

NATALIA

FRAGMENTS OF AN ENCOUNTER

NOVELLA



ALAN LEZAN



PROLOGUE – Basswerk East

The bass rose from the floor like a heartbeat. Heavy, warm, physical. Berlin in 1994 was another animal — raw, hungry, unpolished — and the club Basswerk East vibrated like an organ that had taken in too much energy. Lights flickered in cold tones across the dancers' faces, and outside the Spree smelled of metal and night.

I stood by a pillar, tired from the week, a drink in my hand, letting the music simply flow through me. No thought, no aim. Only that moment, which felt like an in-between.

Then I felt it.
A look.

2

I lifted my head and saw her.
Not beautiful in the classical sense — more interesting, dangerous, electric. A woman who looked as if she could feel at home in every city in the world and, at the same time, nowhere at all. Dark hair, a face that laughed without smiling. Her eyes rested on me as if she had been watching for a long time.

I smiled briefly.
She did too.
A silent accord I did not understand.

A few minutes passed, then she came toward me. Without hesitation, without uncertainty, as if the path to me had already been laid.

“I’m Natalia,” she said. Her voice was clear, slightly hoarse

from smoke, with that French cadence that made everything sound like a secret. “Who are you?”

“Alan,” I said without thinking.

She repeated my name as if testing it.

“Alan... are you French?”

“No,” I answered. “I’m Kurdish.”

She nodded, as if she hadn’t expected that.

“I didn’t know. Nice to meet you, Alan.”

She took my hand. Not fleeting, not tender — simply matter-of-fact.

Then we went outside, through the heavy door, onto the terrace that ran along the Spree. The air was cool, the city murmured, and the music still vibrated in our bones.

3

We talked about everything and nothing — about Berlin, about music, about places we had never been. She spoke fast, alive, with a kind of lightness that couldn’t be entirely real — or perhaps was real for that very reason.

I didn’t know who she was.

I didn’t know why she had spoken to me.

But I knew this night would not remain merely a night.

And that Natalia Lazarus was someone who left traces.

Even if you only noticed them later.

1 – Ratatouille in Schöneberg

The next evening I stood at her door in Schöneberg. An old factory floor, high and wide, with windows that watched the street like eyes. I had no expectations, only a strange anticipation I couldn't explain.

When she opened, the apartment smelled of fried vegetables, garlic, warm bread.

Natalia stood barefoot in the doorway, a tight blue top with small flowers, a heart-shaped neckline that felt playful rather than provocative, cut-off jeans and socks that looked as if she'd put them on on a whim. She didn't look sexy — she looked deliberately different.

“You're punctual,” she said.

“I try,” I answered.

She laughed softly, turned, and led the way as if it were natural that I follow.

The flat was one open room, divided only by shelves and hanging fabrics. Paints, brushes, empty wine bottles, books in French, records I didn't know — they were everywhere. A rug lay on the floor as if someone had danced, slept, and lived on it.

“Ratatouille,” she said, setting the pot on the table. “Simple, but good.”

We ate from deep bowls; she tore the bread apart with her hands. She spoke quickly, vividly, leaping from subject to

subject as if following an inner rhythm only she could hear.

“Berlin is like an unfinished painting,” she said. “You never know if it will get better or only bigger.”

I nodded.

“And you?” I asked. “What are you doing here?”

She shrugged.

“I’m here because I’m here.”

No explanation. No attempt to give one.

At one point she told a story so absurd I couldn’t tell whether she was testing me or simply being herself.

“In Nîmes there was a man who photographed the sky every morning at six. He said he was collecting sunrises until he had enough to build a new one.”

5

She said it completely straight.

I didn’t know whether to laugh.

After dinner she put on music — Drum’n’Bass, of course — and danced barefoot through the room without looking at me, as if she were alone. Not lonely, but free.

I sat on the sofa and watched her.

Not out of desire, but out of fascination.

She moved as if she did not belong to herself.

Later, when I left, she walked me to the door.

“That was nice,” she said.
“Yes,” I answered. “It was.”

She looked at me as if she wanted to say something, then decided against it.

She closed the door, and I stood in the stairwell that smelled of paint and cold air.

On the way home I thought for the first time that Natalia Lazarus might be someone who didn't fit into my life — and precisely for that reason had appeared in it.

2 – The Flatshare

The next morning I entered the kitchen; it smelled of coffee and cold cigarette smoke. Mathis sat by the window, barefoot, hair tousled, sketching something in his notebook. Maria stood at the stove stirring a pot of porridge as if performing a ritual.

