

ALMOND TREES

📖 (present)

There wasn't a cloud in the sky indicating that the day would be any different.

With the wind at my back, I pedaled to the port along the two kilometers of highway that cut across the island of Fernando de Noronha. Beyond the tourmaline color that covered the entire sky, joining the heavens and the sea in a single infinite plane, there was a distinct scent in the air. A remotely familiar perfume that I hadn't sensed for... well, a long time. For 188 years.

I passed one or two familiar faces. They waved and I waved back, just like I do every day. I parked my bike close to the freezer. A new litter of kittens meowed, sensing the smell of fish that came from within. Their unsteady legs barely supported their tiny bodies. I got the sandwich out of my backpack that I hadn't had time to eat. When I tossed it to the closest kitten, a rusty colored one with eyes like a human's, he thanked me and shared it with his brothers and sisters.

I caught sight of Belinha inside the office, attending to a group of tourists, and then continued to the anchorage. The sun had already risen a degree or two on its way high into the sky since I had left home.

It was seven in the morning when I began preparing the schooner for the group's arrival: I wiped the sea spray off the flat surfaces; separated out the slightly moldy life vests; checked the engine and the drink stock and once again smelled the scent that came from a distant place on the island and came to rest deep inside me. Yes, it was her perfume.

I saw Marujo, my employee, coming up to the anchorage with the tourists. There were twenty three in all. I noted a mother with a handicapped child, a couple in a fight and a photographer with her loyal assistant, who looked more like a bird than anything else: teeth sticking out in the front and beady eyes lost in the excess morning sun. The photographer, hidden under a wide-brimmed hat and a giant camera, was the owner of that perfume.

When it came time for them to board the boat, our eyes met, not with shyness, but with mutual curiosity. I touched her arm to help her onto the boat and felt every one of her pores close.

That was when I saw her face. She had sharp features, as if she was drawn in pencil – the woman was without a doubt designed by Picasso. At the same time, she had the most impressive and familiar features in the world. Her eyes were as deep as the

ocean and at the same time shallow and sweet across her face. Her long, golden blond hair embraced her body.

The beauty of that woman whose scent preceded her left me speechless. In my imperfect memory, I couldn't remember if that face were absolutely original or if it was the undecipherable face of Leah.

I navigated the schooner to the Bay of Dolphins, where we waited in silence for them to begin their dance. But my gaze didn't drift from its main focus: the photographer, hidden behind her own picture frame, more interested in seeing than being seen. I went to the second deck where she clicked away and heard, despite the prevailing silence, my heart beat in rhythm with the dolphins.

Without asking, she took some pictures of me. She lifted the brim of her hat and smiled.

— Do you mind?

We looked at each other, embarrassed. It was as if we'd known each other forever and I could see, in that fraction of a second, a future for us.

Certain that the anxiety, loneliness and excessive night dives had been eating away at my insides for quite some time, and that the first female that looked my way would make my heart spin. But that exuberant woman took me back into the past with just her scent.

— Joaquim? — she asked, with an unnerving intimacy in her voice.

I was surprised, how did she know my name? Truth be told, I had introduced myself to the group at the beginning of the tour - but what made her retain that piece of insignificant information?

— Will you take my picture? — She smiled again and her smile filled my heart inexplicably. I forced my memory a bit more. It insisted in its uncertainty by blurring out the stored memory of that possible face as if were a cataract.

I took the picture. I wanted to take one with my cell phone too, to try to recover her features later, but I didn't have the guts to ask. She sat next to me, thanked me with a long and precise look and clicked away in the direction of the Morro do Leão Island.

— Your first time on the island? — I dared.

She shook her head no.

— It's been a long time... — And she smiled without fear of using up all of her happiness, like someone who kept a lot of it around to use on ordinary occasions just

like this one. — Do you dive at night? — And she finally avoided my look, as if, in the blink of an eye, her secret identity were at the point of being discovered.

— I do — it was all I managed to say.

— And if I want to take pictures, is it possible?

— I think today's going to be good to dive at Ressurreta, it's just going to depend on if there's a group or not.

— And if there's no group? Do you do individual dives? — she asked, without a hint of an ulterior motive in her voice, just that fatal combination of perfume and her smile.

