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Saudade

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Saudade

From the Portuguese; saw•'dah•djee; an untranslatable word defined as "A vague, constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot exist, a nostalgic longing for someone or something loved and then lost" (Sanders)

My Brazil story begins in awed fear, shadowed in grays, tight lips, and barked orders. We flew to São Paulo, Brazil, on the first anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attacks. We had no concrete reason to fear flying on that particular date, but I was only in third grade, and had read too many books, so I took it as an omen.

The first flight we took only carried us from home Memphis to Houston, neither terrifying nor adventurous. Seems a bit boring, actually, in the remembering.

We traipsed through the airports with a carry-on each, except for my mother, who wheeled the stroller containing the baby. This was the first flight of my life, and I sat alone, separated from my family by a random act of the ticketing office. In retrospect, I was probably not old enough to sit alone, not on a first flight with a destination like this, but I was the oldest, and so old enough. Someone else's mother explained that I couldn't use the tray table until we had reached a certain altitude, helped me buckle my seatbelt.

From Houston to São Paulo we suffered an agonizingly long flight delightfully fraught with the possibility of adventure, and then continued by car to Campinas.

The Lord had called my parents to be missionaries in Belém, Brazil, a destination as foreign and impossible to me as my beloved Narnia. But before Belém, a month in Campinas for language training, a mere four weeks for my parents to attempt fluency in a language as diametrically opposed to their ears and tongues as rattling kitchen cutlery. For as long as we were there, they never learned—they never had the time—and a mere trip to the grocery was shadowed by difficulties.

I dare say that I was not called to Belém—I was only along for the adventure. After all, I had no real choice in the matter, being only ten. I don't remember the announcement that we

were going, and I assume that I was only told once the decision had been made. Because of my age, I was allowed to miss out on the months of agonizing deliberation, of crying out to God, of waiting and listening before hearing the answer: Amazon Valley Academy, Belém, Brazil. My youth did not make the leaving easier, but I think it made the going more exciting. After only ten years, I had little to leave: family, yes, friends, yes, but I was homeschooled, and so carried my classmates, my teacher, even my classroom with me, which made it a little easier. I did not have the years of experience to fear the pain of separation, to understand the difference almost four thousand miles makes—the inability of phones, emails, even packages to replace being in the same room, the same time zone, the same country as the people who share your name. For the most part, I was spared any anxiety or fear, and only wanted to go on this great adventure.

We arrived in Belém, Brazil, in October of 2002, prepared for at least two years of missionary life, and we were late. The school semester had begun in August, but visas had kept us stuck in America, then stuck in Campinas, always stuck in the paperwork of serving the Lord when we needed to be rushing along to do His work. Dad walked into his classroom as Mr. Peña, science teacher, two months after his students had entered and begun the school year.

I don't think we looked the part of missionary family. Five very pale children under the age of eleven, the youngest sporting a sock on his hand to keep him from chewing the bandages that protected a scar stemming from a vacuum cleaner incident. I cringe when I think of how many things we brought with us, when I remember the suitcases piled to the ceiling in my ten-year-old vision. So glaringly American, as I remember it now. We collectively panicked at the sight of a tarantula waiting to welcome us to our new kitchen, and I wept when a horde of ants devoured the candy left in my desk drawer (in Brazil, all candy must be stored in the refrigerator). My mother, a saint in her own right, never got used to the frequent ant pilgrimage through her room. The sight of thousands of ants marching across her floor, her walls, even her bed, almost always drove her to tears regardless of how many times the ants made their pilgrimage. Only my father would have looked "at home" in the jungle of unreached people groups, pushing a canoe down the Amazon with a Gospel on his back, and only he was crippled by Brazil.

Looking back, I know Brazil was wonderful. My childhood was defined by that single year spent on the equator, a year filled with hot days, bikes, bare feet, friends from all over the

world. Everything before Brazil can barely be remembered, and everything after Brazil had to be compared to it.

For probably the only time in my life, we had a maid, beloved Dona Ero, because that was something you did as missionaries: Hire a maid, provide someone else's living, her salary so cheap it could hardly be considered an expense. I would never get used to the sight of her hanging up my underwear to dry on the clothesline, always mortified by the though that one of the high school boys would see it (not realizing at that age that they most definitely did not care).

Instead of snow angels, we dared each other to run bare foot through the fire ant hills that were two feet, sometimes three feet wide. We chased geckos through the houses, stepping on their tails so they would dash away tail-less, immune to our shrieks of delight. We grew tadpoles in the pool, watched a tarantula wasp kill a tarantula to lay its eggs in the corpse's stomach, and sister Ryan kissed a frog the size of her head, hoping for a prince to appear. The gardener brought us baby birds from the eaves, feeding them while he waited for their mother to appear, and I learned to knock beetles, moths, and even a cockroach once from my head as if they were nothing. We attempted to train the dog, Lottie, which we only had because everyone needed a guard dog. She never learned to guard, but she made an excellent Houdini, her escapes driving my father insane to the point of biting her ear "to earn her respect."