6

“Well?” Mathis asked without looking up.
“Well what?” I said.

He grinned.
“You were late.”

“Had dinner,” I replied.
“With whom?”
“With an... acquaintance.”

Maria turned, raised an eyebrow.
“Acquaintance sounds like trouble.”

I sat down and took a cup.
“Her name is Natalia.”

The name hung in the air for a moment, as if heavier than other names.

“French?” Maria asked.

“Yes.”

“Then trouble for sure,” she said and laughed.

I didn’t tell them much. Only that she lived in a factory loft, that she had cooked ratatouille, that she... was different. I couldn’t even find the words to describe her. Everything about her was at once clear and elusive.

Later, when I went to my room, I paused for a moment.

The flat was bright, friendly, orderly.

A contrast to Natalia’s world, which felt like an improvised work of art.

In the evening the bell rang.

I opened the door — and there she stood.

Just like that.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“I was nearby,” she said.

“Berlin is big,” I answered.

“Not for me.”

She stepped in without asking. Her presence filled the hallway as if she altered the air itself. Mathis came out of the kitchen, stopped, looked her over briefly — not curious, more surprised.

“This is Mathis,” I said.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hi,” he mumbled and disappeared again.

Maria joined us, wiped her hands on her trousers.

“You must be Natalia.”

“Must I?” Natalia asked, smiling.

Maria laughed, a little puzzled, a little fascinated.

“Alan told us about you.”

“Only good things, I hope.”

“Only mysterious things,” Maria said.

Natalia nodded, as if that were the right answer.

We sat in the kitchen. The lamp above the table was warm, the light soft. Natalia looked around as if she were reading the flat rather than seeing it.

“You live nicely,” she said.

“Thank you,” I answered.

“It feels like a place you could stay.”

I didn’t know whether she meant it or had simply said the first thing that came to mind. With her, anything was possible.

She told a story so absurd that Maria eventually stopped stirring and simply listened.

“In Nîmes there was an old man who walked the streets every evening with an empty birdcage. He said he was looking for a bird that had been promised to him. No one knew whether he was mad or merely patient.”

Mathis came back in and leaned against the doorframe.
“And? Did he find it?”

“Of course not,” Natalia said. “But he never stopped looking.”

Silence followed.

Not uncomfortable — more like the pause that comes when you realize someone thinks in a different key than you do.

When she left later, I stayed in the kitchen for a long time.
Maria looked at me.

“She’s... unusual,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Take care of yourself.”

I nodded, though I didn’t know what I was supposed to guard against.

Natalia was not a storm.

She was the wind before it — quiet, cool, inscrutable.

3 – The Invitation

It was a Wednesday, grey and heavy, one of those Berlin days when the city looks as if it has forgotten to wake up. I was tired after work, my head full of code, and really only

wanted to go home, eat something, sleep.

When I rang Natalia's door she opened at once, as if she had been waiting for me.

"You look exhausted," she said.

"I am."

"Then come in."

She didn't say it kindly or solicitously — more like a statement not up for discussion. I stepped inside; the flat smelled of paint and cold coffee. Canvases lay everywhere, half painted, half forgotten. On the floor sat a plate with half an orange, beside it a brush long since dried.

"I cooked," she said.

"Again?"

"I don't like eating alone."

10

She set two plates on the table. It was simple — pasta with tomatoes — but she had scattered fresh herbs over it as if performing a ritual. We ate in silence. Only the music played — Drum'n'Bass, low, like a heartbeat in the background.

After dinner she sat on the windowsill, pulled her knees up and looked out at the street, which shimmered in the yellow lamplight.

"I have a problem," she said suddenly.

I looked up.

"What kind?"

She didn't turn to me.
"I'm bankrupt."

The word fell heavy into the room.
I didn't know what to say.

"The rent... I can't pay it anymore. I have to give up the flat."

She said it without drama, without tears, without pleading.
Simply as fact.

"And... what will you do now?" I asked.

She turned slowly toward me. Her eyes were calm, almost too calm.

"Can I stay with you for a while? Just for a few weeks."

I didn't think. I didn't think at all.

"Sure," I said. "Of course."

She stood, came to me, placed a hand on the back of my head and kissed my forehead.

A brief, warm, utterly incongruous kiss.

"Thank you," she said. "You're good."

I didn't know whether that was a compliment or a diagnosis.

"I just have to talk to my flatmates," I said.

"They won't mind," she said.

