

Soaring

With Arms Wide Open*

(*Pra Voar Mais Alto)

By Flávia Côrtes

SAUDADE

It means “to long for something”. Or someone. The love that remains.

It’s a complex word people use to say that only exists in Portuguese. Maybe the rest of the world doesn’t feel it.

I always wanted to know why *saudade* grows inside of us sometimes; *saudade* of something we don’t even know what it is. Of someone who didn’t exist, of something that never happened.

Any time I get distracted, there it comes. It’s stronger than me.

The other day, when the teacher was explaining, it happened again.

‘The area of the triangle is half the base times the height.’

I stared out the classroom window. A deep blue sea came from nowhere. An ancient ship under sail through small waves, jumping over them for the fun of it. Slowly, it came towards me, getting closer to the window. In its sail, inflated by the wind, a skull and crossbones.

I was a pirate.

One who is not afraid of anything.

I had returned from a huge battle against other pirates which had tried to loot our ship. We fought with bravery and courage. I held the mast rope and kept my foot firmly to swing myself; and using my sword I hit the pirates that were invading my ship. One by one, they all had fallen. We won. Now, restful, we are looking for another adventure, ‘cause a pirate doesn’t live

without adventure. Sitting on the prow; half inclined body, I close my eyes. The smell of the sea and the wind blow in my face. I laugh when some salty drops of water spill on me.

I really miss the sea. Saudade of the sea!

‘Wake up, Juju Bean! The teacher is talking to you.’

‘Come on, boy. What’s the solution to the exercise?’

I glanced at my notebook.

‘37.’

‘All right. Come here and describe on the white board how you got this.’

So I did.

Juju Bean. I’ve tried, but couldn’t get rid of this nickname, though I like it now. It started when I was a little baby and hadn’t developed speech yet. I used to say *ju-ju, ju-ju* instead of *juice*.

Mum always tells this funny story with my father and I.

‘Go on, son! Say dadda. Daaa-dda.’

‘Ju-ju.’

‘Ju-what? No, no! It’s daaa-dda.’

‘Ju-Ju.’

‘No son! Say da-dda.’

‘Juju! Juju! Juju!’ I insisted, finally getting the juice bottle.

It’s been four years since my Dad died.

I think I’ll never get use to it. I used to wake up scared and crying in the middle of the night. At first, Mum used to take me to her bed, but then a shrinking, tangling bed started holding

me. I started choking and cried even more. So, Mum started lying down with me, in my own room, every time I couldn't sleep. It was better this way.

But then he came. Ray. Trying to replace my Dad. But I wouldn't let him do it.

He came quiet as a mouse. Initially, he didn't even sleep at our home. But things have changed. Mum had stopped caring about me, and when I would ask her to lie down with me, sometimes she said yes, sometimes she didn't. She used to say *I am tired*, and that I am too old.

I wanted to cry out at the entire world. To send Ray away and tell him to leave my Mum alone. To tell him that he would *never* take my Dad's place. But I couldn't. I was always like that. Quiet. Sometimes I got angry and I thought I would explode. Then it was gone. But it was going to change.

INTRUDER

When I came home, after school, I threw my backpack on the couch. Took off my sneakers and turned the TV on. Mum showed up.

'Son, it's Ray's birthday. Get ready. We're going out to lunch.'

Damn it! It was Friday, day of my favorite show.

'Just let me watch this show first. Please, Mum!'

'Shower!'

'Just a bit.'

She pointed the stairs. There were no arguments. Since my Dad had gone she became like this, bossy.

Fancy restaurant. Ray's thing. The kind we must be quiet because even an innocent sigh makes everyone look at you. It was better this way. I didn't have to say anything.

Ray opened my mother's gift. A thick book. He seemed to like it.

'This is from Juju Bean. Come on, sweetie, give it to Ray,' she said, putting a big package on my hand.

'Here.'

I shrugged, though I was curious to see what it was. He tore the package open. I had never seen a grown-up man doing something like that. It was a board game. A child's gift. But he was looking at it as if it was a gold bar.

'Wow! It's been years since I played ludo. It was my favorite game as a kid. Your Mummy told you, huh?'

As if he wasn't aware I had nothing to do with that...

I shrugged.

'So, boys,' Mum said. 'You can spend some time together, doing something fun.'

Mum really shouldn't have said that.

'We can play later. Do you know how to play ludo?' he said.

'No,' I said, with no patience.

'It's easy. I can teach you how to play it.'

'I don't want to! Goddamn it!'

They glanced at me in surprise. Mum scowled at me.

'What is it, son? Where are your manners? Apologize to Ray.'

I sulked.

