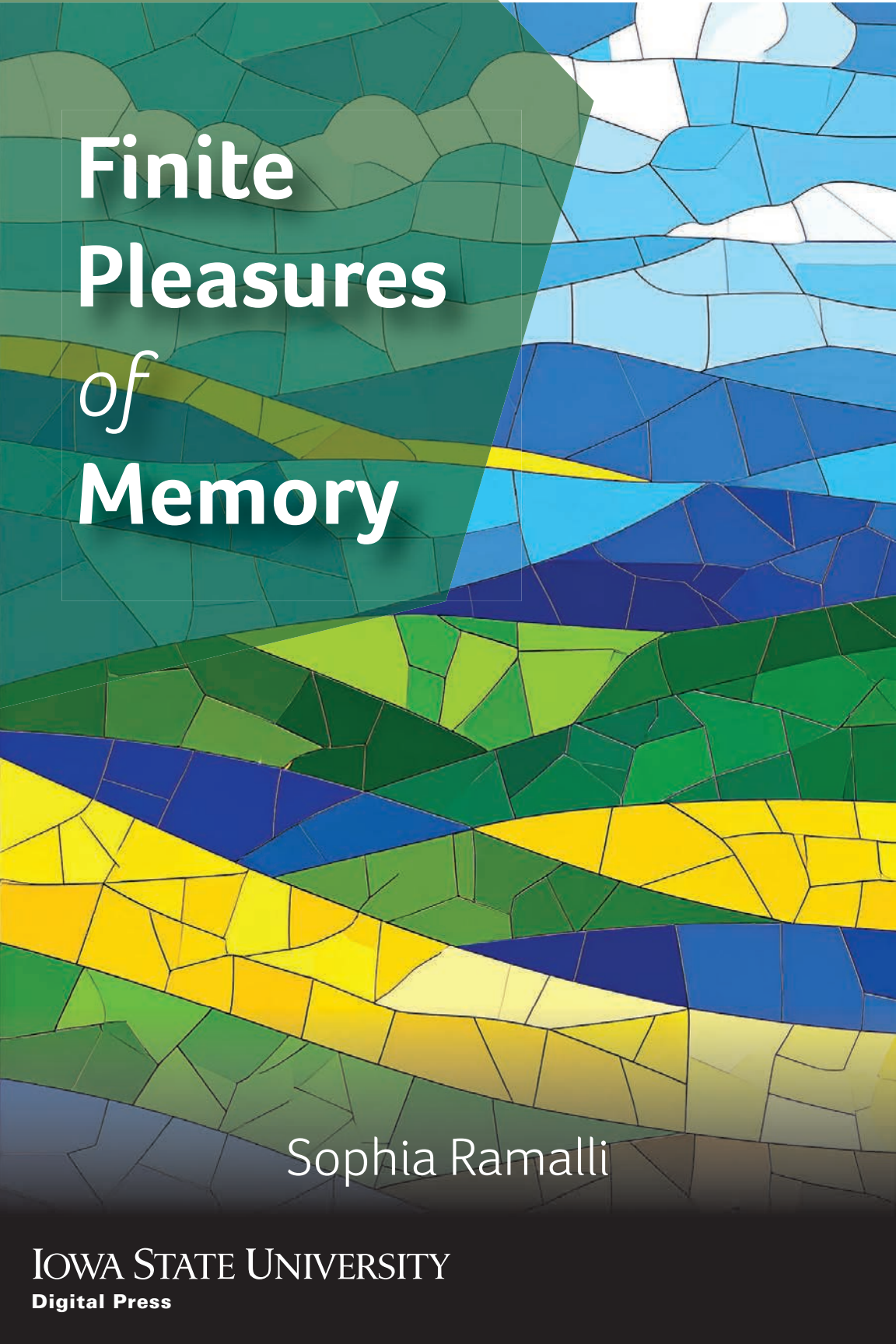




Finite Pleasures *of* Memory

Sophia Ramalli

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Digital Press

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Finite Pleasures of Memory

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SOPHIA RAMALLI

Iowa State University Digital Press
Ames, Iowa



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31274/isudp.2026.217>

Finite Pleasures of Memory is a publication of
Iowa State University Digital Press
199 Parks Library
701 Morrill Rd
Ames, Iowa 50011
United States

iastatedigitalpress.com

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Prologue

I have come to realize that even though we pass through so many stages of our lives, we still end up having the same experiences... just with other people, or in a different place. At first, I thought that was a little bit melancholic, or even morbid, but then I realized I could take a new perspective on this.

That is how *Finite Pleasures of Memory* came to life. All these amazing experiences, both from back home in Brazil and in the United States, seemed so far away yet so connected. I couldn't really understand how I felt scared being alone in a house in Iowa as a 19-year-old, just like when I was eight, and my parents would go to work. Or, when I would get stressed or anxious for an exam, just like I did in high school. Things seemed to change when I was more than 5,600 miles away from São Paulo, but feelings started to become so much more familiar.

I think when it comes to understanding this process of moving abroad—separating yourself from family, friends, and all the things you know—it is hard to establish a connection with your new reality. After all, people say, “You are writing a new chapter in your life.” Nonetheless, the more I stayed with my own thoughts, the more I recognized how I was still a child

sometimes. I still missed Mom. I still wanted to go to the movies with Dad, or pet my cat. We all come to another country with the idea that we have to be strong and build our own futures, but we forget to embrace ourselves, check in on our emotions, and be our own safety net.

