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Whirlwind on a Torrid Day by Jarid Arraes is one of the books featured in the autumn 2020 Portuguese reading group run by And Other Stories.

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Redemoinho em Dia Quente (Whirlwind on a Torrid Day)

Jarid Arraes

Excerpt translated by Bruna Dantas Lobato and Julia Sanches

Voice

All those women smiling and clapping and trying to catch little cash planes. What a sight. Her heart beat so hard she thought it would burst in her chest-cage. That's what she wanted, that audience applauding and laughing at Silvio's jokes. Janaína was crazy about that show. It was her favorite one on TV. It was her favorite thing in the world.

When Janaína was a kid, her mom and dad always fought on Sundays. They started in the morning—sometimes because her dad wouldn't wake up, other times because her mom couldn't stand living like that anymore—and the swearing lasted all day long. They only stopped for two things: lunch and Silvio Santos.

Janaína went by a different name back then. Her childhood had been all pain and fighting. The only time she ever rested was during Sunday TV sessions, especially when the variety show came on, the intro music started, and everyone finally quieted down. They only opened their mouths to laugh. Janaína wedged herself between the wall and the armrest of the sofa, small and hunkered down, mesmerized by the silver microphone pinned to Silvio's chest.

She'd almost chosen "Silvia" as her new name—it was a close call. The only reason she didn't was because she remembered how much her dad had loved the name "Janaína." He always said that if he'd ever had a daughter, that's what he'd have called her. He died before agreeing to meet the Janaína who'd been there all along.

These days, she dreamed of the moment she'd get to hug that sweet man and thank him for saving her. Dear Silvio, your show helped me pass the time. I sat in my little corner, and waited, hardly breathing. But I waited, Silvio. As the wheel turned, the door opened, people fell and won bars of gold. I've always wanted to touch a bar of gold, to feel its weight in my hand, to try and catch my reflection in that gold rectangle.

Janaína rehearsed what she was going to say. Her speech changed every week.

She plotted different ways for her to get on the show. Until then, she'd figured her best chance would be to join the audience, of course. But where was she going to get the money to travel there from Cariri? Besides, taking the bus all that way would be torture. She'd heard that children puked on other people's seats and moms left dirty diapers open on chairs and windows.

So she went on living on standby. She sent letters to the network but never got a response, much less an invitation to take part. She didn't know what else to do. Just getting hold of the address had been an ordeal. So, as she set out to find a job, she was in antsy kind of mood.

She couldn't find anything. Now and then, she helped out at a beauty salon owned by someone her mom knew, and who pretty much let her clean there as a favor. Deep down, she didn't want Janaína around. It was obvious from the way she squinted her eyes, like she was trying to see better.

Most of the time, the woman would claim she didn't have enough money to pay her and send her home. After months of no work, it dawned on Janaína that she could bake cakes, pastries, and sweets for birthday parties. She was scared people wouldn't want to hire her, so she asked her mom to tell them that she was doing the baking. Her mom would get what little recognition they got and Janaína would take care of everything.

Some folks were suspicious, of course, since they often spied Janaína's mom watching TV through the window. When people walked past the house on the sidewalk, there was always this delicious smell and the sound of spoons stirring, and yet the so-called

baker was napping in her rocking chair. Honestly, Janaína knew it wasn't a secret. But people liked it better that way.

Barely anyone spoke to her. The neighbor on the left made a point of calling her "him" even though "Janaína" was the only name anyone knew her by. The woman sounded ridiculous whenever she said "that man Janaína" to the other neighborhood gossips. Those people didn't have their heads screwed on right. The only time she got upset was when some kid called her names or made fun of her. She knew it was the grown-ups who taught them those things. If not directly, then by example.

One Sunday, she delivered an order of cake to another neighborhood. She'd been promoted from "nobody" to "delivery person." She was testing it out, seeing if anyone would be shocked when they opened the door and saw her holding their order. Luckily, the woman who received it didn't seem shocked at all.

She got home late, around the time Silvio's show started. She washed, heated up her dinner, and sat on the sofa with her plate on her thighs. She smiled when the music started and as the women's voices began to sing that Silvio Santos was on his way olê olê olá. She was mesmerized by the banter and the pranks. Then, the host announced the return of an old segment: The Drag Competition.

Janaína cupped her hands over her mouth and held her breath. She could still remember it. The one where men put on make-up and dresses and whoever did the best impression of a woman won.

"If you're a drag artist and want to take part in the Drag Competition, go ahead and send us a video. Our production team will select the best ones to join us on SBT." Those words went straight from Silvio Santos' mouth to Janaína's stomach, which became gassy and bubbly, and went hot and cold.

She burped as she dashed to the bathroom and looked herself in the mirror. Could she pass for a crossdresser? She'd have to buy some make-up and a camera. One of the outfits she already had might do the trick, but something with glitz would make a bigger splash.

She headed to her bedside table and grabbed the small box where she kept her savings. One hundred and forty-eight reals. Not enough for a camera, not even a used one.

Monday had barely started and Janaína was already on her way to the store. Only one store in the center of town sold cameras. The cheapest cost six-hundred reals.

“Can I pay in installments?”

Yes.