'Forget about it, Renata. If he doesn't want to, he doesn't want to, that's ok.'

Yes. That's fine.

Dad and I used to play games all the time. Chess was his favorite. I played well, but sometimes he did let me win.

'Have you already seen that new adventure movie, Juju Bean?' Ray said, and I shrugged. 'We can go to the movies tomorrow, if you want.'

I didn't.

Ray was not my father and never would be. Our order was taking too long. My stomach was growling and my head was thinking about *saudade*. A paint on the wall reminded me a chess board.

The paint started growing and growing and I became little among the chess pieces. Ground became grass and the board opened into a vast meadow where a distant mountain was inviting us for war. All pieces gained life and moved. They were ready to fight. A hundred of enemy's soldiers sprouting from the mountaintop. Pawns went ahead, defending the kingdom from their neighbors attack, and cavalry went breaking the siege in zigzag.

I was a knight.

And my metallic armor gleamed under the bright sun.

Wind shook the treetops as greeting us for our immense bravery.

I was big, really big. Almost a giant.

Troops were advancing and my lance was knocking everyone down. It was our land and we were not going to hand it on a plate. The fight was hard and many have died fighting bravely.

Heroes of an endless war.

‘Juju Bean! Give me attention, son. Do you want another soft drink?’

I’d rather get out of there.

‘I do.’

‘Did you know that Ray use to do judo at school, just like you?’

Like I was interested...

‘Hum, hum.’

‘My dream was getting a black belt. But I stopped eventually. You know, new plans, things happening.’

‘Oh really, honey?’ Mum said. ‘Tell us everything about it. Juju Bean must be looking to know.’

No, I wasn’t.

‘The thing was that I decided to learn how to play the guitar. And the electric guitar came right after that. I had a school band. We’ve played at parties during that time.

‘Wow, Ray! You haven’t told me about this musical side of yours,’ Mum said, and I had lost my appetite before the order came.

‘Yes, sometimes *saudade* comes along and I really miss my electric guitar. So, I take it from the cabinet and play for a while. I can teach you something, if you want, Juju Bean. I’m not completely rusty yet.’

‘No, thanks.’

He didn’t insist. Thanks God.

Food went down heavily. Hard to swallow. And it was stroganoff. I love stroganoff. But I’d rather be home.

That day has passed at a turtle’s pace. No. At a snail’s. A boring Day: lunch with Ray, ice cream with Ray, mall with Ray, ludo with Ray. Mum forced me.

‘See, Juju Bean. After we get the rules, it becomes easy. You throw two dice at the same time. If they match, you can start. If you take two “six”, you can throw the dice again. Then you...’

The clock on the shelf was showing 8pm. Damn it! Too early to go to bed.

‘...and the first to take the four pieces to the center of the board wins. Got it?’

Sort of.

So the game started. I didn’t understand the rules and was not playing well. Ray explained it all over again. I decided to pay attention, or I was going to stay there forever.

I had three pawns on the game, Ray had four. I had no choice but play fair, though it was hard to beat Ray. Even the dice were against me. Once in a while, Mum came across the kitchen door. The smell of buttered popcorn on the air. Ray almost took one of my pieces out of the game, but he changed his mind and used another pawn. ‘It’s not fair!’ I said. But it turned to be. Ray was cheating. Cheating because of me. And I didn’t like it.

‘Listen up!’ I said. ‘You don’t need to let me win. I’m perfectly capable of winning by myself, ok? I’m not stupid!’

‘But I haven’t cheated, Juju Bean. I made a wrong movement.’

I was so angry! He was a liar after all.

I was going to say something, but Mum came with the popcorn.

Huge bowl in front of my nose. Popcorns as white as snowflakes. I’ve never seen snow. Dad told he was going to show me. He didn’t have time.

Snow was falling hard and I was in my snow boots trying to get home. The boot got stuck on snow and it turned from black to white. It was so cold that my nose was freezing. My lungs were freezing. The more I walked, the farther the house became. It was difficult to lift a foot to walk. And the boot was sinking.

A glimmer in the house and smoke in the chimney. My stomach was growling, thinking of the warm food waiting for me.

By my side, a path with no snow. Cars went past, bikes went past, people went past. Even a turtle went past.

And I was there, pushing the snow.

‘Loved the game, Juju Bean, but I gotta go.’ Ray said.

Better late than never.

‘Now, go to bed, sweetie. Ray and I are going to talk a bit more.’

So I went to bed. And I was glad for that.

I had a dream in black and white.

I was a little baby and was waving my chubby

arms for someone to hold me.

Ju-Ju! Ju-Ju!, I kept saying.

Someone took me in their arms, but the face had

no feature, it was no one.