To be honest, I haven't done that in quite a while. I haven't processed a lot that has happened in the last two and a half years—all the things I have seen, the places I have been, the people I have been with—and I am pretty sure I have come to a point where this is necessary. Not because I have been avoiding some trauma, but rather because, unfortunately, I sometimes take it for granted. And living here is everything! However, for me, the most poetic thing was seeing how feelings that seemed never to be felt again (since I wasn't home) were so present in my day-to-day life.

I like to say that there are two Sophias—one from Brazil and a new one from the United States. I don't think that is how I feel about myself anymore. I do understand people change a lot when they move away, but I think for me it was such a drastic change I forgot who I am. And this is also a way to remind myself that I lived 18 years before starting a new chapter of my life.

We don't reboot. We are not robots. Our memories are all deeply connected, our loved ones are always there for us, and our feelings will definitely carry us around. So, we might as well enjoy them and remember they were there with us since day one.

"The search for adventure need not to entail foolhardiness."

Lady Heath, Woman Pilot

I will choose the elevator

Life has become, for me, a composition of finite pleasures. Those that seem so naively simple, yet merge into a love arrow right to the center of my beating heart. It has certainly been a matter of being away from home, at least for me. These little sparkling excitements come from memories, tying my adult present with my childhood history.

I know this is going to seem childish—trust me, I have shared my “homesick” theories with a couple of friends before writing this all down. Nonetheless, I do think the smallest things in my personal experience are the factors that hold me the most in my new environment. They are now my biggest supporters.

After all, which simple memories are those? I will tell you, curious reader, but first let me explain how I came to such a conclusion in the first place.

I am Sophia, an international student who has been in the United States for almost two years. I have experienced a rollercoaster of feelings due to homesickness—honestly, a

classic story. However, that does not keep me from following my dream of becoming an astronaut (*but that is definitely a story for another time*).

Now that you know the specific scenario I am in, shall we walk through my small memories? For that, I will allow you to enter this big, vast space in my mind: the World of Sophia! There, you can find a lot of singing, space-related stuff, and just a lot of laughter. Disregarding the mess of the turbulence of joyful feelings, you can see portraits of me, similar to a museum, and the places I have lived. Live portraits, actually, in which you can see whole stories in a couple of seconds (Yes, *like Harry Potter*).

I grab your hand, and we move to the first painting. It is grey, dark blue, and black, but mostly grey. Monotonous, surely. You ask me what it represents, and I show you the tiny buttons in the back of the portrait. Confused, you claim it is a very blurry vision of a child pressing one of these circles to move the elevator they are in.

"Aha!" I say. "That is the point. This is tiny Sophia using the elevator for probably the third time to go back to her mom's apartment after playing with her friends."

You start wondering why we stepped away from the fun, loud, jumping musical environment, or even the innovative, technological space environment, for, well... really for an elevator. Now, you kind of want to move on to the next painting, just like those impatient teenagers at museums, and I hold your hand, reassuring you that you will follow me to one of the last paintings in the corridor that comprises my little realm.

"I don't get why we are doing all of this," you say, frustrated.

Moving rapidly, I take you to this joyful image of me and

my best friend, Shira, laughing at the humanities building in my college, a colorful painting of us. We notice the elevator's scenery: in the painting, I am looking at it, and she is complaining.

"You're not going to take the elevator, Sophia; there are only three levels."

Still not understanding why I couldn't, child Sophia comes to the consciousness. She is now not only wandering around, but dancing, making a mess, playing all the instruments there, and launching rockets. She knows she wants to take the elevator. So, I start moving.

Shira decides to take the stairs, more as a competition to see who gets to the first floor faster. *It's not important, but she does.* The elevator opens, and I say, "I will choose the elevator."

I go in, press the button, and teleport back to the portrait. And, I close my eyes. I can hear the trembling of the machinery, the silence of the cubicle void inside that space, the anxiety of my heart to arrive. Although all those emotions are coming in—even my silly concern that Shira is going faster than me—I stop my thoughts. Sophia's World is silent. No instruments, no launching rockets, no jumping children. Just silence.

You start realizing something is happening to one of the last paintings, the one we were just at.

"Sophia, look! Do you see that?"

Honestly, I was so immersed in my own thoughts that I had not realized that incredible phenomenon—the portrait started changing... It was turning dark blue, black, but mostly grey. The buttons were becoming more familiar, as if I had seen that elevator for several years in my life. We both look confused and just sit in silence until the portrait is fully developed.

"It is that first painting we saw!" you claim, with a lot of excitement.

I notice that, but I don't respond. It still feels very mysterious what my mind is trying to tell me.

"Shall we see what the first painting turned out to be now?" I ask.

We then move back to the beginning of the corridor, but I don't need to hold your hand anymore.

We stare at it. A blank portrait.

"No, no, no, what happened to it?" You start exhaling your preoccupations.

I calmly at it, and ideas come to my head. "Okay, what if this means that memories are correlated, they make one another, and there is always space for new ones to come?"

It seems from your expressions that you don't really agree, but you don't have a better idea to use as a counterargument.

"I get it, Sophia. We are just going through your memories, and you are showing how important they are to you. So what?" you ask kind of brutally, but punctual.

I tell you that there isn't much more than that, but the key is that I am showing you a new perspective on how to interpret your daily experiences and navigate life more smoothly and appreciatively. This is the beginning of the journey of the finite pleasures of memory.

They all look the same!

This will be a shorter story, but I might say it was one of the most impactful moments for my adaptation in the US. Here I am, in the parking lot closest to campus. I remember my friends and I would rent the one car available for students to practice driving. It feels cold, as usual, but it wasn't as painful as usual. You catch us laughing most of the time, because we are young and free, and, honestly, doing something besides studying.

