

“My Theory on Fathers and Astronauts”

A debut novel

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Chapter 23

It didn't take long for Mrs. Helias to sink into madness. Alexandre was only twelve years old the first time that she put up flyers on all of the lampposts in their neighborhood. *Missing person: if you see Marina, contact me as soon as possible.* Mrs. Helias was obsessed by that single, stubborn thought: tracking down a poetess that she'd supposedly met as a child in the Vendée region. She was convinced that Marina Tsvetaeva had spent an entire summer with her parents, a couple of fisherfolk who made their living off of sardines. When Mrs. Helias would bring her tea, Marina would tell her (in perfect French) about the revolution that she'd fled, her exile, and her solitude. One time, Mrs. Helias had seen Marina crying and carrying on like a river or a volcano about to overflow and destroy everything in its path. Then one day, she went back to Paris. At least that's what Mrs. Helias had claimed all her life. And it was impossible for Alexandre to separate fact from fiction.

As she grew older, Mrs. Helias continued to search: she returned to the neighborhoods in Meudon and Vanves where Marina had lived after that. But none of the shopkeepers had ever seen the poetess and none of the vagrants had seen her walking at night. Marina had lived incognito. "It's a good thing that I'm here," Mrs. Helias would endlessly say.

The whole thing saddened Alexandre and his brother, their mother's obsession for a dead woman. Then his brother left for the States, because if you're going to be out of mind, you may as well be out of sight too. Alexandre hoped that by not making waves and staying close to his mother, he might get the answers he craved someday. That's why he'd longed to shine, to be the perfect son, so that she might finally see him amongst the fragments of gray stories that she invented at every turn. He learned Russian and became a doctor in poetry. I highly doubt that his poems could have done anything about Beatriz's nodules, but it's pretty impressive all the same. When Alexandre defended his 700-page dissertation, his mother didn't even come. She was convinced that it was the big day: Marina was finally going to knock at her door and come in for tea. Alexandre passed his defense with flying colors, and Mrs. Helias drank her tea alone.

Alexandre once asked me if I had brothers and sisters. I told him about the real family that I'd never met, since I was just the shadow of a piece of paper that had never been signed and the scent of

lukewarm cake. I think that Alexandre was a bit unsettled because he never finished the sentence that he started in response to that. But I was just as happy hanging out.

“You know, I like that expression: hanging out,” I said to him, “It makes me feel like I’m all alone, just my sorrow and me, and that’s actually pretty cool, I think better that way.”

Chapter 24

During my second session with Mrs.-Doctor-in-Child-Psychology, we had an easygoing conversation that didn't open up any floodgates. I looked around at her office walls. There were posters of old movies and black shadowy nodules in frames. Framing nodules: talk about a strange idea! I was expecting her to ask me what the shapes looked like, but she didn't. Maybe she could tell just by looking at me that I saw metastasis everywhere. Instead, she asked me what I'd say to my father if he was there in the office with us. I'd say, "Hello, sir, I don't know you and I don't talk to strangers. My mother always told me not to talk to strangers, especially old men." Then I'd sit there silently with my head held high, waiting while he struggled with the impossible task of making things right. Then again, maybe he didn't regret missing out on all of that, missing out on me, choosing his real family, his real children, the ones for whom he signed the paper saying that he's their father. Talk about a bunch of bull. It freaked me out to think that at any given moment, that man, that nobody, could go to town hall and sign a piece of paper saying that he's my father when I didn't want his paternity or anything else. I'd rather bash in his skull: it's too late, you missed your chance, I'm nobody to you and I proclaim that only Mama and Beatriz (may she rest in peace) are my family.

Rest in peace. Why is death associated with resting? That doesn't make any sense. I prefer to think of Beatriz gliding through the sky like a bird.

The psychologist wanted me to talk about my memories, especially the farthest ones back. That was a tough question. My distant memories are also the ones that I think about the most often, which makes them very recent. It all depends on the elasticity of memory. Some of my memories block themselves off. I think that the goal was for me to conjure up the ones lingering at the other end of the track, dozing at the starting line.

"You sure ask tricky questions," I said to her.

I told her about the years when I was the happiest, but I didn't know it then because nobody warned me that it was all going to be downhill from there, which is too bad. She asked me how I saw the future. Since I didn't really know how to answer that, she suggested that I draw a picture if that was easier for me. So I drew the moon, then I added strings and people pulling on the strings.

"Could you tell me about your picture?" she asked.

“They’re towing the moon to force the astronauts to come home,” I replied, surprised that she’d failed to grasp something so obvious.

So then I had to tell her about my theory about fathers and astronauts. If my father came back as if nothing had happened, I’d laugh in his face and I’d tell him that his astronaut buddies would be better off choosing silence instead of take-offs full of promises. And I’d tell everyone else – all those people who ask what my father does for a living, what I’ve planned for Father’s Day, or if my father would be proud of me – that you definitely don’t need those stupid astronauts to live your life. There’s no point in putting people up on a pedestal just because they’re gone. I swore to myself that I’d never promise anyone anything because that way they wouldn’t get their hopes up or feel abandoned. I told myself, “Noé, you have to keep your feet firmly planted on the ground, or maybe in the branches of a tree, but no higher than that. You can’t give in to the incessant calls of some other place that promise to master the Earth but eventually just plunge you into an ocean of sadness, without ties or harms, without lies or arms other than a plain old run-of-the-mill astronaut suit.”

Then other memories came back to me. Once, Beatriz told me that she wished that she could hack into the city’s loudspeakers to broadcast messages of kindness. I’d like to do that so that I could yell at grownups to cut it out with their polite and idiotic questions. It really pissed me off when people, even when they knew about Beatriz, still asked me how I was. It made me feel trapped; what could I say to that? The question was too narrow for my truth. So I’d just reply, “I’m fine, ma’am. How are you? It’s sure a beautiful day.”

The psychologist nodded her head for a long time and then she asked me what I thought of our meetings and if I wanted to keep seeing her. “Why not,” I thought, “If you enjoy hearing my little stories about towing the moon and dialogues with people who are gone. If that works for you, then it works for me. I know, I’m a generous guy, ma’am. Here’s your check.”