— Sure, we can work it out. Does your friend not want to go?

— She's my assistant, but the poor thing — and she pointed to the girl that was on the first deck, greener than moss —, she gets seasick easily, there's no way she can handle it.

We laughed and then fell silent, probably nervous. And then, without warning, she took a picture of the two of us where my fascination and her perfume would most certainly be later revealed.

— Do you mind?

— No, but I will want a copy...

— It's a deal — was all she would say.

— What's your name?

— Sylvia. — Could Sylvia be another way to say Leah?

— Are you a professional photographer?

She nodded her head and took advantage of the chance to ask:

— Can I go alone? With you?

I imagined the scene in my head right away: she and I in a night dive, alone, my heart in my throat, fighting to allow the indispensable oxygen to get by, and her smiling and transforming the simplest things into poetry in the middle of the ocean's silence.

In the mean time, her assistant made a cry for help and, without further ado, Sylvia descend went down to the first deck. When I turned to give her a response, I only saw her long hair balancing back and forth as she went down the stairs. Since I was so confused at the moment, I had no way to go after her. I saw a couple all tangled up in the Bay of Sancho, took a deep breath and descended.

I helped the seasick assistant by laying her on the ground on her stomach. Marujo headed to Ponta da Sapata and I went to the bow to explain about the place. I was embarrassed, not because of the other 22 tourists looking at me, but because she was avoiding my eye. I swallowed a few words, which I had to repeat, and that's when I noticed the sweat beading up on the palms of my hands, which were as full of maps as the Sapata bay itself.

When I finished talking, my only thought was that I needed to at least see her again. I grabbed my office's business card and wrote a cell phone number on the back.

I put it in my pocket, gutless, like a silly boy who is fascinated by the prettiest kite in the sky, who only wants it because it reminds him of his first kite.

We didn't cross smiles or eyes until we stopped at the Praia da Biboca to hear the lion's roar, as usual. Of all the tourists on the boat, Sylvia had the most natural reaction of them all, as if that lion that roared, captive in the volcanic cavern, was an old friend.

Shortly afterwards we arrived in port. Overtaken by an unprecedented cowardice, I decided not to disembark the tourists, instead hiding to the pilot house and letting Marujo carry out the task with the port employees. I didn't even raise my eyes to see Sylvia, I feared her gaze, feared what she represented to me. I crumpled up the card in my pocket, annoyed.

I stayed on the boat for another two hours trying to recover her scent, feeling the hard wood where she was sitting, following her lost smile through the gusts of wind. As much as I hated to admit it, one thing was clear: Sylvia had opened my heart.

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Upon leaving the anchorage, a surprise: the little rusty colored cat was waiting for me. He rubbed my leg and wrapped himself around it. I picked him up and decided to change his destiny. I gave him the name Fire. I thought, for just a moment, that he could calm me with respect to that perfume that had crossed my path earlier. I thought so.

I had never, ever, throughout my long and abundant life, had a pet. Since I was young, I learned from my father to simplify things: a few friends, good books and only one woman at a time. Eat and drink until satisfied. A peaceful and complete life. That's not exactly how it worked out, but I saved pieces of that first lesson, so much so that the life that I had led since arriving on Fernando de Noronha more than a decade earlier, in May of 2001, followed that path.

That's when I started over, started my seventh life cycle from scratch. I opened a small tourist agency with the suggestive name of Falling Star and left behind the worn out and repressed life I led in São Paulo. I learned to contemplate the simple and essential things on that island, which was my beginning and had to be, in a certain way, at a certain specific point in time, my end.

When people asked me where I was from, I didn't know how to respond. I said I was a man of the world, hoping that it was geographic enough to place me some place on the face of the Earth. I really didn't believe I was from anywhere, that I was a man lost in space and time.

Only after returning to the magical island did I discover that I did belong someplace. I was of the sea, I was of that island and, no matter how hard I tried to erase my past, it was as present in me as the foam in the waves.