I walk past the first car, a small grey one. Then, I look at the second vehicle—a red truck (*an Iowa classic*). I keep looking, cars keep passing as I move forward, but my mind stays still. Even though all my friends are enjoying themselves, having the time of their lives, I get fixated on this thought.

Now, you, curious reader, will have to step into my mind again. It's okay, though, I will let you explore the mysteries of my deep thoughts. We are now in the void, but it looks different than before: no portraits, no museum lookalikes, just one phone in the middle of this blank space, on top of a large, high column

of concrete painted in white. We see what is on the phone, as it is unlocked, and there is only this image of a wall in a parking lot, specifically the sign *D6*.

"Oh, I remember that!" I say excitedly.

You still look confused and don't quite understand the correlation between that and the memory we were just in.

"This is something me and my family would do. We would take pictures of where we parked the car to make our lives easier when we were leaving the place".

"Okay, but why is that important to you and your friends driving around Grinnell?" you ask quite impatiently.

"Take time to process, trust me, but I will give you a spoiler. What is the one thing you will always see in a parking lot?" I ask, wanting to see if you will follow my thought process.

"Cars, trucks...", you affirm, kind of bored.

"Yes, and what else?" I continue.

"Motorcycles, and probably some bicycles around," you respond, definitely not interested in this memory anymore.

"Sure," I say, not agreeing that much with the bicycle part.

"What is the point, Sophia?" You let that impatience you've been holding in for some time come out.

"Well, the point is, I had never thought of the beauty of parking lots until I moved abroad," I say, almost dreaming, singing...

"Which is?" It feels like you're almost wanting to murder me at this point.

"They all look the same!" I claim, very much excited. "All cars

placed right next to each other, the random motorcycles and trucks, all of that. It is just like Brazil!"

You look a bit disappointed, but more invested in the memory than before. "So, why is that relevant to you in the first place?" you ask, genuinely.

"Because it was the first time I felt I teleported back in my memories, that I felt like I was in two places at once." I continue, "There is no such thing as recognizing where you are based on a parking lot. If you were kidnapped and left on one of them, it would be impossible for you to tell where they had abandoned you".

"Sure, and I am assuming this is also a finite pleasure of memory for you?" You question, without much emotion.

"Of course, my horse!¹ I love going to parking lots to this day. I have found they are the most efficient way of teleporting that exists." We laugh a little bit at this silly thought and step out of my consciousness once more.

1. Brazilian expression we like to use (in English, especially).

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr...

Well, here we are. It feels like you glance at me in a different way, emotional reader, and that is okay—I get it. Humans tend to be more affectionate once they know the little pieces that compose your heart. I suggest we go for a walk in my big, extended void, and you accept, silently, but more so in a reflective manner.

“Hey, look, there are some white and purple petals a little far from us! Do you see that?” you exclaim excitedly.

I fear I do not want to end your happiness, so I continue moving forward, already knowing that the memory we will experience next will be pleasant. It is funny, you know, how sometimes we think our brains are our enemies, when in fact they are just trying to make our lives a beautiful garden of colorful flowers made of love.

“Jesus, it is really hot in here, don't you think?” you start complaining, and apparently, your entire peaceful state fades away.

I smile slightly, first because I am used to the hot weather. *I'm not expecting you to know this, so I will tell you—this young lady*

right here comes from the marvelous lands of Brazil—just in case you skipped the prologue. Secondly, because now I am pretty sure we are coming back to my grandma's home, where you surely would feel like you were in a sauna all the time.

The petals start getting close to us, but they are more stacked than we first thought. In fact, they make a thin, straight layer on the white ground. The more we walk, the more it feels like they start levitating, almost as if they are creating an oval portal for us to enter.

"Is this safe?" you ask, kind of scared.

This time, I can't hold my laughter.

"What do you mean, my friend? We are in my spacious void at the back of my mind. Anything could happen," I say joyously.

After filling in the oval space, the big round space in the middle starts emitting a light purple light, with flashes of white sparks all over it.

"Come on, let's go," I affirm, somewhat expecting you already knew we were going to go there.

You stop, steadily.

"Sophia, I am not coming in. I do not care how much I may learn about valuing experiences both inside and outside your home... This is insan—!"

I grab your hand before you can finish your sentence, and we enter this mysterious, yet exciting new memory.

"Wait, what?" you ask, confused. "Waaait, what?"

I spiral in my own thoughts, wondering why we are in my current dormitory at Grinnell (*in case you are not sure, reader, it is my college*), rather than my warm bed in my grandma's home, with the birds singing outside the window, and the sugary

coffee with biscuits ready for me in the kitchen. There is only one thing that is the same in both places—the *vrrrrrrrrrrrr...* sound.

"Sophia, I am confused." And you continue on, "I can only see your not-so-neat bed, portraits of friends and family, and your school materials all over the place,"

The room itself is quite hot, actually. I can recognize that it is the middle of spring. Firstly, because of the flowers' hint at the portal. Secondly, my room is a mess, so it is probably close to final exam week.

"Look, do you see that?" I point at the fan my roommate used to leave on, especially since our windows wouldn't open due to the extreme weather conditions. *This year, there was a day that we had -35° C, or -31° F—I know. You're welcome for the conversion.* "Yeah, Sophia. It goes *vrrrrrrrrrrrr...*, really nothing special about it".

Plinnn!!!

