

## Strawberry Hearts Forever

*Alexandre Spinelli*

Ellie did not want to go to the art exposition. She was reluctant, but after a long conversation she agreed and we went to see the exposition of the art of my friend Alex. In the first moment, it seemed to be a kind of artistic insanity, but when it was seen from a given distance, it was a beautiful image, fifty strawberries bleeding in the white wall. It was five lines of six fruits interposed by four lines of five fruits, and they bled. Alex's voice, with his strong Brazilian accent, alternately screamed and whispered as a recorded sound in an old K7 tape that came from different points in the room, "nothing is real... nothing is real...nothing is real..." A red light pulsed like a heart, sixty beats per minute. The smell around us was a mix of fresh and rotten fruits, strawberries probably, but it was mixed with smell of manure or wet soil, I'm not sure about this.

Ellie held my hand firmly as we entered in the room, as we were coming inside of a hospital room, not a room inside of an art gallery, as it was the case. She held my hand tighter and tighter at each beat we heard.

"Let's leave this room, babe."

"Take it easy, Ellie. It's just a few minutes. Alex is my friend. I have to have something to tell him about his work."

"I guess he is sick. This is creepy."

I just smiled. I know Alex is not sick. Those small red fruits that were nailed in that white surface with their juice draining as blood seemed to be small hearts, with no life, dripping their

last drops of love. That is what I saw. Alex's voice was taking control of my mind, driving me to feelings and memories I would like to forget about.

I had met Alex for the first time in Madrid, ten years ago. I was travelling alone, just after my graduation. I decided that it was the moment to know more about the world and took a trip to Europe. I was sitting alone drinking some beer on that hot afternoon at the Plaza Mayor, when he approached and asked me if he could sit with me. There was no problem at all. We stayed talking for hours, we ate some fried shrimps, and I confess I was enjoying the conversation, probably for his poor Spanish mixed with Portuguese, that sounds nice to my ears. He told me he had bought two tickets to watch the Opera Carmen next day and he invited me to go with him. I didn't have anything programmed to do, so I agreed, *why not?* I had never watched an Opera before, so it could be a good and interesting experience. After watching the Opera, we went to have dinner together. We drank one bottle of a good red wine from La Rioja – the best Spanish wine, as he told me – and Alex ordered strawberries with whipped cream for dessert.

I didn't see any problem or issue in Alex's behavior. At least I stayed thinking about that before sleeping and I was sure that he was just a guy trying to be friendly. I should learn about warmness with the Latin people. Alex was in his 30's and he was probably feeling alone, so he just wanted a company. In the next day, the hottest Sunday ever, we decide to meet again to watch a bullfight in La Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas. We could not stay until the end. After two bulls being killed, we left; watching two more cold-blooded murders was too much for us. We knew they were going to kill the bulls, but we were not prepared to so big violence. The day

seemed to be even hotter with those scenes in front of us. We had a more idealized image about it until see it in reality, just in front of us.

Alex told me he was leaving next morning, so we decided to have dinner together. In this time we went to the restaurant Nirvana which was just in front of the hostel where he was hosted in "la Puerta Del Sol." Alex ordered a dish made with lobster for us and surely a bottle of wine from La Rioja. After the third bottle, he asked the bill and a fourth and last bottle to go.

We left and Alex invited me to go to his bedroom, just to finish the wine. There Alex confessed he had lied, he didn't have the tickets to the Opera when he invited me to go, but he bought them in the next day. I don't know why, but I liked that story, I felt loved, as someone was caring for me spontaneously. In the next morning when I woke up I was nude and I heard the noise of the Alex taking shower. I could not believe in what had happened. I felt as I was dirty, used, but I didn't say anything to Alex, when he came back to the bedroom. I just left after a long hug of good bye.

We met again some months later, some phone calls later, when I moved to Orlando, Florida. I lived there and I lent my couch for almost two months to Alex, until he found a job and moved to his own place. He moved to the same building, in the same floor, on Science Drive. Alex's presence was sometimes a comfort and sometimes a weight for me. We used to have barbecues or picnics on the weekends at one of the two lakes close to our building: Lee Lake or Christine Lake. Alex preferred Christine because of the fields close to it where sometimes they could see some guys playing soccer. I always preferred Lee for being bigger and full of trees all around. I felt we were more protected and sheltered being there, and more in contact with nature.