She said it as if the decision had already been made.

Later, walking down the stairs, I felt oddly light and at the same time unsettled.

It was as if I had opened a door whose destination I did not know.

On the way home I thought of her flat, of the colours, the stories, the restlessness inside her.

And of the kiss on my forehead.

Natalia arrived like a gust of wind through an open window.

You could not stop it.

You could only hope nothing toppled.

4 – Moving In

A week later she stood at our door with two suitcases, a rucksack, a bundle of canvases under her arm. It was early afternoon; the sun hung low over Charlottenburg and the street smelled faintly of rain though it hadn't rained.

12

“That’s everything,” she said.

“You don’t need more.”

I took one of the suitcases from her. It was lighter than I had expected.

Natalia never seemed heavy.

When we entered the flat no one was home. Mathis was at work, Maria at university. The kitchen was quiet, the air still warm from the morning. Natalia set her things down and looked around as if testing whether the room would accept her.

“Nice,” she said. “Bright. Friendly.”

She walked the corridor, opening doors without asking.

My room.

Mathis’s room.

Maria’s room.

The bathroom.

She paused at the kitchen doorway, laid her hand on the frame as if feeling the grain.

“I’ll spend a lot of time here,” she said.

I didn’t know whether that was a declaration or a warning.

We carried her things into my room. I had cleared a corner for her — a shelf, a small table, a place for her paints. She leaned the canvases against the wall as if they were plants that needed light.

13

“Thanks,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

She sat on my bed, drew her knees up, and looked at me as if she expected something.

I sat on the chair.

A distance that felt right.

“You’re good to me,” she said.

“I like people who are good.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing.

That evening Mathis and Maria came home. We sat in the kitchen — four plates, four glasses, a bottle of wine. Natalia told a story so absurd that even Mathis eventually stopped chewing.

“In Nîmes there was a woman who claimed she could speak to pigeons. She said pigeons were the only animals that never lied. She told them secrets every day. One day she disappeared. The pigeons stayed.”

Maria looked at her.

“Is that true?”

“Of course,” Natalia said. “Everything is true if you believe it.”

Mathis laughed.

“You’re crazy.”

“A little,” she said. “But only in the right places.”

Later, while we loaded the dishwasher, Maria pulled me aside.

“She’s... interesting,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And dangerous.”

“Why dangerous?”

Maria glanced at Natalia, who stood at the window looking out into the night as if she could see something we could not.

“Because she needs nothing,” Maria said. “People who need

nothing never stay.”

I said nothing.

But the sentence lodged in me.

That night I heard Natalia moving through the flat for a long time.

She walked quietly, almost floating.

Sometimes she paused outside my door.

I heard her breath — calm, even.

Then she moved on.

And I knew: with her arrival something had shifted.

Not loudly, not visibly — but perceptibly.

Like a piece of furniture that, in the night, had crept a little out of place without making a sound.

15

5 – The Canvases

That afternoon when I came home the stairwell was full of things that did not belong there. Three enormous rolls, each almost as tall as I was, lay side by side on the floor as if someone had delivered carpets meant for a palace.

I stopped. Then I heard footsteps.

Natalia came up the stairs, breathless, hair dishevelled, cheeks flushed from carrying.

“Ah,” she said when she saw me. “You’re here.”

“What is that?”

“My paintings.”

She said it as if it were the most natural thing.

I looked at the rolls. Each was wrapped in coarse cloth and tied with rope. They looked heavy, yet Natalia seemed to have carried them alone.

“From Nîmes,” she said. “I had to fetch them.”

We carried the canvases into the flat together. Mathis came out of his room, stopped in the hallway and stared.

“What the...?” he muttered.

“Art,” Natalia said. “Or something pretending to be.”

We unrolled the first canvas in the living room. The fabric crackled as if it were breathing. Beneath it an abstract work revealed itself — wild lines, bold colours, a chaos that nonetheless held a kind of order you could not explain.

“Wow,” Mathis said.

“This is... big,” Maria said, having joined us.

“Big is good,” Natalia said. “Big forces people to look.”

She unrolled the second canvas.

Then the third.

Each was different, yet all shared the same pulse — a mixture of anger, freedom, longing, and something I could not name. Something you only felt when you stood before it.

“And what will you do with them?” I asked.

“I’ll show them to galleries.”

“Do you have appointments?”

She shook her head.

“I just go.”

The next day she took the paintings one by one, always carrying one under her arm like a wanderer with a sword. She returned late, exhausted but not disappointed.

