanging over the hidden bulge in the bed, a knife in her hand above the bleeding spot in the blanket. The look of fear deepened further across her face when the flower vase shook clear off the table, breaking into little black pieces on the floor and spilling water under the scattered red and yellow petals. Then the entire floor opened up and the water gushed out from below, while the ceiling started snowing down before giving way to the water above.

Open your eyes. The sun is beginning to set on another weekend in Terceira, the mist of light waning back again through the bedroom window. But you can still see inside the closet from the bed. The yellow dress is still there. The red dress is still there. Only the black dress is missing. Your wife is still wearing it. She will always wear it. She wore it when you escorted her body back home to your in-laws, whose daughter you had promised to protect before taking her overseas with you. They had already heard about the earthquake that split the island to pieces and that Beulah had been missing for days afterward. When you saw them you told them again that you didn't know why she turned up in the town of Angra, but many others had been pulled from the rubble there. And you told them about how when the doctor pulled back the blanket to show you her face, you could not identify her by her face, as it had been crushed and torn beyond recognition. But she was wearing your dog tags when they found her. You didn't need to wear them. You weren't in combat. You weren't in danger. You let Beulah wear them, and you were glad she wore them. Letting her wear something that belonged to you let others know that she belonged to you when you weren't around. But the doctor at the morgue insisted that she had been pregnant. Before the autopsy, she could have been you.

They once pronounced you dead, but you left the morgue days later wearing the same dog tags that were found on the body in Angra do Heroismo. And when you came home that day, the square, stone house was empty, as if no one had lived there for a very long time. Now, still lying on your back, you realize you must have only come to an unfortunate end because you made the wrong choices. But it's not over yet. You can figure this out. Close your eyes and think about what could have happened.