

Caged Bull

Standing outside Blockbuster video on College Street, Miguel tells her that his pregnant girlfriend called the cops on him.

Nadia looks at him annoyed. It amazes her that he expects her to take his side.

“What did you do, dummy?” She asks him, glancing at her watch. Her 15-minute break is almost done.

“What do you mean, ‘What did I do?’ I didn’t do anything. She started it. I pushed her back,” he says, incredulously.

“It takes a lot for a girl to call the cops on her baby-daddy. If she dialed 911, you did more than just push her back,” Nadia says. She knew he had a temper, yet he didn’t scare her. She had never felt threatened or unsafe around him.

She looks down at her wristwatch. Her break is over. She had to get back to the store.

“Look, I’ve got to get back inside. Call me later if you want,” she says before opening the heavy glass door behind her. From inside she watches through the storefront window as he jogs towards, then gets on the streetcar.

Was she too dismissive of his predicament? she wonders. What did he want from her anyway? He had gotten himself into this situation, hadn’t he? With his quick-to-act, slow-to-think-of-the-consequences way of moving through the world.

“Paciência, que as pessoas hoje em dia não usam a cabeça,” she whispers to herself, mimicking her grandmother, as she returns to her spot behind the blue and yellow counter.

Nadia started working at this video store in Little Portugal a few months earlier. Everything she earns goes towards tuition at Ryerson University. Lucky for her, she doesn’t have to pay for rent or food since she lives with her grandparents.

Miguel is a classmate from elementary school. He was one of her first crushes. Her mom chaperoned their date when they were 12. They ate at the fancy Simpson’s restaurant in Yorkdale. The one you had to climb a few flights of stairs to access, the one with the crisp white linen tablecloths and napkins. Nadia remembers feeling very grown up that day. That was long ago.

Since then, she and Miguel have butted heads a zillion times, drifting in and out of each other’s lives.

Each of them first-generation Canadians of Portuguese descent. She is a university student working part-time to pay her way through school. Nadia is on a mission to break free from the stereotype of the uneducated Portuguese immigrant. All the adults in her family are either cleaners or construction workers. She wants a different life.

Miguel seems like he is fine with the status quo. She's not sure if he's even finished high school. She can't bring herself to ask. Last she heard; he told her he was working with his dad at a factory.

He smokes cigarettes, does dope, and drinks. She is firmly anti-drugs. Nadia is the designated driver, the mother hen in her friend group. Although she and Miguel share the same zodiac sign, same cultural background and many middle-school and some high school memories, they are very different.

From her perspective, he has so much potential but continues to screw things up. When they were kids, she thought they might end up together. But that would only happen after she accomplished her career goals.

When he told her he was going to be a dad that was the beginning of the end of that fantasy. There was no way she was going to be anybody's stepmother. She was a child of divorce. She wanted the opposite of a Jerry Springer reality. Nadia dreamed of becoming a successful writer.

Getting married and having kids was firmly in the *maybe-but-not-necessary* category for her. She grimaces thinking about the time when they were in their early teens that Miguel put his hand on her belly making a wistful comment that one day she might have his child. Yeah right! she remembers thinking. No way Jose! They both had so much growing up to do. She wasn't going to be a teen mom: she was staying far away from penises. Her own mom had given birth at 17. Nadia was told all about the birds and the bees early. Nadia's mom had given her several books on puberty around the time she got her first period in Grade 5.

After today's conversation outside her work, Nadia and Miguel didn't really speak much. She didn't have the heart to ask Miguel for details about the girl he got pregnant, about his plans moving forward, not any of it. Instead, she distanced herself and prayed for him. As the distance between them grew, she would find herself imagining how things were going for him.

Her prayers went like this: Dear God, what's happening with Miguel and his family? I hope they are all well, happy, and healthy. Please keep them safe.

She really liked his parents. Every time Nadia visited their house, both his mom and dad were very kind to her. His older sister Pamela was gorgeous. For a while she worked as a teller at the bank across the street from Blockbuster. Nadia enjoyed catching glimpses of Pamela's long beautiful blond hair swaying just above her hips as she walked to the bank.