“And?” I asked.

“They don’t want them.”

“Why not?”

“Too big. Too wild. Too much.”

She said it without bitterness. More like someone reading a weather forecast.

On the third day she came back earlier than usual. She was quieter than before, but not sad. She sat in the kitchen, opened a bottle of wine and drank a glass without looking at me.

17

“You know,” she said at last, “in Nîmes a gallerist once told me: ‘Your paintings are like you. Nobody knows what to do with them.’”

I sat down opposite her.

“And what did you say?”

“Nothing.” She smiled. “I left.”

She took a sip of wine, set the glass down, and looked at me as if checking whether I had understood something she hadn’t said aloud.

“Berlin is different,” she said. “Here you don’t have to fit. Here you may simply be.”

I nodded.

“And you?” I asked. “Do you want to fit?”

She laughed softly.

“I never fit. That’s my talent.”

Later, when she leaned the canvases against the wall in my room, I watched her for a long time. Not the paintings — her. She suddenly seemed small. Not weak, not broken — merely small, like someone carrying too much world inside and not knowing where to put it.

That night she fell asleep early. I heard her breathing, calm, even. And for the first time I thought that perhaps her art was the only thing she truly owned.

And that perhaps it was not enough.

18

6 – The Painter

It was a Saturday morning, far too early for wine, far too bright for surprises. I shuffled into the kitchen, rubbed my eyes — and stopped.

An old man sat at the table. His face was furrowed like a map folded too many times. Hair white, thin, but wild. Before him stood a can of wine, open, half empty. He wore a coat that looked as if it had already lived several lives.

And Natalia sat beside him. Barefoot, radiant, alive like a spark.

“Ah,” she said when she saw me. “Good morning.”

The old man raised his glass.

“Morning,” he mumbled in a voice that smelled of tobacco and decades.

It took me a moment to place what I was seeing.

“This is...?” I began.

“A friend,” Natalia said. “A very old friend.”

The man laughed softly.

“Old, yes. Friend... perhaps.”

She poured him more. It was ten in the morning. I sat down slowly, cautiously, as if not to startle an animal.

“Would you like some?” Natalia offered, holding out a glass.

“I... no. Thanks.”

She shrugged as if it were a missed opportunity.

19

The old man took a deep swallow, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and looked at me.

“You are Alan,” he said.

“Yes.”

“She has spoken of you.”

I glanced at Natalia. She smiled, but not toward me — inward, to herself.

“He is a painter,” she said. “A great painter.”

The man waved the praise away.

“A poor painter. That’s more accurate.”

She laid her hand on his shoulder — a gesture too familiar, too soft, too natural. Something inside me tightened. Not jealousy — more like recognition. I stood up.

“I’ll leave you two alone.”

“Stay,” Natalia said.

“No,” I replied. “I... have to work.”

She nodded as if she had expected that. The old man raised his glass to me.

“Take care of her,” he said. “Or don’t. She’ll do what she wants anyway.”

I went to my room, closed the door, and leaned against it. Voices from the kitchen were muffled, but I heard her laughter — a laugh I had never heard before, a laugh that did not belong to me. I sat on my bed and stared at the canvases propped against my wall. Their colours looked different now. Darker. More honest.

After an hour it grew quiet. I cracked the door a little. The kitchen was empty. The can of wine was nearly drained. Two glasses stood side by side as if they had been in conversation. Natalia lay in the makeshift corner of my room, hands folded beneath her head, staring at the ceiling.

20

“He’s gone,” she said without looking up.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Someone who knows me.”

“More than I do?”

She turned her head toward me. Her eyes were clear, sober, almost sad.

“Everyone knows me differently,” she said. “You too.”

I sat down beside her.

Not too close, not too far.

“Is he your...?”
“Yes,” she said.
Without hesitation.
Without shame.
Without explanation.

I nodded.
That was all I could do.
She closed her eyes.

“He’s poor. But he paints as if he wants to save the world.”
“And you?” I asked.
“I don’t save anyone,” she said. “Not even myself.”

Silence.
Only the city murmured outside, muffled, far away.

In that moment I understood something:
Natalia Lazarus belonged to no one.
Not to me.
Not to him.
Not to Berlin.

She belonged only to movement.
To the now.
To whatever she felt in that instant.

And that was the dangerous thing.

It was late, one of those warm Berlin nights when the city refuses to sleep. Mathis, Maria and I sat in the kitchen, an

open bottle of red on the table, the windows wide. The sound of the street drifted in — muted, like a distant river.

