

Wild Flame

As I watch the bride slowly walking down the aisle to the sound of Bruno Mars 'Marry You', I dig my nails into Patrick's hand. God, I hate that song. In the nine years since I have been living in Australia, nothing has made me more uncomfortable than witnessing Renata get married. I knew it was always going to be a disaster, starting with the wedding planner who should have been warned not to separate the room by putting the bride's family (Brazilians) on one side and the groom's family (Australians) on the other. It was like painting their differences in neon colours. This clear division meant chaos on one side, discipline on another; exaggerated and loud sobs on one side, polite tears – or no tears whatsoever – on the other; it meant photos-not-allowed-but-no-one-gives-a-fuck on one side and ultimate respect of rules on the other; and, worse of all, it meant that one side would be empty for the first twenty or so minutes after the ceremony had begun, as Brazilians are known for their extremely poor time management.

Once the ceremony is over Patrick glares at me and asks, 'Why did you do that for?'

Of course, I know what he is talking about, but I can't help myself. I know this union is deemed to fail. I mean, I got good at predicting this kind of stuff. It's all in their eyes, I promise. The ideal couple should have a touch of wilderness in their gaze, the kind you find so clearly in the eyes of a child. It's hard to describe, it's like an untamed fire, a wild flame. Everyone should keep one. I like to think *you* still have yours.

Do you remember the story behind that interview I did with that divorce celebrant guy for the Radio Sao Paulo? This must have been what, almost ten years ago? You were around then, weren't you? There was such a big trend in Brazil in those days. Divorce parties! Funny, I've never heard of those here in Australia. I guess only people from poor countries have this ability to transform anything into a celebration of life. They can see opportunities even in piles of pure shit. Someone must have realised they were sitting on a gold mine, and by gold mine I mean a country with 500 plus million people, most of which are going through failing marriages.

I never forgot what the divorce celebrant said when I asked if he was the villain of the wedding industry. With the thickest carioca accent I have ever heard to this day, an accent that can be half-sexy and half-snob – I still don't know how people from Rio ended up developing it – he said, 'Darling, can't you see what I do? I let people free. I let them be, like the Beatles' song.'

The Beatles! I'm pretty sure I forced a cough when he said that, maybe it was my way to apologise to the listeners who were rock fans, but he kept going. 'It's like they've been locked in a prison cell and I'm the one who comes to rescue them by giving them a key and saying, there you go.'

As he said these last words, I asked, 'And what are the looks on their faces when you give them this magic key?' I was hoping he would say they look happy, relieved, or satisfied, at least.

'Oh, it's crazy,' he said, and after a long and slightly too dramatic pause, he continued, 'It's like they forgot how to open the fucking door.' Big juicy veins were forming on his neck and forehead.

I was apologising for the *fucks* he threw during the interview – as it was the radio's policy at that time and probably still is—when he interrupted me. 'But, you know, with this key in hands, their eyes do change. It's like I can see the flame going on again.'

'What flame?' I asked.

'Oh, darling, have you ever been in love?'

It was summer 2009 when you came into my life, I was 22 years old then. My next summer would be spent in Australia, but I had no idea of it back then, not yet. The thought of you leaving me had never crossed my mind, and sometimes I'm glad this was the case. Our relationship wouldn't be the same with fear in it. I still have to change the conversation when strangers ask me why I moved to Australia. They're usually just trying to show interest, I know this, they want to say *Look how much I care about you*, but I don't give them the pleasure. *I don't know*, I tell them, again and again. I can tell them why I stayed, but not why I left. Is that weird? Angelica, my therapist, tells me we'll work on this. It's like I'm some sort of mathematical equation waiting to be resolved. 'One day at a time,' she says in that husky and slow voice of hers. I often think she talks to me as if I'm dumb, like people talk to me when they realise I've got an accent. What's odd about Angelica though is that she's also from Brazil, and our whole sessions are conducted in Portuguese. Maybe everyone speaks to me like I'm dumb. Everyone except Patrick.

Angelica says we'll work through many things. Many things are yet to be revealed. She's full of hope that one. Sometimes I wonder if what she's got is that bad quality hope, you know? The hope that that only helps us to build false expectations. Hope without true belief. Like the one that made me so certain I would have lost my accent by now and fully blended in. I

know my English is far from perfect, and it always will be. I have an immense trouble pronouncing words such *India*, or *Obviously*, or *World*, or the name *Andrew* – which everyone thinks I'm saying *Angel* – or the number two – which everyone thinks I'm saying *Chew*. I'm lucky that the probability of using all these words together in a sentence is practically null.