For several years in a row, I thought my fight was only against time: that which took refuge in me and stopped. I've been the same age for many years now, decades that I can't count on both hands: I'm 27 years old, lived to exhaustion. I was born in 1797 and grew up normally until 1824. From then on, every year my body completed the same 27 years old, without ever getting any older and without being able to perpetuate through the generations.

Throughout my life cycles, I had many women. But I had only one true love. Leah. I haven't seen her since the year 1824 was engraved in every cell of my body. From time to time, she appeared stamped into another woman. Since I couldn't remember the details of her face, I reinvented her features, confusing them with those of the halfhearted loves and disposable passions. I was always armed with the constant hope of finding her; or forgetting her.

When I picked up the cat, my fear and fascination gave way to the knowledge that, in Sylvia's smile, I had discovered Leah's. I walked to the office, where I told Belinha that if anybody asked about the night trip, that she could confirm it and give them my cell phone number.

I spent the rest of the day checking to see if the phone had enough signal to receive the long-awaited phone call from Belinha, which never came. At night, already with a silly dismay at heart, I left home and went to wait for nobody at the anchorage.

I must have stayed there, inside the schooner, maybe for two hours until I was hungry enough to leave and give up. I still held out hope that there was a possibility of

finding her at the Cachorro, the only night spot on the island. I left in my buggy as if I wasn't in a hurry, but arrived as fast as I could.

But neither she nor her perfume were there. I sat down with Tião, a tall and thin island resident that apnea dived. He was heading back to the sea.

— It's crazy down there right now. It's transparent – he exclaimed, and that pulled me in, his words pulled me to the ocean. I didn't even manage to choke down the rest of the pizza I'd ordered and I didn't wait for the dancing.

I went straight back to the port and started up the schooner in a hurry. I put on my wetsuit, checked the oxygen and set out for Ressureta. Underwater was the only place where I felt at peace. Where my heart managed to capture the ocean rhythm and fill itself with calm.

📖 (past)

The year of 1824 was special. Not only for everything that happened in my life, but for what I experienced on the island of Fernando de Noronha. It was when we were told about Brazil's independence, which had happened two years earlier.

I still remember the cargo ship *Bandurra* that was approaching the port. Its commander, a man with a permanently surprised look on his face, was named José Bernardo Salgueiro and he came in nervously because that wasn't his destination. He'd made an "emergency stop". When we asked what was the emergency, he yelled, spitting every which way, that he'd seen, waving from the Forte dos Remédios, a flag of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and Algarve.

My colleagues and I, some construction workers and a group of indians and slaves, were speechless and didn't understand what he was talking about.

— But what would be the problem with that, commander? — I dared.

— A true provocation to the Empire! — he exclaimed, to everyone's amazement.

Empire? There was a mutiny! Empire! Brazil was finally free!

— Finally, no! — José Bernardo growled —, it's been an Empire for two years now! — That being said, the commander made his own proclamation and used, for lack of another, the already useless flag and proclaimed Pedro I our emperor.

I found out that the Arsenal da Corte, for which I worked, had already changed names: Imperial Arsenal of the Navy. There was also talk of a Constitution on the way.

It was impressive how Fernando de Noronha, an island outside the axis of space and time, almost like an appendage lost in the invisible Bermuda Triangle, had taken two whole years to find out about Brazil's independence. We were still subordinate, mentally and officially, to the Portuguese power.

And that was the news that made me decide to leave there. The world was a big place, I had been on the island almost four years and, despite all of its natural beauty and living a relatively peaceful life, I needed to go out into the world, find a woman, make a family.

I thought: I'm going to make my escape, I'm already 27 years old, I made it to the title of first constructor of the Arsenal, I need to move forward.

Before finding out about the independence, I had plans to go straight to England, where I would study naval engineering. The courses that I'd already taken in Rio de Janeiro didn't make me an engineer, as I longed to be. To have studied geometry and design was fundamental, but there was still so much more to learn, above all else the terms of theory since I already knew how to make several things work in practice.

Another possibility, completely different from going to England, had now opened itself: I could return to Rio de Janeiro and grow together with the blooming empire. It would also be good to see my family again, since I hadn't seen them since I left the capital six years ago to work at the naval repair center in Salvador – from where I went straight to Fernando de Noronha, to command my own naval center.