Natalia had left an hour earlier.

As always, at the same time.

Ten o'clock.

No explanation.

No destination.

Maria stared at her glass, turning it between her fingers.

"I'll say it," she said. "I think she's a prostitute."

The sentence fell like a stone into water.

No one spoke.

Mathis raised his eyebrows but did not argue.

I needed a moment to answer.

22

"What?" I said at last. "Why would you think that?"

Maria looked at me, serious, not provocative but sober.

"Look at her. How she dresses. How she talks. How she appears and disappears. And every night she goes away and comes back at six in the morning. What else could it be?"

I shook my head.

"That's... nonsense."

"Is it?" she asked calmly.

Mathis took a sip of wine.

"I don't know," he said. "She's... hard to pin down."

"She's free," I said. "That's all."

Maria leaned back, arms folded.

"Free? Alan, she lives here without paying rent. She eats with

us, uses everything, is always around — except at night. And you know nothing about her. Nothing at all.”

I wanted to protest, but words failed me.
Because it was true.

“Maybe she has friends,” I said.
“Then why doesn’t she bring anyone home?” Maria asked.
“Why does she never have visitors? Why does she never speak of anyone?”

I was silent.
“And why,” Maria continued, “has she never kissed you? Never touched you? Never... anything? You live together, but you are not a couple. And yet she blocks you. You don’t bring other women home anymore. You wait for her, and she gives you nothing.”

23

Mathis nodded slowly.
“That’s true.”

Something tightened inside me.
Not anger.
Not pain.
More a quiet doubt that had been there for a long time and now had a name.

“You don’t understand her,” I said softly.
“No,” Maria said. “You don’t understand her.”

Silence followed.
Only the ticking of the kitchen clock, the sound of a car outside, the hum of the fridge.
I stood, went to the window and looked out.

The street was empty.
The lamplight threw yellow pools on the asphalt.
And somewhere out there was Natalia — in another room,
another world, another life.

“I just want you to look after yourself,” Maria said behind me.

“She’s not evil,” I said.

“No,” Maria replied. “But she’s dangerous.”

I turned.

“Why?”

“Because she needs nothing,” Maria said. “And people who need nothing sometimes take everything.”

I said nothing more.

The sentence lodged in me like a splinter.

24

Later, when I went to my room, Natalia’s bed was empty.
Her scent lingered in the air — a mix of paint, smoke, and
something I could not name.

I sat on my bed and waited.

Not consciously.

Not willingly.

Just like that.

And sometime, just before dawn, I heard the apartment door.

Soft footsteps.

A brief pause outside my door.

Then she moved on.

I closed my eyes.

And I knew:

Something had changed.

Not loudly.

Not visibly.
But irrevocably.

8 – Stories

The next evening Natalia returned later than usual. It was almost seven in the morning; the sun was already above the roofs, and the kitchen lay bathed in that pale, early light that makes everything more honest than one can bear.

I sat at the table, a cup of coffee before me, awake for hours. Not from worry — from restlessness. The door opened quietly. Natalia came in, slipped off her shoes as if she had only been out for a moment.

“You’re awake,” she said.
“Yes.”

She poured herself coffee and sat opposite me. Her eyes were clear, not tired, not blurred. She looked as if she had not spent the night but collected it.

“You want to ask something,” she said.
I nodded.
“Where are you at night?”

She stirred her coffee though she took no sugar.
“Out.”
“To where?”
“To where I’m needed.”

I laughed softly, not mocking but a little desperate.
“And where is that?”

She looked at me, long and steady.
Then she began to tell me.

“In Berlin there is a man who stands on a bridge every night and waits until someone passes who will listen. He tells stories no one believes. I listen to him.”

I said nothing.

“And there is a woman who dances in an abandoned courtyard. Every evening, alone, to music only she can hear. I watch her.”

She took a sip of coffee.

“And sometimes I go to bars where no one speaks. Only looks. Only silence. I like silence.”

I stared at her.

“Natalia... that doesn't sound real.”

“It is,” she said. “Everything is real. Just not all at once.”

26

I shook my head.

“Why don't you just tell me the truth?”

She smiled — a small, sad smile.

“Because you want a truth that doesn't exist.”

I felt something harden inside me.

Not against her — against the uncertainty.

“Maria thinks you...” I began.

“I know what she thinks,” she interrupted.

“She believes many things. She likes to believe.”

“And?” I asked. “Is it true?”

Natalia set her cup down.

She did not look hurt.

