



THAT SWEET SENSE OF SADNESS

For journalist Olivia Gagan, returning to the neighborhood in London, UK, where she'd once lived and worked left her with feelings of nostalgia and longing. The Portuguese have a word for it: 'saudade'.

I recently visited the first place I had lived in London, UK. It's a neighborhood called Whitechapel, in the East End of the city. It's home to a large Bengali community, and has a busy road with a major hospital, subway station, and hundreds of shops and restaurants. Booming and brash, this street teems with life 24/7.

Back when I lived there, I used to get up at 4:50 a.m. every day. Half-asleep, I'd slip on my sneakers to walk one-and-a-half miles (just under two-and-a-half kilometers) down this road to open the café where I worked as a waitress. Whitechapel High Street has a street market, and at dawn, I'd weave through traders setting up their stands of fish and clothes and herbs.

The air always smelled of coriander. This developed into a more full-bodied scent of curry as you approached Brick Lane to the right, a narrow street famous for almost every building being a curry house. I'd pass the same newspaper stand every day, and the headlines would briefly flash past my eyes as I walked. Seasons went by: I walked in leaves, I walked in snow and, as summer arrived, I walked in slowly brightening morning light.

GLASS TOWER

When I returned this year, nearly a decade had passed. It had changed a great deal: the people and the buses still rolled endlessly down the street, but the area had become sleeker, more gentrified, more

upmarket. Funky little coffee spots now occupy the spaces where the hole-in-the-wall newsagents and Indian candy shops used to be. New and wildly expensive apartment blocks have replaced dusty, dirty Victorian warehouses.

I noticed these things while wobbling on a chair outside a coffee stand, trying to discreetly wrestle a pair of heels onto my feet. I didn't have much time to think about all these transformations: I was in a rush to get to a meeting. I had to impress a new potential client who worked on the top floor of a gleaming glass tower that didn't even exist when I had lived in the neighborhood, and I forgot my sense of nostalgia as soon as I walked into this fancy office.

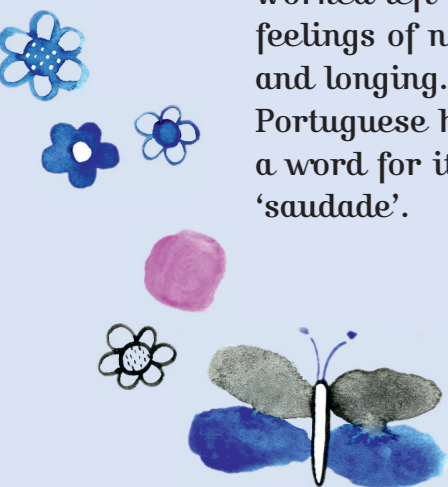
But when the client later took me on a tour to admire the views from the top of the building, I was overcome with a wave of a very specific emotion. Looking down at the street, separated from it by a thick sheet of glass, tears suddenly started to well up in my eyes. It felt like getting hit with an intoxicating memory—with a deep aftertaste of sadness. It was a strange feeling. A longing for something, a place, a time, along with the strong sense that what I was missing had gone, that I couldn't go back. Everything had changed.

ROSE-TINTED GLASSES

It was such a distinct, bittersweet sensation that I kept thinking about it in the days that followed. I had

rarely thought about that street in the years after I left. But when I went back, I was flooded with feeling. What was it all about? It was such a strong emotion—a very specific ache—that I felt sure other people must have felt it, too. It couldn't only be me. I tried to explain it to a friend who had spent time there too back then, and was met with a laugh. "It's just nostalgia!" he said. "Looking at the past with rose-tinted glasses." And yet, none of his explanations quite rang true.

