

## NOSTALGIC KNOTS - A LISBON VIGNETTE

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Every morning on my hurried way to catch the train I pass a magic time capsule – too rushed to follow the inviting whispers of times gone by and yet slow enough to feel their pull. One day, I stepped into the small dusty store of the old framemaker. In his sturdy apron he stood behind the counter sanding down a piece of wood. Time moved languorously, past, present and imagination fused as memories and nostalgic longings merged.

Senhor Gabriel spent most of his well over 80 years of life in this very same small store. His father opened it almost a century ago in this small Lisbon street, making frames, offering glassworks and selling tinware in Alcântara – back then – a buzzing workers' neighbourhood.

Today, the small street is calm, from time to time a client enters, often an old acquaintance, stopping by to pick up an order and to chat. A conversation with him is like slowly leafing through a heavy old book holding countless stories of a life lived in old Lisbon. Every corner of his shop holds another treasure, safeguarded from the unrelenting grind of passing time. The shelf behind his working counter contains small black-and-white pictures nestled close to a wild collection of trinkets. When he pulls out some of them, the disorderly shelf feels like a shrine from which he devoutly draws objects, each carrying its very own story. But it's the tiny pictures that speak the loudest of the lives lived in this very place, pictures of his parents and grandparents, of himself as an infant standing in the door I just walked through.

Reliable, like clockwork, he opens his shop every working day. Every working day his hands run surely and deliberately over wood and glass with great artistry, dovetailing picture frames, putting together small glass vitrines as they are used for religious reliquia and small statuettes of catholic saints; Every working day.

In fact, Senhor Gabriel's store seems to be the center of its very own microcosm that exudes a sense of permanence in an everchanging part of the city. Next door there is the *Tasca do Esteves*. The menu handwritten in white chalk on black board invites visitors into a small, dark tavern, its walls completely covered in white-and-blue Portuguese tiles. From the very back of the room, from behind the counter, João Esteves, a tall man with an imposing stature and a big white mustache greets his visitors. Together with his wife, Lina, he has been running this Tavern since 1987. Luís, their son, who has been helping out since his childhood is

working with them as well. Senhor João and his wife stem from the same small village in Trás-os-Montes, a region, as he proudly tells, famous for its high quality beef and bullfighting. He describes the change that Alcântara and his *Tasca* underwent in vivid colours: “The *tasca* was founded in 1884 but until around 1950 it only sold alcohol, some wine and *bagaço* and people would come here to bring their own lunch from home to be warmed up and consumed here. Before it was called *O Retiro dos Pobrezinhos* [The Poores’ Retreat]. I have been told that this *tasca* was very famous for its cooked snails. It was the best snails in Lisbon”. Recalling the early years after he had taken over the *tasca*, he recounts “This was a working area, with many factories of sugar, soap.... at this time of day that street seemed to be an anthill, people walking up and down. There were also more than 6500 dockworkers here. We offered cozido, feijoada... they came in here, ate for 20 minutes and then they were out on the street again and the table was free for the next one. The house was always full. Now you don’t see this anymore. They closed down the factories 20-30 years ago and the houses in this street are rented out to people from abroad. Some hostels, a lot of people from India. Many of them came here also to open their business in Rua Prior do Crato, there are many stores now run by Indians and Chinese.”

On the other side, next to Senhor Gabriel’s store, Senhor José, himself an immigrant from outside Lisbon, runs a small supermarket. Fruits and vegetables are presented on the outside, on sunny days given shade to by a colourful parasol. The small market, offering all kinds of products, looks like nothing much has changed since decades. In fact Senhor José had started working there already in 1965. First as an employee and since the 80’s he runs this place together with Fernanda, his wife. Senhora Fernanda arrived to Lisbon from the region close to Viséu already as a child. Senhor José came to Lisbon as a young man from a small, isolated village in the Serra da Estrela. And while he now says that at this point he feels a greater sense of belonging to Lisbon than to his village of birth, he also recalls that back in the day, when he started working in the supermarket this was a job a true *lisboeta* would have never taken up: “*Lisboetas* would work in farmacies, have small boutiques... jobs that were more chichi. The same for restaurants, most of the restaurants at the time were run by migrants from Trás-os-montes and Minho”.