There, in that place and in that time, our friendship was built and grew. Sometimes I thought as Alex was trying to be more than just a friend, but actually he was my best friend. I should just forget about what had happened. So we never talked about that night in Madrid. Alex was always fascinated with berries, mainly with blackberry. He used to say that it was healthy. He had read that they were the best of the antioxidants, a true fighter of free radicals. This was always reason for jokes. I used to say I was in favor of freedom, even for the radicals. However, on that Saturday when I arrived completely excited, telling about my promotion and my subsequent transfer to New York, Alex took a strawberry from his Tupperware and crushed it slowly in his right hand, while he was looking coldly and deeply at my eyes. The red juice of the fruit drained among his fingers slowly.

“There are people whose hearts are like this strawberry. The exterior is beautiful; it seems to be tasteful, but it is just this. They are just appearance and frailty. They are ephemeral hearts, easily destroyed and forgotten.”

I did not understand his reaction and what he really meant with that. Alex just finished his beer and left, after a long and tight hug, “Good luck, my Mexican friend. Take care of yourself in the Big Apple. The big city is a jungle waiting for you, a real and dangerous jungle, with no friends. I’ll be here. Count on me for whatever you need.”

Years later, after a long time without contact, we met again. This time, we met on facebook. I met Alex on a page about the movie “Frida,” where Alex had posted a comment about the version of the movie in Portuguese. As usual, he was complaining about the bad translation of the subtitles to Portuguese. I saw Alex was dating a blonde blue eyes girl. She was a typical American cheerleader. Or Alex had changed a lot in the last five years or that was not

the Alex's type definitively and he was dating just to prove something to himself or to other people. I was not jealous at all, I could see for what I knew about him that she was not for him. We know which type of girls fit to our friends. After a while, Alex facebook status was update to "single." In his status I read "no one is in my tree...I think it's not too bad." These words sounded familiar to me, this is Beatles, the song I like the most.

We became close friends again, using what the internet offered us, facebook, skype, MSN, and so on. When I started dating Ellie and published the first picture of us together, Alex was the first to like it. "Strawberry hearts to you," he wrote in the comments. Ellie thought it was cute; I was not sure about that.

After a few months another picture on Alex's profile caught my attention. It was an empty church with opened doors. It was possible to see white flower arrangements on the corners of the pews and the empty florid altar. There were some scattered grains of rice on the ground. Alex was crouched close to the door; from his left hand some rice was falling; in his right hand, a strawberry was being smashed, as I had seen he doing in that last meeting in Florida, dropping red juice on the ground. Alex had a lost gaze in his wide opened eyes and an expressionless face. In the description of the picture it was written, "Living is easy with eyes closed... It doesn't matter much to me."

"This Alex is weird, Juan," Ellie said shaking her head negatively.

"He is an artist."

"A weird artist, you mean. I don't want him at our wedding."

He did not come. The date of our wedding coincided with Alex's first art exhibition outside of Florida. That Saturday morning, we received at our new home some red roses and

one box with strawberries. In a white small card, only a few words were typed, "Strawberry hearts forever." I did not know if we should eat such fruits or not. We did. They seemed to be poisoned to me. I could not stop of thinking in Alex during all ceremony.

While we were getting married, Alex was reaching success in Los Angeles. He was becoming a celebrity among the artists. This was one year ago.

Now, he was exposing his works here on Leo Castelli Gallery, in the heart of the artistic life at New York City, sharing space with artists like Andy Warhol and others. And the well-known strawberry hearts were there bleeding again.

We had just left the art gallery, when we met Alex on the sidewalk. He was dressed in his traditional clothes, a leather jacket over a white t-shirt, jeans, and white pair of tennis shoes. He was smoking, his left foot and his head against the wall, blowing up the smoke.

"Hey, Alex! How have you been, man?"

"Not bad," he said without looking at me.

"Are you okay?"

He just breathed deeply, "Always... no... sometimes... think it's me. But... you know... I know it's a dream."

Alex seemed to be unconcerned about the embarrassment of the scene. He just kept his eyes lost, looking at the sky. After a short silence, I tried, "By the way, that's Ellie."

He did not move his eyes, "It's all wrong. I think I disagree."

He took his hand from his pocket and I notice something falling close to his feet, and he stepping over as to hide it. Without look at us, Alex looked down directly at his right foot on the ground. Ellie and I just followed his eyes. Some red juice was flowing from under his foot.