A huge shiny light comes to our faces, and for a few seconds, we go extremely blind.

"Ahhhh, this hurts", you say, cryingly.

I do not respond because I feel kind of bad about what you are having to go through. There is no noise besides your complaints, filled with anger and hurtfulness. We can start seeing better again, and I notice some things are different. The bed is centered in the room, rather than in the corner where it would stay in my dorm. The window is open—in fact, you can even hear the birds singing outside. And the key difference here—it feels like a burning hell!

"Oh my godness, this is hotter than when I went to that music festival in 2015."

I am sure the festival was nice, reader, but I have no idea what you are talking about.

"Awnnnn!"¹, I exclaim.

"What?" you say, with no patience whatsoever.

"It's my bedroom in Grandma's house! See the fan on the roof? It also goes *vvrrrrrrrr...*." I show affection and nostalgia in my affirmation.

"You made me go blind because of a fan??? I swear to God, Soph—."

I stop you there. I shut your mouth, grab your hand again, and take you really close to the window.

"See how lovely the birds are!" I say, almost singing. "And, can you feel the sun lying over your skin? It feels so soothing, right?"

You stay silent, but I guess your appreciation is coming back.

"Okay, so let's see if I understand. When you woke up this morning in your dorm room, you heard your roommate's fan, and that brought you back immediately to your grandma's house." You make your conclusions.

"Yeah, pretty much," I respond, giving more attention now to the decorations around my room at Granny's rather than listening to what you are saying.

"I get it. You like daydreaming and remembering stuff. What now?" you ask impatiently, as usual.

"Well, now we will get some biscuits and sugary coffee, and

1. A Brazilian expression for "Oh my god, so cute!!!"

then we can go back to the void to continue on in our trip on the Finite Pleasures of Memory." I am pretty sure you look satisfied now, because you stopped frowning and followed me to eat the most delicious biscuits of your life.

Tum, tum, ... tum, tum

"This is getting way too onomatopoeic to me," you complain at this new chapter of mine. "Tum, tum, Sophia? What is this? Please don't tell me the story is about a marching band..."

No, kind-worded reader, this is a way different context. In fact, this is the other way you can have your body floating—the one that is not through music. This is a scene of me diving into the swimming pool at Grinnell.

"Eww! There is sand all over my feet," you complain while noticing that my void is now being filled by a tiny island beach, where we see a tiny sea that almost feels like a lake, sunlight, and one coconut tree. I cannot hold my laughter this time—I am starting to like your company here, reader.

"Shall we get some coconut water?" I say, moving towards the tree and grabbing two of those big, juicy fruits. I sit down and a knife magically appears in my hand.

"Wow, how did you do that?" you ask, quite amazed by what happened.

"I swear you have to stop asking... This is my void! My mind, my rules!"

To be honest, I also have no idea how I could do things like that, but I'm guessing it would freak you out to know that I have no control whatsoever over this space.

"Heyyy, what are you doing?" You try to push me while I sit down under the tree, now drinking my delicious coconut water.

"Let me be!" I think, but don't say. Which is funny, because I would imagine you could hear it, considering we are in my mind. But, who knows how all of this is stored...

"We don't have time for this, Sophia. We have got to keep going on our journey, or did you forget I have a life outside this book?"

Sure, I know, reader, but I pull you down anyway. We sit, and you take your first refreshing sip of coconut water. *Spoiler alert: you adore it, as I had predicted.* You are looking at the tiny sea in front—but really the big lake that is as clear as the blue sky at my grandma's house in the countryside in Brazil (*a really hot place, by the way!*). Suddenly, however, you start to really see it—how each movement composes into a dance of dynamic fluids, which exist just beautifully, but are certainly breathing together into a creation that makes humanity dazzle.

"This is, th..." You don't finish your thought. Whatever you first felt, reader, whatever anxiety you had with you when first opened this book and entered my void—it, just for a couple of seconds, vanished.

"It is so peaceful here," you almost whisper, in love with this tiny spot in the enormous white space around us.

"C'mon, now, I have got to show you how this will all turn out

to be," I say almost regretfully, because it seems like you are finally experiencing tranquility after a long, long time.

Now the beach is gone. No sand over your feet.

"Nooo, what did you do?"

Well, again, insistent reader, I have no idea how these things come and go, so I didn't do anything, technically.

"Okay, so what now?" you say, and apparently, all your peace went away like one of those waves at the tiny sea. "I can still feel the sunlight, though, which is good."

Finally, you are not complaining. *Somebody should have recorded this moment!*

There is some trembling here and there, then a tsunami takes the whole (yes, *the entire*) void. We cannot see anything; there is just water all over us, and for a couple of seconds, we cannot breathe. I try to swim and pull you with me, and you might or may not have swum too (it *depends on you, reader*), and we finally get to the top of what seems to be my swimming pool back in the building I used to live in Brazil.

"Awn, this place is so pretty! There are a bunch of coconut trees, chairs to sit down, and a clear, blue sky. I love this. Why did you move out of here in the first place?" you say dreamily. I don't bother to go through my astronaut objective again (*I've already told you it is a story for another time...*).

"Let's swim for a bit, shall we?" I say, already starting to do my freestyle, and you, not prepared, start saying some not-so-kind words (*your classic*), because apparently you are very competitive (yes, *I am assuming this of you, reader*).

After a lot, I mean, a lot of cardio, we bend our knees and push ourselves out to the middle of the pool.

"I can feel my heartbeat so loud!" you nearly scream, due to your sudden increase of endorphins.

"Now, you should close your eyes," I say, also almost screaming, but more conscious of what is about to happen.