Also for him, business was much better back in the day, “Back then, when we opened in the morning at nine, there was already a line of people waiting outside.

Also the relation with the customers was much closer. I would personally go from door to door and note down people's orders and deliver the groceries to their doorstep. But the first Continente opened around 40 years ago and we started feeling it. Today people buy more, but the places where they buy have changed. We used to sell a ton of Almonds for Easter, now it is not more than 5-10 kilograms.”

Senhor João and Senhor José are not just idly reminiscing about golden times gone by. Senhor João also remembers the hard work of those long never ending days serving clients in his Tasca. Senhor José as well looks back on a life determined by his work and still, even with much less clients now, he is working seven days a week. And yet, there is an undeniably strong vein of nostalgia running through these conversations, a longing for a bygone era.

There is at once a startlingly similar and yet very distinct form of nostalgia that impelled me to embark on these conversations in the first place. Right from the very first time, I passed Senhor Gabriel's shop, I felt a strange wistful pull, a light drape of sweet melancholia lowering itself on myself. Ever since, I've continued to feel a nostalgia for the present, imagining my future self looking back at the memory of this very moment where this magic microcosm revolving around the small frameshop still existed. It's a world doomed to disappear in the very close future. A fact aggravated by the municipality's plans to extend its metro line to this part of the city. It is these very houses that will be taken down to make space for yet another change in the urban landscape.

This nostalgia driven by the anticipated loss of these places that make this small Lisbon street unique and breathe a sense of the past, is layered with yet another type of nostalgia – a very personal longing driven by my own imagination. I have not lived through the time when Alcântara was a rough and lively workers' district. But imagining this time means imagining an era in which people I have loved and lost like my grandparents could have wandered through the then buzzing streets of Alcântara, could have sat down in Senhor João's Tasca, bought an apple from Senhor José and asked Senhor Gabriel to make a picture frame adorning a postcard they bought at some corner of the city to remember their Lisbon holiday. Now, this is a journey my grandparents only ever made in my own imagination. But it is my imagination and a nostalgia for my beloved grandparents that is offset by these places that become a time portal through which the aroma of my grandparents' presence leaks into the current moment.

Alfredo, my friend, colleague and photographic collaborator for this project shares into my appreciation of these small places in Lisbon, telling stories of another time. As we trawled this neighbourhood, in between chats with the locals, we exchanged thoughts on what these places meant to us. We enjoy the radical alterity of these places that defy the commercialisation and paradoxical standardization of the unique and the “authentic”, and indeed of nostalgia itself. And maybe one of the reasons we feel a tender nostalgic care for this microcosm we explored together, lies yet again in our very own imagination. We both have gallivanted from country to country and across continents to follow our curiosities and interests. These places seeming to be anchored timelessly in one place, have the tang of an escapist fantasy, of a longing for a stable life in another time that we don’t live but only imagine. An edenic what-if we can daydream of when momentarily overwhelmed by the pace of our own life-events.

The triad of Senhor João’s Tasca, Senhor Gabriel’s frameshop and Senhor José’s supermarket is a gentle nostalgic knot, where memories – real and imagined – past and present, different lives and different nostalgic longings are wrapped up into each other. Their unwrapping reveals nostalgia as an affect inextricably linked with human imagination and the human experience of the irreversibility of time.









Handwritten price tag for red apples. The tag is white and has the number "2.70" written in large blue ink. To the left of the number is a red "K" and to the right is a red "E". Below the number, the text "pair per foot used cat" is written in blue ink. At the top of the tag, "Haga's Real" is written in red ink. A black binder clip is attached to the right side of the tag.



Handwritten price tag for yellow apples. The tag is white and has the number "2.80" written in large blue ink. To the left of the number is a red "E" and to the right is a red "K". Below the number, the text "pair per foot used cat" is written in blue ink. At the top of the tag, "Haga's Real" is written in red ink. A green binder clip is attached to the right side of the tag.





Loquites Mimosa

- Natural .35
- aromas. .35
- Pedaços .40
- Magro líquido .60
- Limhazero .60
- aroma líquido .50
- sem Lactose .65





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