With the arrival of the *Bandurra* on the island, we were informed of all the progress that Brazil was undergoing. I heard about the doubling of the warship fleet that, if I wasn't mistaken, had only 38 vessels. The seamen of the *Bandurra* gave conflicting reports, one said ninety; another, 96; but the lowest speculation was eighty warships, with more than six hundred cannons onboard! To make things even better, the old cannons with smooth bores were being substituted with rifled bores, with a greater range and precision. New repair yards were popping up along the coast, most of all in the capital and in Salvador, with the objective of quick modernization of the fleet. The scene appeared too good to be true for me to remain on an island that took two years to find out about the new reality.

At the end of that day, in an agitation that I'd never felt before, I knew that nothing would ever be the same. I wasn't tasting the whiskey that we were drinking to commemorate, but that flavor that we rarely taste and that we never forget: freedom.

In October of that same year that we found out about Brazil's independence, another ship pulled into the port of Fernando de Noronha, the *D. Januária*, a ship that was returning to Lisbon with some Portuguese families that, just like their crown, didn't recognize the colony's independence.

After a violent storm, the six hundred-ton ship had a broken mast and two ripped sails, and they'd also lost part of their supplies. Their commander, Captain Francisco Eugênio Porto, was relieved to see the island and anchored close to the repair post. I was in charge of the repairs and worked with my team worked around the clock already on the first day. I knew that in less than five days it would be impossible to finish the service, so I suggested that the captain take on stores of manioc, corn and beans, grown on the island by the indians.

At the end of the day, the captain invited me to dinner and I, as etiquette required, accepted. I arrived on the ship dressed the part, with my best lace collared shirt, already a little yellowed, a jacket belted at the waste with a dark green velvet sash and black pants. I didn't have time to shine my work boots and the top hat also needed sewing. A man that lived for years on an island couldn't be expected to follow Napoleonic fashion or use wigs.

I was well received and the banquet was the most impressive that I've ever seen. The Portuguese insisted on the best: shined silver, well-dressed staff, food cooked in olive oil and an unending festival of desserts. You could quickly tell that the crew of that ship didn't approve of the recently formed Brazilian Empire.

When I crossed the ship's party room, lit by dozens of candlesticks, I was immediately attracted to a perfume that filled my senses before I even found its owner. And then the only thing I saw was Leah. She was wearing a white silk dress with the waste slightly marked by a yellow sash tied at the back. The wide sleeves had the same details as the hem that dragged the ground. Her hair was pinned up, with the curls dangling from high above like flowers hanging from a cherry tree, which left her neck free for more detailed observation. The dangling earrings were certainly made of precious stones. But what really shined were her blue eyes, keepers of deep secrets.

Leah was the most beautiful women I'd ever seen. Of course, after spending years on an island with only men, all the women appeared magnificent to me. But Leah was more than that: perfect, she knew how to move through the party room and I had to feign well so that those present didn't notice my fascination with her. She was sixteen years old and had the soul of a woman.

We were introduced almost immediately: Leah was captain Francisco's daughter. Born in Brazil, she was going to Lisbon for the first time, where her marriage to the son of the second marquis of Borba – that they hoped would succeed to the title or something similar – had been arranged. It was an extraordinary feat that the captain had managed to marry his daughter, a commoner, to royalty.

The attraction I felt for Leah was so strong that it crossed my mind to ask the captain if I could continue with them to Lisbon. Worst case scenario, I thought, was that from there I would continue to London. In the best case scenario, who knows, maybe I would arrange for a wife...

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This is how it happened: dinner was over, with all the necessary pomp. We talked with the captain about the death of Napoleon, the audacity of Pedro I in proclaiming independence and of the new Constitution on its way. The night passed by quickly, but Leah and I didn't manage to take our eyes off each other. It was genuine, strong and mutual.

Leah and her sisters excused themselves and left the ship for Vila dos Remédios, where they were staying. The captain and I, with more than a dozen Portuguese military personnel and Brazilian colleagues, went directly to the upper deck where we smoked Cuban cigars offered by a nobleman. Someone commented about a ship full of Germans named *Argo* in port at Rio de Janeiro. And the others arrived.