Tum, tum, ... tum, tum.

You can only hear that in your now expanding void. For that specific moment, you vanish from my void. *I'm still figuring out what that means, reader, but I think you are starting to reflect upon your existence, too.* You come back, still with your eyes closed, but when you open them, we're not in Brazil anymore. We're in the Grinnell swimming pool, right after my water aerobics class (*so fun!*).

"No need to explain this one," you affirm really confidently. "It is because whenever you swim intensely in Grinnell, you bend your knees, push yourself to the middle of the pool, close your eyes and listen to your beating heart. And that brings you back to this paradisiac spot back home. That is your finite pleasure for this memory".

I smile at you, content that you are more immersed in this journey than I expected.

Too hard to be summarized

"I think we are ready," I say, looking at you with sad, distant eyes.

"Hey, hey... why do you suddenly look so sad?" You start getting worried, because I am the one usually with the mood up.

"It is just that this finite pleasure had really severe consequences..." I almost start hiccupping from the sudden remembrance of memories from both countries.

We see younger me in the void, looking at the window in her bedroom in Brazil while lying down in her bed in the dark, listening to songs by The Neighbourhood. She looks devastated, with her big eyes red and the same for her cheeks, her body all contracted, and not breathing well.

"Damn, that looks tough," you say, a bit worried but also a little resentful, as I am pretty sure you, reader, also know what this is about. It is the thing all humans understand and can be compassionate about—a heartbreak.

"Can we come and say something to her?" you suggest, concerned.

But I say my void projects memories, so they are not really there. "Pretty Boy" starts playing, and at that point, lying down in her bed, she starts screaming in pain.

"Why is he ignoring me? Why does he pretend I was never in his life? I don't understand..."

"What an asshole," you say, deliberately, while I relive this past memory. "Hey, if you don't feel well, we can always move to the next memory."

You grab my hand. Now you're the one who is willing to lead me on this journey.

With a tear falling slowly on my cheek, I almost whisper, "I have to go through this."

"Do you remember the first time you were in love?" I ask you. Suddenly, your semblance changes. I cannot tell if you are reliving good, exciting, or lost love, hurtful memories. After all, isn't past love a combination of all of those?

I look into your truthful eyes, and we feel connected after long hours of being on this journey. You look content, reader, and I think you are just now starting to process your youthful passions.

"What?" I ask, while you give me a little, sweet smile.

"Nothing," you respond, but your head brings you back to your really nice void again.

While I give you a chance to relive your own love memories, I check on my 16-year-old self, who is devastated in her bedroom.

"Poor girl," I somewhat whisper, saying it while breathing

deeply. I close my eyes when the song "You Get Me So High" starts playing. That one always got me the most.

Opening my eyes, I now see myself seated with my friend Isabella on one of the couches in Gardner, our concert spot on Grinnell's campus. I keep noticing this guy, who I was very much emotionally involved with, moving stuff around, because he used to work there.

I say to Isa, "I cannot believe I continue to expose myself like this, just watching him even though it makes me feel so awful". She stands there, supporting me like an 18-year-old would help her close friend moving on from a boy.

You come back from your own void, and you, love-magnet reader, you start wondering why I also don't look like I am floating like sky clouds. "Well, it is simple. This is not a story about love, you naive traveler. This is about what happens afterward."

"Hold on, Sophia," you call me out, frustrated that I am not taking any pleasure from this. "What about enjoying the little memories in life? Seeing the connection between your two homes? Creating new experiences based on what you have lived?"

Yes, reader, I think this story after all is not the finite pleasure itself of a love memory. It is about what happened after I had that, which, trust me, was easier for my past self to connect to my current self".

"Okay, so walk me through why these two Sophias, one lying down in her bed and the other at the concert thing, are particularly connected." You want to understand why I suddenly feel so unmotivated and depressed. "Fallen Star" starts playing while I begin to dive into my heartbreaks.

"Indeed, these two guys, one from Brazil and one from the US, made me feel amazing at first, right? They would say I am different, that they would always notice me in school, that I was beautiful... and then? Well, then they pretended I didn't exist when we saw each other in classes," I say, my voice trembling.

"I am so sorry to hear that." You look a little sad and compassionate about how much these feelings have impacted how I move on with my life. "So, what is the purpose of this travel spot?" you had to ask after all.

"That you, my friend, you are the only one who will always stick with yourself, help yourself, be there for yourself, hold yourself on your bed, or in public. There is no such thing as a 'finite pleasure' when it comes to love—first of all, you should not depend on another person to feel satisfied with your life, because, guess what? You start hating just being with yourself. And that is not the way you first came to life, is it? Also, love is very much an ideal construct. Yes, it gives you endorphins, but so it does developing a hobby, singing a song, painting, studying, accomplishing a dream, sleeping... I guess this one spot, traveler, is not about a specific memory about both my home in Brazil and in the US. This is about my life mindset after I went through a finite pleasure. And I hope you can understand how important it is for you to think about that too".

Long time no see

Life moved on... I am sorry, reader, that I have not taken you on any adventures for a while.

My own world got a little... messy. You see, I am going to be the classic early-twenties girl right now. Unfortunately, I fell into that category—I met a boy. Yes, I fell in love.

Indeed, he wasn't that much in love, apparently (*even though he took me to Disney*). Then he proceeded to cheat on me a week before coming to visit me in college. Crazy, but predictable, since we were doing long-distance. Funnily, he said I would be the one more likely to cheat since I am Brazilian and tend to kiss more people (*stereotypical, I know*). And all of those events took me to a very, very deep hole. One I thought I couldn't get out of.