I couldn't find a name for the emotion, until I remembered a word I'd heard once somewhere: *saudade*. It's a Portuguese word that doesn't have a direct equivalent in other languages. Try entering the word into



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'SAUDADE ALSO HAS A POSITIVE MEANING—OF GRATITUDE FOR HAVING HAD THE EXPERIENCE YOU NOW REMEMBER'

Google Translate and it offers back the word 'missing'. *Saudade*, as I found out, is notoriously difficult to translate. It means 'nostalgia', 'longing', 'a reminder of a person or a place that is missing or cannot be reached again'. Here's a better definition, from the Portuguese dictionary *Houaiss*: *Sentimento mais ou menos melancólico de incompletude, ligado pela memória a situações de privação da presença de alguém ou de algo, de afastamento de um lugar ou de uma coisa, ou à ausência de certas experiências e determinados prazeres já vividos...*

Translated, this means something like: 'A more or less melancholy feeling of incompleteness, linked by memory to situations of deprivation of the presence of someone or something, the removal of a place or a thing, or the absence of certain experiences and pleasures already lived'. See? It's a hard emotion to describe. But once you've felt it, you know what it means. I expect most of us have felt a small tug at the heart when unexpectedly being confronted with a person or a place from the past: bumping into an old boyfriend, perhaps, or smelling a perfume a relative used to wear, or hearing a song you loved as a teenager. *Saudade* can be provoked

by many different things. The key thing is, it's usually something you can't touch or access again. And while the feeling is strongly associated with melancholy, it also has a positive meaning—of gratitude for having had the experience you now remember. A sweet, complicated kind of sadness.

A PAINFUL TUG

Saudade is described as the national spirit of Portugal and Brazil, and has inspired countless songs, artists and books. It's the emotion at the heart of the Portuguese tradition of *fado*, a melancholic, guitar-based style of music. Portuguese singer and actress Amália Rodrigues, who was known as the 'Queen of Fado', is strongly associated with *saudade*. So well-loved was Rodrigues for her songs, that three days' of national mourning were declared in Portugal and she was given a state funeral when she died in 1999. Countless other Portuguese artists have tried to describe this feeling in novels, poetry, painting and film.

Of course, we're all human and wherever we are, we all have access to the same spectrum of human emotions. So why is *saudade* so unique to the Portuguese language? And is it just a lazy stereotype of

Portuguese-speaking countries? I message a friend, Rosie, who spent a year living in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to ask what the word means to her, and if the spirit of *saudade* really does filter into everyday life in the country. '*Saudade* is a huge part of Brazilian culture,' she writes back. 'It must be one of the hardest words to translate in the world.' She now lives back in Europe, but often talks about how happy her time in Rio was, and how much she identified with the way of life. "I feel *saudade* for Brazil every day," she says.

This started me thinking about how important and formative places can be to us, whether we realize it or not at the time. Feeling a painful tug when you think of a house, street or town where you used to live is a very *saudade* emotion. In fact, it is possibly part of the origin of the word. Some academics argue the word emerged to describe the longing experienced by those left behind by Portuguese explorers and sailors in the 15th century, many of whom would never return, or the feelings of those who set sail and left Portugal knowing there was likely no way back to their homeland.

Another common definition of *saudade* is 'the love that remains'. Australian musician Nick Cave's

attempt to describe it is: "We all experience within us what the Portuguese call '*saudade*', an inexplicable longing, an unnamed and enigmatic yearning of the soul, and it is this feeling that lives in the realms of imagination and inspiration, and is the breeding ground for the sad song, for the love song".

LOST LOVE

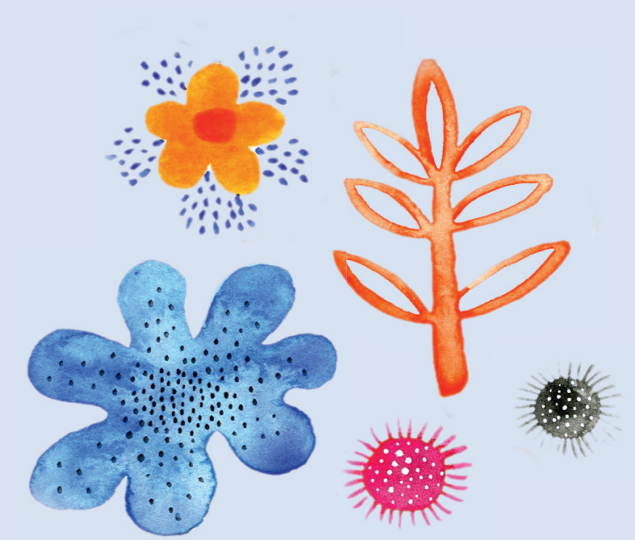
Ah, love. That might have something to do with it, too. I can't in all honesty say I loved, in the romantic sense of the word, that period in my early twenties in Whitechapel. I was living in a cold, shoddy apartment, I was broke and I was desperate for a better job. I had little idea what I was doing and where I was going. But on the other hand, I was also around friends; I fell in love for the first time during that period and the opportunities I had to shape my life felt endless. Maybe these things were what prompted those tears to spring up when I returned years later. I ask Dr. Katherine Shear, professor of psychiatry at Columbia University in New York, US, about her understanding of what triggers *saudade*. "*Saudade* isn't one emotion exactly," she says. "It's a complex emotional experience that contains within it the various mix of feelings that a person has about