Ten Years Later, Nadia is at a Portuguese picnic featuring bull fights in Listowel, Ontario with her husband. They decided to go to the event -- despite her reservations regarding animal cruelty -- because a woman they'd gone to Portugal with last spring was hosting it.

Nadia hasn't spoken to Miguel in years, but he still crosses her mind occasionally. She sometimes wonders how things are going for him.

"Oh my! It's Miguel," she tells her husband Dawson, pointing towards a white tent. Miguel and his dad are selling souvenirs at the event.

"Go say hi," Dawson encourages her. He knows all about this childhood friend that holds a special place in her heart.

She had told him about the times that Miguel had shielded her from mean kids. How, despite her complete lack of athletic skill, he always picked her first when he was baseball team captain at recess. Their elementary school was a rough inner-city school near Bathurst and Queen Streets. Miguel had street smarts to fend off the bullies. He helped Nadia -- a highly sensitive and emotional kid -- feel safe.

But their friendship worried Nadia's grandmother. One time, in grade 5, her grandmother raised her walking stick in the air, threatening Miguel through the schoolyard fence. If he ever did anything to hurt her, he would get it with the stick. She said this while waving the cane vigorously in his direction.

Dawson had heard all the stories. As they approached the souvenir tent, Miguel smiles wide with instant recognition of his old friend. It had been a decade since they last spoke.

"How's it going? It's been a long time," he says.

"Things are good. This is my husband, Dawson," Nadia says, nervously watching as they shake hands.

They make small talk while Nadia browses the Portugal-inspired merchandise. She settles on a small Portuguese flag. After Miguel rings through the sale, he puts a pile of other stuff in the bag too.

"It's a gift," he says. "For you to remember me."

"Are you sure? Really, I can pay for it. I don't want you to get in any trouble."

"Nah, for real. Take it," he says. Nadia ends up with three Portugal flag keychains, two large Portugal flags, and tiny boxing gloves that she hangs on the rearview mirror in the car.

On the drive back to Toronto, Nadia wishes she'd asked more questions. She wants to know what else Miguel is doing with his life. Was he married to his daughter's mother? Was he happy?

She found herself thinking about something she'd read recently. Before deciding anything, ask yourself three questions: 10 minutes from now, how will I feel about this decision? 10 months from now, how will I feel about this decision? 10 years from now, how will I feel about this decision?

Today, she is thankful for being child-free. Does Miguel ever wonder what his life might look like if he hadn't gotten that girl pregnant? Nadia is thankful to be married to a life partner that understands and accepts her ambition to accomplish and do more than be a stay-at-home mom. Dawson has his profession, and she has hers: as a community news reporter. There is no rush to procreate.

The Covid-19 pandemic a few years behind them, Nadia and Dawson are at a park in Brampton celebrating Portugal day. Among the vendors, Nadia spots Miguel's mom at a distance.

She is selling soccer jerseys, Portuguese flags and souvenirs alongside his dad. It's been a lifetime since Nadia last saw them.

Last time she saw his mom, she was in high school. Now Nadia is a married grown-up with three teenagers of her own.

World Cup is going on, and the kids have been bugging them to get soccer jerseys. That's why they are here at this park hoping to catch one of these pop-up vendors selling soccer memorabilia for cheap.

Walking up to the tent, Nadia wonders if she should introduce herself. Would they remember her? At that moment, she locks eyes with Mrs. Pavao.

Miguel's mom comes out from under the sales tent to greet her with a big hug. It is a cozy, warm embrace. Nadia introduces her husband and children. Of course, she asks how Miguel is doing. His mom pulls out her phone to show off pictures of her son and his children. As they prepare to walk away, his mom asks if she can take a photo of Nadia and her family to share with Miguel. Nadia's family smiles for the photographer.

Moments later, when they are out of earshot, Dawson leans into his wife, lovingly pulling her close while whispering, "The way she hugged you, I think she wishes you were her daughter-in-law."

His comment gets her thinking, what might have been if Miguel hadn't become a young father. Might their friendship have evolved into something more?

Maybe, but highly unlikely.

Nadia's husband is kind, patient, and her biggest champion. Miguel is quick to anger and impulsive. Nadia knows that she is with the man God intended for her.

Still, she counts Miguel and his family among her friends and includes them in her prayers.

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