- The doors are open for the immigrants of the world, Brazil will turn into no mans' land - said the irritated captain.

I took advantage of the moment:

- Captain, I need to get to Lisbon. I'd like to know if there's a place for me on the *D. Januária*. - And I took a drink of the Port wine.

I couldn't tell the Portuguese nationalist that what I really wanted was to study naval engineering in England. There was a terrible ill will between the two powers, especially after the English protection treaty signed in 1810 that provided concessions to the British in Brazil. Above all else, it was well-known that they only paid fifteen percent in taxes, while Brazilians and Portuguese had to pay more.

The captain finished his glass and looked me over curiously, with a certain hope in his stare:

— Do you mean to tell me you're against the Independence?

I hesitated, but ended up responding what he wanted to hear. After all, that ride was worth a little white lie.

— There's nothing for me in the capital of the new Empire. I don't know how it is without the Portuguese crown, I just know that I don't want to find out - I said, regretting it at the same time because I was betraying my nation.

Captain Francisco was happy and gave me a pat on the back. He then ordered the slaves to fill the glasses with more Port wine and lit another cigar, which he exhaled in my direction.

— You're one of us and you'll come with us. After all, having a construction worker onboard isn't bad at all for a captain.

Two hours later I left the ship by dinghy, head over heels after all the fine alcohol served there, but also because of the new future that awaited me. I walked the narrow anchorage to Tartuffe, my horse, who was sleeping standing up. I tried to mount the saddle three times, and only on the fourth did I manage to throw my leg over enough to get on. Tartuffe laughed at me and started to trot away. A little bit ahead, I heard a sound that made me stop.

It was Leah. Dressed in a nightgown, she quickly mounted the horse and settled in behind me before I could even react. Then she sweetly asked me, with those soft, pink lips:

— Get me out of here, even if for only a few hours.

I was startled, but I was also too drunk not to obey. After all, that was the first time I'd seen a woman in a nightgown on that island. We galloped far away and Leah held me tight around the waist.

📖 (end of the chapter)

It was late afternoon when I opened my eyes in my room, in Vila dos Remédios. I felt my burnt face, remembering the events that led up to my expulsion from the *D. Januária*, but I had no doubt: I'd go after Leah, whatever it cost.

Zeinho, a slave that worked in the big house, was at my side, wetting my forehead.

— Sir, you finally woke up!

I quickly jumped up in bed and my voice cracked:

— And the *D. Januária*, where is she?

— The ship left early, as soon as you were thrown out – he explained, wetting the clean cloth again in the silver basin.

— Left? What do you mean, left? And Leah?

Zezinho shrugged. A smart slave knew that keeping his mouth shut was best.

— I'm going to change the water. Would you like a cachaça?

I nodded, maybe a cachaça would give me back my ideas, maybe it would calm my inner confusion or at least give me the courage to face the truth: Leah was gone and my possibility to go to Europe was gone too.

I spilled the first shot of the drink. Zezinho served a second.

— I think maybe you should take a dip in the ocean.

— Why?

— That which stings, cures, sir – he said, referring to the wounds that I couldn't see on my face.

It still took me ten minutes to leave the bedroom. Tartuffe was tied to the leafy fig tree and was happy to see me again: he smiled at me.

I hugged my horse. Without thinking, we galloped to the Praia do Bode, where my last encounter with Leah last night left our impressions in the sand.

A knot rose in my throat when I saw a wilted plant laying there. It was a sign of her, of her absence, of our love, of all the things that time had already taken from me and would probably not bring back.

I shed my clothes and entered the warm water of the Bode. The waves were soft. For a while, I imagined myself climbing the Morro do Pico to sight the *D. Januária*. I couldn't reach it, it would be torture and, in those circumstances, the chances of me throwing myself in a blind flight into the sea were good.

I let the waves take me on their path. I imagined myself as in the painting of the young revolutionary Marat, murdered in his own bathtub. Head hung to one side; heart stopped on the other, more dead than death itself. In his hands, he held the letter that he was writing before being murdered. My letter, which I couldn't give to the commander, lay folded in my pants pocket.