After all these years living in Australia, people still ask me what I miss the most about Brazil. Apart from you and our time together – which of course are never mentioned to anyone – I say it's the food. I haven't eaten coxinha in years, or moqueca, feijoada, esfiha, pastel, farofa, you name it. I have a secret list of foods I crave saved on my laptop. It's the saddest thing I've ever written, a list that lacks both belief and hope. We do have a few Brazilian restaurants here in Perth. We have Lapa, which sells you the traditional churrasco – or all you can eat meat, if you may. We had Gado Gado, which has been closed for a while now –, we have an all you can eat pizza place in Clarkson, but that's so far away we may as well say it's in another town, and a few very small businesses here and there. Their food is okay, I give them the credit, but it's just not the same. I wonder if it's because the memories I have of these dishes are bonded with my memories of you. Entangled, that's the word. I miss sitting down with you in our favourite buteco, devouring a whole plate of mandioquinha frita while I daydream about our future together. The saddest part is that I really believed we'd be together until now. And it wasn't just fake hope, I promise.

Maybe that's why I connected with Renata instantly. We weren't necessarily homesick, but we were both new in the country, both on student visas, and neither of us could speak English for shit. While other international students with better English than us struggled to find half-decent jobs to pay for their studies, food and accommodation, we knew we had no chance of surviving in Aussie land. So one night, in one of our lowest moments, when all our hope – and belief – were practically gone, we shared a whole box of cheap wine between us – just the thought of it now gives me goosebumps – and headed out to Northbridge, where all the wild animals run free.

We were waiting in line at one of our local clubs, it might have been the Mustang Bar, when a man in an extremely tight pair of denims and pink linen shirt came to talk to us. He looked a bit too old to be there. The man had that golden sun-kissed glow that just rich people with too much money and time in hands can afford. He gave us his business card and talked to us for a bit. He seemed a bit sleezy, but we couldn't understand a thing he was saying so we went along with it and smiled, occasionally nodding politely. When he was gone, he gave us each a kiss on the cheek, Brazilian-style, and as soon as he turned his back to us, we immediately started studying his card and laughing between ourselves. The card was black

and in red glossy letters the word 'RAUNCHY' screamed at us. We didn't have smartphones back then; we did not know what 'raunchy' meant.

That's the story of how we got our first job, as skimpies, or bikini waitresses. Our fake names were Gigi and Fifi – I know, how original! We started exercising more, and we bought fake eyelashes and cheap spray tan that used to make us stink like fresh cat piss. Depending on the angle you want to see this, the job was fairly easy. All we had to do was to serve drinks behind the bar wearing bikinis – but sexy lingerie preferred. Talk to me about stereotypes; the men raved when we said where we were from. Some of them wouldn't believe I was Brazilian though. *Why's that?* I would say, and they would tell me my skin was too white for me to be Brazilian. Yeah, my least favourite part of the job was to put up with the ignorance of these men. But I wouldn't be telling the truth if I said they were all the same. I worked as a skimpy for almost three years, during which I met beautiful souls; some depressed, some clearly alcoholic, some who did suspicious things for a living, and some who went to Thailand to do dodgy things to women. With time I learned to differentiate the good from the rotten, like picking weeds amongst flowers.

When we completed six months working as skimpies, Renata and I were invited to a training lesson – yes, there's an actual workshop for just about everything out there. The class was led by a middle-aged ex-skimpy who became a bodybuilder. She could be anywhere between 40 to 60 years old, and, somehow, she still had that sexy vibe on her, even though she was h-u-g-e, her arms the size of my legs. I was quite intimidated by her, even though my job was to entertain drunk men who a lot of the time were bikies or gangsters. What I remember the most about her is that she had a basket full of protein shakes and meal-prep snacks with her and throughout the day she kept munching and gulping on those like if her life depended on this – but again, maybe it did, who was I to know? I guess the main purpose of the workshop was to teach us how to 'move gracefully' (aka to get more tips). But don't be silly, by 'moving gracefully' I mean a lesson on how to perform a real sexy bend over.