Not angry.

Just... tired.

“I sell nothing,” she said.

“Not my body. Not my time. Not my stories.”

“Then what do you do?”

She stood, went to the window and opened it.

The cold morning air flowed in.

“I live,” she said.

“And sometimes that is enough. Sometimes it is not.”

I stood as well.

“I want to understand you.”

She turned to me. Her eyes were suddenly soft, almost transparent.

“That’s the problem,” she said.

“I’m not here to be understood.”

She stepped closer, close enough that I felt her breath.

But she did not touch me.

“You’re good, Alan,” she said quietly.

“But you look for answers where there are only paths.”

Then she passed me, took her jacket and disappeared into her little corner of my room without closing the door.

I stood in the kitchen, the window open, the air cool.

And I knew:

She had answered me.

Just not in the way I wanted.

Natalia Lazarus was a story writing itself.

And I was only someone trying to read the chapters.

In the weeks that followed something shifted between us.
Not visible, not tangible — more like a temperature you only
notice when it changes.

Natalia and I never touched.
Not by chance, not by design.
And yet she was closer to me than anyone I knew.

It began with small things.
She often sat in my room without saying a word.
Sometimes she read, sometimes she painted, sometimes she
lay on the floor and stared at the ceiling while I worked at my
desk.

She was there — not intrusive, not demanding, simply
present.

28

“You work too much,” she said once.
“You think too much,” I replied.
“That’s worse.”
She smiled, not at me but at the world.

In the evenings we sometimes sat in the kitchen, drinking tea
or wine while Mathis and Maria slept.
She told stories that sounded like dreams.
“In Nîmes there was a boy who climbed a tree every evening
to greet the moon. He said the moon was the only friend who
never left.”
I did not ask whether it was true.
With her it did not matter.

Sometimes we sat in silence beside each other.
She on the windowsill, I at the table.
The silence between us was not empty — it was filled with
something I could not name.

Once, late at night, she came to me, sat on the floor and
leaned her head against my bed.

“I can’t sleep,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Too many thoughts.”

“Which ones?”

She closed her eyes.

“The ones you don’t want to think.”

I sat down beside her, not too close, not too far.
She opened her eyes again and looked at me as if testing
whether I would stay.

“You’re calm,” she said.

“You’re not,” I answered.

“That’s why I stay.”

She lay on her back, hands on her belly, and breathed in
deeply.

I stayed seated, listening to her breath, to the city outside, to
my own heart that suddenly sounded too loud.

“Alan,” she said softly.

“Yes?”

“You want something from me I cannot give.”

I swallowed.

“What?”

“A shape.”

I didn't understand. Or perhaps I understood too well.
"I am not round," she said. "I am not square. I am nothing you can hold."

I looked at her. Her face was soft in the light of the streetlamp that fell through the window. She did not look strong, not mysterious, not eccentric. Just human. Just there.
"I don't want anything from you," I said.
"Yes," she replied. "But that's not bad."

She sat up, drew her knees to her chest, and looked at me for a long time.
"You are the only person with whom I can be silent," she said.
"That's rare."

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.
She rose, went to her bed, lay down and turned toward the wall.
"Good night, Alan," she said.
"Good night."

I stayed awake for a long time. Not because of her — because of what she had set in motion inside me.
It was not love.
It was not friendship.
It was something between, something unnamed, something that exists only when two people do not touch yet remain connected.
Natalia Lazarus was like a shadow walking beside me. Not dark, not threatening — simply present. And sometimes, when I turned, she had already moved on.

It was late afternoon; the sun hung low over the courtyard and my room was bathed in that golden light that makes everything more beautiful than it is. Natalia sat on my rug, legs crossed, a glass of water in her hand. She looked like someone who had just woken from a dream and still didn't know which world she had landed in.

I stood at the window, hands in my pockets, feeling something tighten inside me — a knot that had been there for a long time.

“Natalia,” I said.

She lifted her head.

“Yes?”

“How long do you plan to stay?”

She blinked as if she hadn't expected the question. Or as if she had been expecting it for a long time.

“Stay?” she repeated.

“Yes. Here. With us. In the flatshare.”

She set the glass down slowly, almost carefully, then looked at me — directly, without evasion.

“Forever,” she said.

I laughed. Not meanly, not mockingly — more in surprise.

“Forever?” I repeated.

“Yes.”

She did not smile. She did not mean it as a joke. She meant it as a possibility.

I sat on the windowsill.