someone or something who has been or who still is very important to them, but is no longer in their life. It doesn't always refer to someone who has died. It can refer to various kinds of loss, too: a lost romantic relationship or a lost place." I ask her why it is such a potent emotion. "It's a feeling that you have when moving around a world where you're noticing the absence of someone or something that you loved," she says. "You're living in the world with the presence of absence. I think that can be very evocative. It's a big emotion to feel."

THAT YOUNG GIRL

My time in Whitechapel only lasted eighteen months or so. I eventually found another job and went to live in another part of town. I moved on. But the images, sounds and experiences of that place got filed away in my memory, in a box labeled: 'You, aged 22'. And when that box was opened, just for a second, in the present, *saudade* emerged.

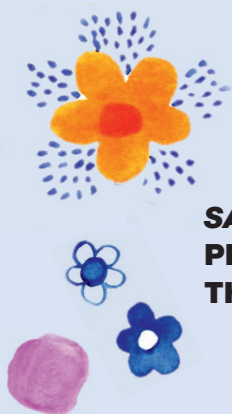
Perhaps I experienced *saudade* because in that moment, my brain recognized that, just like the neighborhood I'd lived in, I had changed, too. In the present, I was a groomed, confident, smiling woman running my own business; I was completely different from the



ON THE SCREEN

In the 2012 Brazilian movie 'Elena', the eponymous main character leaves behind the military dictatorship and her little sister, Petra, in Brazil, and goes to New York, US, to pursue her dream of becoming an actress. Twenty years later, Petra, who was born when Elena was thirteen, goes to New York in search of her sister. All she has to go on are a few bits of film footage, newspaper cuttings, a diary and letters. Nevertheless, she hopes to find Elena. But things don't go quite as she had hoped...





**SAUDADE IS SOMETHING THAT
PEOPLE CAN'T AVOID FEELING IF
THEY CARE ABOUT SOMETHING'**

younger girl pounding the street below a few years earlier, who had no clue where she was going. And yet in many ways, I was still the same.

I don't wish I was back in that time. I don't have to wake up at 4:50 a.m. every morning, for starters. Things are, in many ways, much better now: I'm older and, I hope, a little bit wiser. I have more. But my visit to that place reminded me that life does indeed move forward—that we can't stay in one place or state of mind forever.

Dr. Shear says we are all likely to experience this unique emotion at some point. "*Saudade* is something that people can't avoid feeling if they care about something. It could be something about your childhood you care about, a neighborhood you care about, a period of time in your life, something you used to do—it's endless, really. But then you can't avoid confronting those things, I don't think. It's a shared human experience."

MANAGEABLE GRIEF

The main thing I've taken from my brief investigation into *saudade* is to enjoy what I'm seeing and doing

and the people I'm with in the moment, because these things are transient, and the time will pass. And while, in one sense remembering something that is lost *is* sad, in other ways it's a reminder of how lucky I am to still be here and to have such rich memories to reflect on. Most of us avoid feeling sad because, well, who wants to feel that? But to me, *saudade* seems like a mellow, manageable kind of grief. It means that you have loved something. Isn't that to be celebrated? Feeling *saudade* is a reminder, in a strange way, that you have lived.

I put this theory to Dr. Shear, and she agrees. "*Saudade* is not a deeply painful grief—there's pain in it, sure, but there's also love and beauty and meaningfulness. You're left with positives, too. And that's life, right?" ●

'SAUDADE' SONGS

- * 'Fado Da Saudade',
Amália Rodrigues
- * 'Saudade' (Longing),
Almeida Júnior
- * 'Chega de Saudade',
João Gilberto
- * 'Remember',
Luciana Souza

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