Our house, though bigger than any we've lived in since, had no air conditioning except for one hallowed room, where every important electronic device, book, and DVD was stored in an attempt to preserve them from the heat. If anyone was sick, the lucky sufferer earned the privilege of sleeping in the tiny cold room, but only then. To combat the oppressive heat of the equator, everyone slept with a fan at the end of their beds, the imitation wind blowing over us throughout the night and the droning noise drowning out the mysterious creatures that lurked outside.

Food, essential in any culture, was especially important in Brazil. Even today, my comfort food is rice and black beans, served by Dona Ero at every meal she made for us, though something is always missing without the Brazilian staple of *farofa*, a yellow powdery substance, to sprinkle on it. In Brazil we ate *jumbo* fruit we found on the side of the road, drank coconut milk fresh from the coconuts that someone's father was always willing to cut down with a machete for us, and savored açai popsicles before the fruit became a diet fad in the U.S. Plantains—not bananas—grew in our backyard, and fresh grilled pineapple was always the

requested dessert. I remember a fuzzy black bean that has no name now, a sweet treat pulled from a black, eel-looking fruit that grew on the trees next to the pool. Towards the end of our stay, we devoured Doritos as the only taste of America we could find, so much so that once we returned I couldn't look at a bag of them without feeling nauseated.

I cannot say that we assimilated, or ever even fit in. We lived on a missionary compound where even the non-Americans spoke English. We attended an American missionary school, which was missional because it provided an education for the children of missionaries and of Brazilians who wanted their students to learn in the always-revered English. Occasionally, we attended a Brazilian church, and I loathed the hours spent sitting on a hard, wooden bench, listening to a man drone on in a language not my own. I hated the kind, but inevitably condescending, efforts of the Brazilian children helping me through Sunday school, giving me answers and repeating phrases, as if the mere acting of saying it again, slowly, would translate. I learned no more than a few phrases in Portuguese, and even those are lost now. I can still sing the first line of "Happy Birthday" in Portuguese, but that helped me little then and even less now.

In Brazil I had more aunts and uncles than I could count, because every missionary became "Aunt" or "Uncle" in an attempt to recreate some sort of extended family for the missionary kids. I attended the same English-speaking school my father taught at, entering a classroom filled with missionary kids from various states and countries, the children of men and women called to Belém from all parts of the world. I experienced my first crush in Brazil, a puppy-like but furtively disguised devotion to Jonathan, a dark-eyed, curly-haired boy who had passed out and fallen in my lap one day during math (can you blame my crush? It seemed destined to my literary brain accustomed to reading of such romantic encounters). I willingly shared my crush with Claudia, my best friend and the first friend that I had to make for myself. Unlike most of my friends before Brazil, Claudia and I were not automatically friends because our parents were friends, or because we went to church together. Instead, we stuck to each other because we were the new missionaries, often the only ones in our class still confused by Brazil, and the only kids who couldn't speak Portuguese. After I left, she would stay in Brazil, later moving to the Canary Islands with her family while I slipped from the life of a missionary kid to an awkward American teen.

My Brazilian childhood was a happy childhood, despite the heat, the alternative Thanksgiving shared with strangers united only because of their American ties, and the

separation from extended family. In Brazil I loved and was loved, I cried, I grew, I learned, I matured, even as I would have in the States. I don't think I missed anything, really, at least not any of the important things. There is a definite gap in my knowledge of American culture from that period, but I doubt my education suffered too much by missing N*Sync (I'm not even sure how to spell it, but forgive me. I was in Brazil.).

I loved Brazil.

My parents had committed two years to the Lord's work in Brazil, but He only accepted one. Close to the end of our first year, Dad began showing signs of illness, mysterious symptoms that refused to go away. A persistent shaking, as if coming off a sugar high, is all I can remember. He was sent first to a Brazilian doctor, accompanied by a fellow missionary to translate, who diagnosed it as Parkinson's. Most thirty-five year old men don't get Parkinson's disease, so he was sent to more doctors for more tests, until he quickly reached the limit of his translator's capabilities and the short reaches of Brazilian medicine. The mission organization brought him back to America for testing in English and with first-world medicine, leaving my mother in Brazil with the five of us to wait.

"He will come back," the Mission Board promised. "We will figure out what's wrong."

After a month, he did come back, bringing American candy and DVDs and gifts with him, but only to leave again after two weeks. The tests were inconclusive, and so more were needed; more American doctors to be consulted with their American medicine. He left us to wait a little longer, waiting on him to get better, waiting on the Lord to work, waiting on the mission board to decide what to do with us: six stranded Americans in a foreign land.

One night, I went to spend the night at Claudia's new house, and Mom had told me that we were not moving back. Not yet. I slept in the hammock next to her bed, teased her brother, and laughed until the wee hours of the morning, not realizing these would be my last definitive Brazilian memories. Then I came home and found that suddenly we were going home—back to our real home. Sometime in the night, calls had been made, bags been packed, decisions finalized before I knew they must be considered.