But now we are here, reader. Me and you, ready to start a new adventure. And you might think I am getting attached to our detours, but I am actually excited to be back. One thing I think about being in a very low mindset is that you forget all the beautiful trips along the way. Of course, you reader will help me recognize the brightness of life. And perhaps I may help you

see a little bit of beauty in your life, too. At this moment, I am just appreciative that you are here with me.

So, let's go back a week, probably the moment when I felt that the first love chapter of my life was over. You are sitting with me at the airport, early morning, all passengers feeling sleepy with no thoughts in their heads. And then you look at me. You try to read my mind, but unlike everyone else, I have a turmoil of emotions. A heavy rain of thoughts.

I can't stop looking at my phone, with his contact number and a photo I took of him on our second date right above his name. I keep remembering how that summer was—how nice it felt to have some company, to share yogurt with granola in the mornings, to play him some sweet guitar songs, to tell him my fears and melancholic thoughts. He was with me, and I was with him. He loved to say we were a team...

My flight departs in an hour. I am on my way to Boston, a city that seems so exciting, beautiful, and alive. To be fair, as a twenty-year-old who is, perhaps unfortunately, consumed with media content, influencers, and viral videos, I have been a little bit happier than usual since Tate McRae said she had a great night in the city in one of her songs. See, I told you, reader, not a lot to expect from a young adult girl who loves pop culture.

It is funny, and definitely not a coincidence, that Tate McRae's song was playing while I looked at his picture. And, hey reader, I know you might not be a twenty-year-old girl going through her first breakup, so you just need to know this singer is one of the most helpful humans when it comes to remembering your value and how a boy cannot lit off your spark (*very pop culture of me, right?*). She would keep whispering in my ears, or sometimes screaming to make it loud and clear, "Thought I

might love you again [...] now that you are acting like that, boy I never will".

You might have guessed, but I was thinking of giving him a second chance. *Yes, after he cheated. Yes, you can call me stupid, at least when it comes to love.* But you were there with me, reader.

Realistically, and since I never lie to you, the truth is my friend from school was seated next to me at the gate, and they basically forced me to block him. You know that's usually how it happens. However, I wouldn't like to believe I wasn't strong enough to do it on my own. I just like to think that such a beautiful story couldn't have had such a tragic ending.

So, I guess in some way, reader, I think you were that friend to me. Maybe because then, some time after that moment, I would come here and write it all out to you, and you would help me process what happened. And, also, that friend stayed by my side, even when I thought I couldn't do it on my own; she did it for me. I want you to please remember, reader, that those people will come to you at the right time.

And I guess this might be a hard memory to trace back to my childhood or teenage years, since we as humans tend to take help for granted. Actually, I am sure that in different situations in my life, people have done for me the same as this friend did in this moment. But, instead, I am stuck with the memories of being bullied by kids in my class. Or, of this one 21-year-old boy mistreating me.

See, reader, I think sometimes we don't like to be reminded that we are people who are loved. That some around us care. I don't quite understand. Perhaps it's because we want to feel better about our problems, but we play the victim a lot of the

time. And, it's okay, I think... as long as we don't neglect people like that one friend who helped you cry over a boy, get over the first time you were fired, or the distancing from your parents.

That might be the pleasure I am feeling towards this airport memory, which honestly is not about me blocking this boy and having the time of my life with my friends in Boston. No, I think it is actually a broader happy feeling... I know now. It took me the actions of an immature man to figure it out. I am sure this magic sensation we get from being taken care of in a relationship, when in a so-called fantasized "romance," is actually all around us.

Yes, I am not naive, I know it's not that strong—a person holding a door for you is not the same as him giving you flowers. But I don't think we should neglect small actions. After all, these are always with us. You might say, "Yeah, nobody has ever bought me a ring," but I am sure you can say, "Yes, my coworker/friend/classmate/parent waited for me while I was grabbing my stuff so we could leave."

People are considerate. They are loving, caring, and special. I think we shouldn't accept the high standards culture brainwashes us into as the truth. Humans can be kind in simple ways. And those should be enjoyable too.

God I feel so lonely

I'm eating my not-so-cooked mac and cheese in the dining hall. It's 7:30 pm—almost time for my mentor session. I look around and there you are, enjoying your food (*I'm not sure how, with this oily burger in your hands*). Anyway, I smirk at you and start looking around—there are so many students talking, from so many bubbles, in their own little worlds. And I am here, watching everyone while peacefully eating my pasta and counting the time to go back to the science building.

It hasn't been that long since I last saw this boy that I have been talking to. Yes, nosy reader, I moved on from the cheater. No further questions.

Now, I know you may think I'm silly and all that (*remind yourself that I am 20, and yes, I am aware of the teenage behavior*), but I did feel complete with him a couple of days ago. It was so simple, yet so effective. We would just watch movies,

drive around, eat together, sleep... Yet, it all felt right. It felt nice, and I felt like I wasn't missing much on life¹.

He drove me back to campus, and now I am in this little town with nothing but school assignments around me. Keep in mind, reader, that we live just an hour away from each other. So really, his reality is not that different from mine (*even though he is in Iowa City, which is like the New York of Iowa*). Anyway, if you really think about it, all the stuff we did there, we could have done in this little town, too.

That is what really gets me—how can somebody change everything about how you live (*and perceive*) your life? I miss him, I know, but it's also that kind of feeling I am unsure would change if I were back home in Brazil... or in Europe... if any of that makes sense...