“Natalia... that won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” I began and realized I had no sentence strong enough. “Because this wasn’t... meant to be.”

She tilted her head.

“Meant by whom?”

“By us. By me. By the flatshare.”

“I’ll adapt,” she said. “I won’t disturb anyone.”

“Still,” I said quietly, “you disturb me.”

She looked at me for a long time. Not hurt. Not angry. Just attentive.

“How?” she asked.

I searched for words. They didn’t come.

“You’re everywhere,” I said at last. “In every room. In every mood. In every thought. And I don’t know what you want. I don’t know who you are. I don’t know where you go at night. I know... nothing.”

32

She rose slowly, as if moving through water, and came to stand a step away from me.

“You know enough,” she said.

“More than most.”

“But not the important things.”

“The important things aren’t for everyone.”

I shook my head.

“I need clarity.”

“I don’t.”

Silence.

Only the courtyard outside, a bird, a distant car.

“Natalia...,” I began.
She raised her hand—not to touch me, but to stop me.
“Alan,” she said softly.
“I’ll stay as long as you let me. No longer. No shorter.”
“And if I say it’s enough?”
She nodded.
“Then I’ll go.”
“Just like that?”
“Just like that.”

She turned, went to her bed, sat down and drew her knees up.
In that moment she seemed small. Not weak—just small.
“I never said I wanted to stay,” she said.
“I only said I could stay.”

I didn’t know whether that was a difference or a warning.
I stood, went to the door and stopped there.
“I just want to know where I stand,” I said.
“Beside me,” she answered.
“But not with me.”

I closed the door behind me.
Not loudly.
Not angrily.
Just quietly.

For the first time since she moved in the flat felt too large.
And I felt too small.

11 – The Night Without Her

It began on a Thursday. A day like any other—grey, uneventful, one of those Berlin days you forget as soon as they’re over.

Natalia had spent the whole afternoon in the kitchen, mixing paints that smelled of solvent and listening to music so low it was almost a whisper.

“I’ll go out later,” she said without looking up.

“Where to?”

“To where it’s dark.”

I didn’t ask further. I had learned that questions with her were like stones thrown into water—they sank without changing anything.

At ten she left. As always. The door closed softly and the flat grew quieter, as if a sound had vanished that you only notice when it’s gone.

I didn’t wait consciously. I simply did nothing else. At three in the morning she hadn’t returned. At five neither. At seven I heard the first sounds of the city—the garbage truck, a delivery van, footsteps in the stairwell—but not hers.

34

I made coffee and sat at the table. Her place was empty. Her glass from the night before stood half full, as if she had left it there on purpose to come back. Mathis came in, half asleep.

“She still gone?”

“Yes.”

“Could happen.”

Maria tied her hair back and looked at me.

“You’re worried.”

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

I was silent. The day passed. I worked but saw nothing, heard nothing. I thought only of the door that did not open. In the evening the three of us sat in the kitchen. The chair beside me remained empty. Maria put her hand on my arm.

“Maybe she needs distance,” she said.
“Maybe,” I answered. But I knew it wasn’t that. Natalia didn’t take distance. She disappeared.

The second night came.

I did not sleep.

I lay awake, hearing the flat’s small noises—the pipes, the fridge’s hum, the distant roar of the city—but not her steps, not her breath, not the soft opening of the door I had come to know like my own heartbeat.

On the third day her bed was untouched.

Her jacket still hung on the peg.

Her paints sat open on the table.

Her canvases leaned against the wall as if waiting.

I sat before them and looked for a long time.

The colours seemed different—

harder,

lonelier.

I didn’t know if she would ever return.

I didn’t know if she was somewhere she wanted to stay.

I only knew she was missing.

Not loudly.

Not dramatically.

Like a light that goes out without flickering.

On the evening of the third day I sat again in the kitchen.

The door was closed.

The flat was quiet.

And I understood:

you can miss someone you never touched.
You can lose someone you never owned.
You can love someone without noticing—until they are gone.

Natalia Lazarus had vanished.
And I did not know whether she would ever reappear.

12 – Return

By the fourth day I had stopped listening for sounds.
Not because I no longer wanted to—but because I could not.
The flat had grown too quiet, too ordered, too clear.
Without Natalia it felt like a room that had forgotten people
lived inside it.

I sat in the kitchen, hands wrapped around a cup long since
cold.
Mathis was at work, Maria at university.
Only I remained, alone with a silence that felt like weight.

36

Then I heard footsteps in the stairwell.

Light.
Quick.
Familiar.