I returned to the sand where I sadly watched the sunset. The wounds didn't sting: my inner flesh was a fresher wound, burning. I rested my head and saw Venus rise high in the sky. I thought about Leah's delicacy, thought about how she must hate me for not having followed the plan. I thought that I'd been a coward and selfish, that I

was more interested in ensuring my escape from the island than in our relationship. I would have been happy, very happy, anywhere, as long as she was by my side.

Finally, I let my eyes close and only felt the altered breathing that overtook me, filling and emptying my lungs, pumping life into me. I wanted to die.

And it was then, full of ideas and fluids that I slept, still holding the wilted plant in my hands as if were the last – the only – piece of Leah that I could have.

I dreamed that she awoke me, kissing my face. She was illuminated and happy. She said: “Things worked out just as planned, my dear, but only in a different way.”

In the dream, she put my head in her lap and her dress dripped with salt water.

It was the sensation of the water that woke me. And I saw that the dream was real; opened my eyes and it wasn't just a voice: Leah was there caressing my face.

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After I was expelled from *D. Januária*, Leah had locked herself in her cabin and said she wouldn't come out for three days. She'd exploded with her father and threw a fan at Mr. Diego's forehead. But she counted on her sisters to contrive an escape plan.

With the ship relatively close to the port, Leah dived into the sea and swam the opposite way.

— I've been secretly practicing swimming — she revealed, almost proud. — I knew it would really help me out some day — she completed.

She ended up exactly on the Praia do Bode, and there she stayed, hidden and resting until the moment when Venus rose in the sky.

That was all she said, nothing more. I was so sleepy that I didn't really understand what was happening.

Leah seemed like a kind of Joan of Arc; her courage surprised me. She kissed me with salt on her lips, a different kind of kiss, decisive, and when I realized what was happening, we were naked in the ocean. I saw how our love was great and strong and, naively, I didn't see and much less feared borders.

Her skin flowed like oil through my hands – and nevertheless, I managed to hold onto it. There was a necessity so great between us that we made love not as two people that loved each other; not as Joaquim and Leah; but as in the dance of a hummingbird and its nectar flower. If she lost her virginity in my arms, I became a man in that instant.

In the ocean, the waves swept by us still in silence. The sand on the bottom held our feet. My eyes were closed, I believe Leah's were too, when a light greater than

the sun roused us. The radiance forced our eyelids open, but when we really saw what was taking shape on the dark horizon, we weren't sure if it was real.

A star fell from the sky into the ocean. A falling star, perhaps. A travelling star, without a doubt. A star that had become tired of being suspended in the infinite sky, longing for a perfect dive to the depths of the ocean. A star without a defined size: the closer it came, the smaller it got.

This magic star fell at our side, provoking a silent brightness in the water, a scary explosion under our world.

Leah clung to me terrified. The light lasted long and incomprehensible seconds. For that moment, it was possible to see everything that was under the ocean: the sky was black; the ocean, fluorescent, shone more than the great star.

Together, we looked down and saw schools of fish shining like sequins thrown into the wind. Algae, green turtles, reef sharks, manta rays, forest-colored morays, elongated octopus, schools of scared lobsters, flying fish. Sole fish, trumpet fish, angelfish, perch, salmon and puffer fish shared that secret with us.

The sea transformed itself, solid, into an invisible web of algae, touching our skin without burning it. Despite the numbness in our bodies, we groped our way back to the sand, which was hot as if the midnight sun were burning.

What we saw that night was the bizarre story of a suicide star that preferred death in the sea to living in the sky. We never had time to talk about it. We dove underwater to try to see the star, but it went out, transforming itself into a starfish and bringing back the dark of the night. We were silent, not without words, but without voice. We also became blind, anesthetized, deaf and without air. All of our senses were smothered with the death of that star.

Something had changed, had affected us. Something of an unspeakable magnitude. We cried together, embraced, for something that we couldn't describe at that moment. The sky became dark again as if everything had been snuffed out in a starry fight and I only managed to see the brightness of Leah's gaze.

I felt my numb body and I think she did too, because we leaned against each other and slept in the sand, without time to understand that a type of energy had affected us, that the magic star had immortalized us, forever.