However, I also do think it's important for me to understand that I have to be alone sometimes. And, God, it hurts so much. I know this, reader, because I have been there before. In fact, since we are both sitting at the dining table right now, why don't we go to a similar spot back in my high school?

The cafeteria there is a little bit more chaotic, naturally, because, well, it's filled with 15 and 16-year-olds instead of

1. As a disclaimer, I know this is the second time I have been talking about a boy, but it is not that I am superficial. *And, personally, I hate the perspective that just because we are talking about loved ones, that means we don't care about anything else in our lives.* For some reason, romance allows me to think about everything in my life. It's like opening the faucet, and all the tears flow out. And trust me, most of the time I can really shut my feelings off if I want to, so I know that strategy works.

young adults (*not that it would make that much of a difference anyway*). I can still see the same small bubbles, all groups interacting and talking about random subjects, so much variety yet so many similarities among all of them. I look at you, and you are now enjoying a brigadeiro², and I smile really big because that is actually something I also enjoy (*or it could have been the fact that you offered a piece to me, who knows*).

You see how sad I am, reader. And I think you understand why... Nobody likes to be alone. I mean, you have me, and I have you, but we are the same person (*sorry for the spoiler*). We have to be together and learn how to be together. Everyone else will just come and go...

I just kept hoping someone would talk to me or sit next to me. Regardless of whether I'm 15, 20, or possibly 40 in my workplace, I want company. And I think I realize what this all comes to, reader... and I think you know it too. At the end of the day, it's just you and me—and we have got to help each other out.

2. A Brazilian chocolate truffle

Will somebody make my lunchbox?

This morning, I was walking to class very early for my physics lab, and I stumbled across two chemistry professors. I don't really know much about them, and they don't know much about me, either. One thing I notice, though, is the lunchbox they both have attached to their backpacks.

Immediately, I remember my Disney Princess lunchbox, which I would carry around and get so excited about what my mom (*yes, stereotypically, my dad didn't do those things*) would have put in it.

Now, keep in mind, reader, I don't think it's wise for you to follow me on this journey today. The thing is, I feel very sick, and I don't want to give you whatever I have. And it is bad, trust me. I have been like this for weeks and weeks...

I will tell you everything about it, though, and the advantage (*maybe not for me*) is that I will have to share my own thoughts too, since you are not actually seeing what is happening.

Anyway, I look at those lunchboxes, and with the terrible

sickness I have, I can only imagine what it would feel like to have someone prepare one for me today. You see, yesterday I had to walk 30 minutes in the cold to buy lunch, and it would have been okay if I hadn't been so close to passing out. It is in these moments that you start to realize how important it is to have family by your side.

But, you know, reader, sometimes these thoughts can be misleading. And I don't want to get political or anything, but the truth is (*and it shouldn't shock anyone*), if there was someone in the family who had to prepare lunchboxes, it would be me. The mom.

I do understand my mother a lot more after being away from her for almost three years. I mean, it's hard not only to take care of yourself, but three other individuals (*yes, I am including my dad on this one*). And it's no wonder that in TV shows or movies, mothers are always represented as control freaks. At some point, your brain burns out. And you, who, when you were in your twenties, thought that you would finally find the love of your life and he would treat you like a princess... well, you were simply wrong.

So, yes, reader, I am scared of that. Of all that my mother went through in her marriage. To be in a scenario where I start out as Cinderella, and turn out to be whatever she was in the beginning of her story. I love love, I truly do, but sometimes it is hard for me to believe that whatever happened to my mom, or my aunt, or my best friend, won't happen to me. It is just too... common.

I guess the moral of the story is that we have to make our own lunchbox. Trust me, I know that sounds awful. First, because you are ruining the surprise since you already know what you've put inside, but also because self-love can be kind

of tricky. You don't really see a nice action that you did for yourself the same way as if someone else had done the same thing to you. And, to be honest, reader, I don't know why this happens in our brains.

Well, I told you already, I am sick. And you think I want to be pampering myself? No, it's quite the opposite. I have been spending more and more hours in the library, studying so much, and trust me... this is not ideal. I guess I do this so that I don't remember that when I come back home, there is no one to take care of me.

My infinite pleasure from memory

Hey, reader, you are back! I missed you in our last adventure, so I decided to take you to our final destination in the most magical way possible. I don't think you are ready for this...

Here I am, heading to my differential equations class, and the only thing I can think of is my mom saying, "Hold your tears, now is not the time to cry."

See, I had just found out that my first real boyfriend had cheated on me, and since it was long-distance, it was so hard for me to know all the details. I had so many questions, and it felt like all my insecurities were swirling around me like strong wind gusts. I would try to move, but couldn't. But that story I have already told you. What I didn't tell you, though, was how I was able to move on from that...

So, yes, I was unstable, confused, and visibly falling apart until a curly-haired, sweet girl from class saw me. We hadn't really talked much before, but in her eyes it felt like I was ready to tell her everything. And with the way she looked at me, it felt

like she's known me for a long time. It only took her these three so powerful words, "Are you okay?"

And I burst into tears. I couldn't stop crying as I hugged her as though my life depended on it. Keep in mind, reader, this was five minutes before our class started. She suggested I skip class because, obviously, the professor would understand. But I just went to the bathroom quickly before going to the classroom.

See, I felt okay after class. Not good, but at a level where I could proceed with my day. I even felt proud, because I got to learn something and distract myself from the horrendous thought that I wasn't enough to keep a relationship (*which I came to realize later isn't true, since it doesn't matter how perfect a person can be, the other can always choose to do something else*). But, reader, do you realize what happened? She just hugged me. That was it. And that changed me more than anything could have in that moment.