The door opened.
She stepped in.

Natalia Lazarus.
As if she had only gone out for a cigarette.
She set down her bag, brushed a strand of hair from her face
and looked at me as if she had seen me only yesterday.

“Hello,” she said.

I stood. Not abruptly, not angrily—more like someone unsure whether he was dreaming.

“Where were you?”

She shrugged off her jacket and hung it on the peg as if it were an ordinary evening.

“Away.”

“Three days?”

“Sometimes you need three days.”

I stared at her. She did not look exhausted, confused, or changed. Just... there.

“Natalia, I... I didn’t know if you’d come back.”

She stepped closer and stopped a step away. Her eyes were calm, clear, almost gentle.

“I always come back,” she said.

“Until I don’t.”

I didn’t know whether that was comfort or threat. She opened the fridge, took a bottle of water and drank, then sat at the table in the chair she always used.

“Berlin is too loud,” she said. “I had to go.”

“To where?”

“To where it’s quieter.”

“And where is that?”

She smiled—a small, tired smile.

“In me.”

I sat opposite her.

“You can’t just disappear.”

“Yes I can,” she said. “I disappear often.”

“But not without saying something.”

“If I say something, it’s not disappearance.”

I rubbed my forehead.

“Natalia... I’m worried.”

She looked at me for a long time. Not testing, not defensive—more surprised.

“Why?”

“Because you... matter.”

She tilted her head.

“To you?”

“Yes.”

She nodded as if storing an unexpected fact.

“That’s nice,” she said. “But dangerous.”

“For whom?”

“For you.”

She rose, went to her bed, sat down and began unpacking her bag: a book, a scarf, a small stone she placed on the bedside table as if it had meaning.

38

“I’ll stay here today,” she said. “Maybe tomorrow too.”

“And after?”

She looked at me. “After I don’t know.”

I breathed in.

“Can you at least tell me if you... will stay?”

She shook her head.

“I never stay. I am only here.”

She lay down, pulled the blanket over herself and closed her eyes.

“Good night, Alan,” she said softly.

“It’s afternoon,” I replied.

“For me it’s night.”

I sat for a long time, watching her breathe—calm, even—as if nothing had happened.

And I understood:

Natalia Lazarus was not a person who came and went.

She was a state.

An apparition.

A movement.

You could not hold her.

You could only be present when she appeared—

and hope she would not vanish again.

EPILOGUE – N. Lazarus

Many years had passed.

Berlin had changed, as cities do when you give them enough time.

The clubs of those days had disappeared or become bars, the bars turned into cafés, the cafés into something else.

Only the Spree still smelled the same—of metal, water, and stories no one told.

I was on my way to an exhibition in Mitte, invited by a colleague. I expected nothing special. Just art, people, wine, conversations you forget as soon as you leave the room.

The gallery was bright, white, almost sterile.

The kind of room where every sound seems too loud.

I walked through the first hall, looked at paintings that said nothing to me, heard voices blending into one another.

Then I stopped.

Before a canvas.

Large.

Wild.

Fields of color colliding and embracing, lines that moved like gestures you could not hold.

A chaos that carried an order you could not explain but could feel.

I knew that hand.

I knew it at once.

My heart quickened—not from shock, but from memory.

From a feeling I had long packed away and put on a shelf.

I stepped closer.

The title was small on a plaque:

“Untitled (Berlin)” — N. Lazarus

I had to smile.

Not broadly, not sentimentally—more like someone who hears an old song he had forgotten.

A woman stopped beside me.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” she said.

“Yes,” I answered. “Very.”

“She’s a phantom,” the woman said. “No one knows who she is. No interviews, no photos, no biography. She appears, then disappears. Some say she lives in France. Others say she’s always traveling. A legend.”

I nodded.

“Yes,” I said. “That sounds like her.”

“Do you know her?” the woman asked.

I looked at the canvas again.

At the colors, the anger, the freedom, the longing.

At the movement I knew like a breath.

“No,” I said.

“Not really.”

I lingered before the painting for a long time.
Not because I sought answers—I had long given up on those.
But because I recognized something I had never owned, and
yet which was part of my story.
Natalia Lazarus had never been someone you could hold.
She was a state.
A gust of wind.
A color that would not blend.
And now she hung here, in a gallery in Mitte, large, wild,
unmistakable.

I took a step back.
Breathed in.
Breathed out.
“Good to see you’re still here,” I said softly.
Then I left.

The city was loud when I stepped outside.
But inside me it was quiet.