She went home to engineer a plan: aside from filling orders, she’d bake pastries to sell in the square. She had nothing to lose by trying. Except for the cost of the ingredients, of course. But if she didn’t sell them all, she could just have coxinha and pastelão for lunch and dinner.

By Wednesday, everything was ready. She took a white sheet of paper, wrote on it “Pastel R\$ 1,50,” and taped it to the basket. She put on the plainest clothes in her closet.

On the way to the square, she was stopped by two men who wanted to buy pastels. As she walked away, Janaína realized she hadn’t said a single word, not even “thank you.” Later, in front of the hospital, a woman called her.

“Hey there! Have you got any chicken pastel?” Janaína quickly nodded. “I’ll have three. I’ve got my grandkids with me in the waiting room.” The woman took out some money from her purse.

Janaína sat on the sidewalk in front of the hospital without speaking and turned her basket toward the entrance. People started coming up to her and asking what she had on offer. She tried not to talk, and hid her face behind a curtain of hair, as if she was very shy.

It was actually a pretty good plan. She became more discreet somehow, like she’d shrunk in size and the only thing people could see was the pity they felt for a woman who could only communicate in gestures. She was selling pastries on the street because she couldn’t get a job, poor girl. Nobody would hire a mute. It made more sense to sell pastries. People saw what was in her basket and Janaína just nodded yes or no. Chicken, yes. Not cheese, no.

On Thursday, she wrote the different kinds of pastry she had on another white sheet of paper, and stuck it to the basket too. Meat pastel, chicken pie, pigs-in-a-blanket. All nice and tidy, wrapped in clean plastic film, and ready for the sidewalk outside the hospital. She didn’t even have to go to the square, what with all the people at the hospital starved for good food. Women who spent hours waiting for an appointment, screaming children, distressed mothers, upset friends.

Nobody wanted to pay a small fortune for boring hospital food. A cold sandwich cost over five reals in there, peopled told her.

Folks gathered around Janaína and helped themselves. Yeah, the poor girl's a mute. Yeah, she sells pastries to get by. Thank god she knows how to bake. Go on, have a pig-in-a-blanket, they're delicious, I always buy them. She's out of cheese pastels but check out what else she's got.

Janaína would sit on the sidewalk, half-hidden by her hair, and take their money, holding her hand in the shape of a little bowl. Her heart leaping, leaping.

After five weeks, she had five hundred and twelve reals in her little piggy bank. She'd never saved up that much money in one go. Had it not been for her dream to be on Silvio Santos' show, she probably would've spent it all on clothes by now, or maybe on a new mixer to help make the dough. She might still do that, after she recorded her video. Once she was famous, five hundred reals would be like pennies to her. But what was she going to become famous for?

She was struck by the sad realization that she didn't know how to be a drag artist. To start, she'd have to pretend to be a man pretending to be a woman. Then, she'd need to be beautifully made-up, professional-looking. Lastly, she was going to have to strut about in a swimsuit with her hands on her waist and choose a song to lip sync to on the program. She'd have to do all of this while dancing with an obvious hollow between her legs. Silvio always said he found it most convincing when he couldn't see the bulge down there.

She went around collecting all the make-up she had in the house. She found two lipsticks—one brown and one red—an expired bottle of foundation, and a black eyeliner pencil, and tried to do something about her face.

In her closet hung a party dress she'd bought five years ago, right after her dad died. It was pretty, covered in blue sequins, though the neckline was high. In the end, it was a good thing. That way, no one would notice her breasts were real, not just filling. She didn't have to win, she just wanted to participate. To be invited on to the show, to have a quick chat with Silvio. That was enough for her dream to come true.

So, that was it.

Once she'd saved up six-hundred reals, she went to the shop, her chest swollen with pride. Two months had passed, and she didn't even have to pay it off in installments. She paid the whole amount upfront. The clerk even gave her a discount.

At home, she fixed herself up. She strapped on her tallest heels, squeezed into her sequin dress, and applied make-up to her face as best she could. She wanted to keep the room a shade dark, and she thought it might be a nice idea to light some candles. For the background, she hung a red sheet on the wall. It wasn't the prettiest option but she wasn't going to be judged on the setting, so instead she put all her energy into performing the song she had chosen.

Her lips were perfectly synced to the music so that every note seemed to come from her mouth. She was a bit embarrassed when the song ended and she had to walk to the camera to stop it recording. She had no one to press the button for her. But it was a good video, she looked pretty. If Janaína had been on Silvio Santos' production team, she wouldn't have thought twice before choosing that video. Her artistic name was Sylvia, with a yue. She thought it was clever of her to choose that name. Maybe the team would find it interesting to have Sylvia, the crossdresser, beside Silvio Santos.

She got everything together and sent the package two days later. Now, it was just a matter of waiting.

She went back to nodding or shaking her head on the sidewalk outside the hospital. Yes, it was pastel day. Yes, she'd made everything herself. Whenever Janaína felt like yawning she quickly covered her mouth so that she made no sound. Janaína was mute as she sold pastries and mute as she delivered cake. She held out her hand with a little piece of paper. The price of the cake was in the middle, followed by a smiley face, and "thank you for your business" in nice, round letters. Poor girl.

Silvio Santos was coming, she just had to wait.

The above extract was translated by Bruna Dantas Lobato and Julia Sanches

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