When it comes to hugs, I think we sometimes take them for granted. Especially because, I don't know about you, but when I am feeling miserable, and somebody holds me, it feels like I am back in the womb. It is so comfortable, peaceful, and easy that everything else stops existing for a while. It is kind of like... magic.

And, reader, I could take you to so many more moments like these in my life, but I dare to say I don't remember them that well. Now, if you ask me about the girls in school who bullied me (*like I have told you before*), or the boys who would make fun of my looks... sure. But no memories of love, care, and companion... I wonder if that is a general problem with our brains. Why do we cling to so many terrible memories? And I swear to God, reader, I have been away for so long, I know what it is like when your mom and dad hug you after being away.

Or hugging my baby, Crystal, my lovely cat. Or hugging friends in school I haven't seen in two days, or a boy who I am most probably passionate about, maybe even in love with. Or a girl who saw me crying in a bathroom and was willing to comfort me.

Trust me, reader, if I tried to take you to one specific memory in the past, I think we would mess up the timeline. Because, after all, even when we don't realize or remember, there is love in every step of our journey. I came to realize, while writing this book, that hugs have become more than a pleasant memory for me. They are infinite, because I get to relive them over and over again, even when that moment happened two years ago. Or when I was a child. Or when I am daydreaming about when I will see my family again.

Our journey, reader, comes to an end now... but not really. And you want to know why? Because right now, I am giving you the biggest, most loving hug you could have ever asked for (*and I know you didn't*). I love you, great friend, and I really appreciate you being here for this big chapter in my life as I get to finally become an individual of my own and learn things for myself. I hope you remember that I am always here by your side, just like you were here with me. And I leave with that bittersweet feeling of stepping out of a hug, or finishing a book, or opening my heart. I hope you remember this as a memory which gave you pleasure, but most importantly, which made you laugh, cry, relate to, and feel loved.

My infinite pleasures: A visual



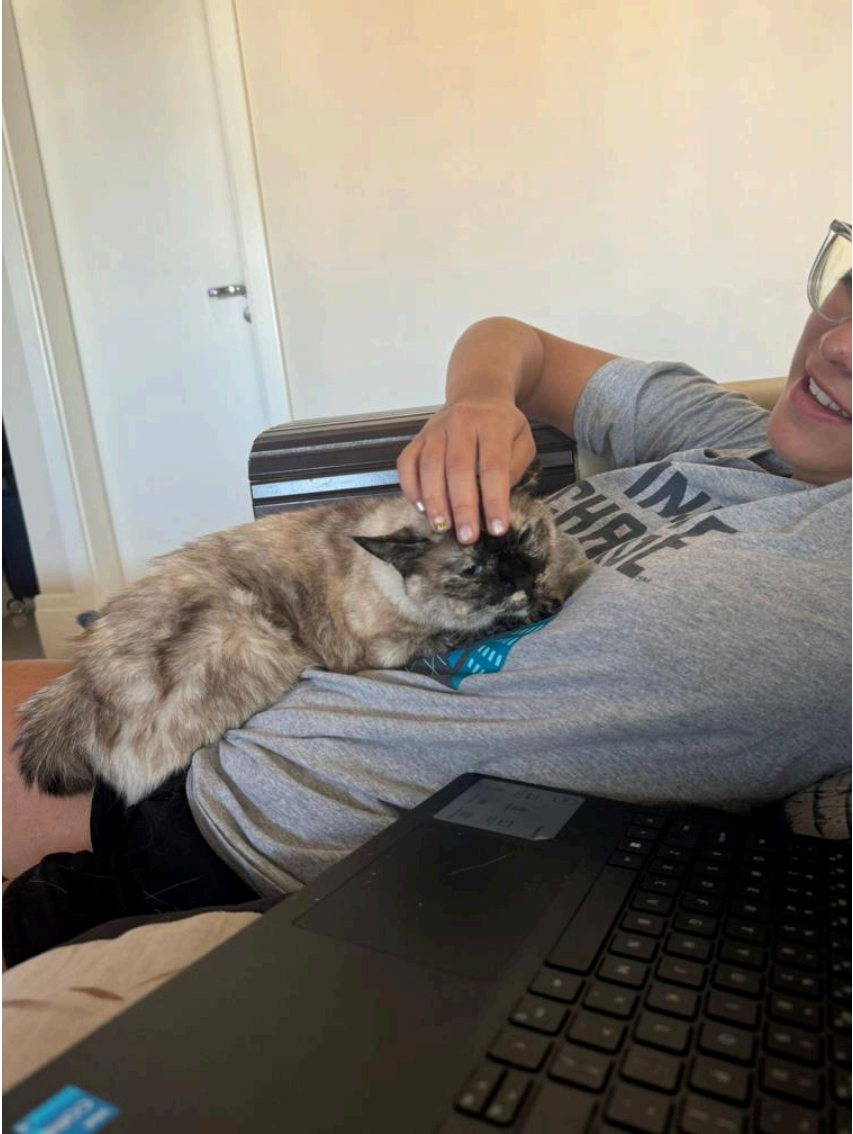
My best friend, Gabi, and I saying goodbye at the airport.



My great friend, Lulu, and I during our summer together in California.



My family and I visiting Bahia, our favorite place in Brazil.



Hugging my cat, Crystal, after not seeing her for a long time. 😞



My favorite (and only) brother in the world and I. 😊 I love him.