Once the training session was nearly finished and everyone got at least a pass for their techniques, the ex-skimpy-now-bodybuilder gave us a bit of a pep talk. Man, I've studied pretty much my whole life, I've read hundreds of business, psychology and self-help books, but this woman said something I'll always carry with me. She told us we were lucky we could make that much money being so young, but I already knew that, having come from Brazil, where making money is pretty hard. She said we should make the most of it, including working naked in bucks' parties, since they were excellent money-making opportunities. But then she said something very interesting, and I knew the importance of what she was about

to say even before she said it, for the look on her face changed completely, as if she had given a lot of thought to it. She said, 'But in the meantime, I urge you to work on some sort of a side job, get yourself a degree, learn a new skill, start a small business. Do whatever you may do, but do something with your life. Think about your future. Your 30's or 40's may seem far away right now and maybe you're naïve enough to think you'll look like that forever, but let me tell you something, babe: YOU WON'T'.

She also said men were all pigs and they would never look at us the same from the moment we turned 37 years old – and this was only if we were genetically lucky and kept dieting and exercising, otherwise the cut off age would be lower. I still don't know where she got that specific number from. Thirty-seven!

'Train your brains, girls, train the fuck out of your brains,' she told us. By then she had started crying. I wanted to tell her *Calm down, you're still pretty, you know? Look at all your muscles*, but the crying only got louder and more dramatic. The noise must have reached the front desk, because a couple of minutes later the agency's receptionist came to rescue her – and us – by taking her into a private room. We were dismissed, the workshop had come to an end. A week later word was out she had committed suicide. I never knew if this was true, I guess I didn't want to know.

I wonder if Renata remembers any of this as she dances past me in her elegant wedding dress, long-sleeved and lacey, only the right amount of cleavage showing. With her is the man who should be her true soulmate. What sort of lingerie is she wearing underneath all that? I notice her body shape has changed, thickened. I should know, I saw this girl in all her angles. Patrick catches me out staring at Renata and whispers in my left ear, 'You're so louca.'

When you left me, I thought my life was over, I really did. We were only together for a few months, but I'd never felt what you made me feel. Perhaps I never will. When I came to Australia, the least I was expecting was to find someone else, especially someone so successful like Patrick. I travelled because I wanted my memories to be gone. How silly of me! Even back then I knew I'd never be able to get rid of them. Maybe I didn't try hard enough.

I want to tell Renata that I'm sorry she isn't so lucky in the way I am, but don't worry, I won't. We're both so different now. I miss her so much. I miss the girl-boss of a lawyer that came to Australia to learn English and, eventually, to practice law here too. *To conquer the world*, we both would shout to each other, clicking our plastic glasses full of cheap booze. I think these

young immigrant dreams are so beautiful; they're so pure, bursting with hope. But then life hits you in the face, one, two, three, too many times. And sooner or later you get tired of fighting back. But you can't lose the battle, so you use the weapons you've got. I used my savings to put myself through university to retrain as a public relations advisor, and Renata used hers to pay for this wedding. This was her way to stay in Australia, although it came at a big cost – you only have to look across the room at Craig staggering off the dance floor to down some more tinnies with his mates to realise that.

'Hey Maura, let's go. You've done your part,' Patrick says. He's a bit tipsy, and I find it funny how obvious this is to me even though no one else in the world would be able to pick on it. The fact that this is so obvious also panics me in a way – how boring a good relationship can be. Yet, that's all we aim for, the stability, the calmness, the familiarity. Patrick is already balding even though he's only 31, but I find he's only getting more attractive. Sometimes I think it'll be a shame if we end up not having kids.

As we head towards the exit door, Patrick signals towards the newlyweds. 'How long do you give it?' He knows all about the flame theory so he too can tell when a couple won't last long.

'I think you know the answer,' I say.

'Aren't we lucky?' He kisses my lips gently, and the smell of his expensive cologne overwhelms me.

A group of people is standing next to the door, chatting and having the last bit to drink before jumping into their Uber. I look back towards the venue and catch Renata waving 'tchau' to us. It makes me feel guilty – I've hardly said a word to her all night. My eyes can't resist but to look at her small belly one last time. It's barely noticeable, but I recognise that familiar shape of pregnancy. I offer her a smile full of hope, but empty of belief. My hand hovers, then rests instinctively over my own belly. I remember you then; the wild flame in your little eyes, the midwife placing you in my arms for the first and very last time.