It was more important to be together in America than it was to be in Brazil, because Brazil was not home. It was just a place we happened to have been.

Now when I travel I always say goodbye before I leave. Goodbye to the skyline, to the way the clouds look at sunset, to how the sun flickers through my window at four in the morning

because dawn comes so much earlier in a place like Wem, England, than in Southaven, Mississippi. Hugs and kisses, sometimes shared tears, with the people who have offered me their country, their love, their home. I make memories, take snapshots, and hide them away for later when I am missing this temporary dwelling, the reason for these passport stamps.

I do not remember saying goodbye to Brazil. I did not memorize the sun's path under the screen door, the way the trees waved outside my window, the smell of brush fires after a long day. We simply left.

The flights that carried us away were harder than the ones that brought us. We left early in the morning, only wanting to be gone rather than waiting for a more convenient departure time. My mother's friend travelled with us, helping her, temporarily acting as single mom, to wrangle five children and belongings through customs in two countries and through airport security in three different cities. We carried much less than before, having taken only what we could easily carry, leaving behind toys, books, clothes, memories, loves. Ty, only seven, carried a plastic cap gun strapped to his backpack through two airports until a large, cold woman demanded it be thrown away. The TSA did not care that his best friend had given it to him just before we left, passing it through the car window as we pulled away. They did not care what it symbolized to him as his best friend's most prized possession, only that it represented a plasticized symbol of terror to the rest of the world. Tate, only five, screamed through the long night flight, unable to wake from her nightmares, incapable of being silenced. A few rows ahead, I hunkered down in my own tears and pretended I did not know the screaming child, had no connection to the girl wreaking havoc on the rest of the plane's dreaming passengers.

At Memphis International Airport we were welcomed home by family, by strangers my parents knew, by friends I had forgotten.

Brazil was over.

With each passing year, Brazil becomes less and less a part of my life. At the time, my year in Brazil composed one tenth of my life, but at this writing it has been reduced to less than one twentieth. Eventually, it will be as little as one thirtieth, even perhaps one eightieth, and it is possible that I will spend more time in another country or other countries than I ever spent in Brazil. In my mind, it is an incomplete experience, my family now including four siblings who came after Brazil, who know nothing of the year we spent "roughing it." Most tragically, Brazil is marred by my father's mysterious illness that pulled us away from it, a part of my story that

has transcended Brazil as disease to continues to war within his body. We found that even American doctors do not guarantee a sure diagnosis, and while I cannot say with certainty that he has Parkinson's, I cannot say he does not. Just because we speak the same language as the doctors he now sees does not mean they understand us, or that we understand them.

I fear losing Brazil. Already I have forgotten the name of the man who came to our house and trimmed back the trees, the layout of the compound I roamed every day. My childhood memories are failing me, and I panic at the thought of the day when I will have forgotten them entirely.

Am I making this all up?

I must ask myself that as I write this, not trusting the memories of a ten-year-old, or her perspective, or her understanding. I have been forced to request details from my parents already—I could not even remember the first part of Brazil we landed in.

I still do not look the part of missionary kid. There is nothing to suggest Brazil about me, no mannerisms, no bracelets, tattoos or scars. I don't even have a Brazilian flag or map on my wall, even though a Union Jack hangs in my room after only a few visits to London. "I lived in Brazil for a year," I offer whenever an interesting fact is needed, and the words sound strange on my own tongue.

Little of Brazil is left in me. However, I stubbornly type "Brasil," knowing Word will angrily underline it in red and suggest the American "Brazil." I ask for "fAHnta" instead of the harsher, Americanized "Fanta," and sometimes "the States" slips out of my mouth when referring to America, confusing my American friends who don't understand that Brazil is also, technically, America. Other than these small things, there seems nothing Brazilian to permanently mark me.

On my saddest days, I am afraid that I never truly lived in Brazil. I was only passing through for a very long time. But those days I consider what my life would look like minus Brazil, and I realize the impact.

Without Brazil, my worldview would have been confined to my small American borders. I would not imagine another way of doing things, an un-American way. I would have no desire to travel, to see the world outside America, because by nature I am sedentary and complacent. Adventures carry the threat of change, and if not for Brazil, I would not understand that such

change could be good, or even better. Having gone to Brazil, I want to travel again, see more of God, His world, His creation, because in Brazil I learned that God is not American.

While writing these pages, I have cried, laughed, drug up and examined memories I thought I had permanently tucked away. As I grasp at these words, pounding at my keyboard in vain attempts to cement memory and understanding on the page, I wonder if this is closure. After eleven years, do I understand all the whys? Do I value my Brazilian year? Do I see its effects?

I left a piece of myself in Brazil, a small piece, because at ten I only had small pieces to give. But the piece is there, its absence permanently etched on my heart. I am learning that having such a hole is all right, and is possibly even more significant than having a piece that fits there perfectly.

I lived in Brazil for a year. But my Brazil story has not yet ended.

Work Cited

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