

**Those two**  
*Caio Fernando Abreu*

The truth of the matter is, there was nobody else around. Months later, not right at the beginning, one of them would say the office was “a desert of souls”. The other agreed, smiling, proud, aware that he was excluded. And, slowly, between beers, they exchanged acid comments about voracious, unloved women, the chats they overheard about soccer, Secret Santa, gift lists, bookmaking, lottery, fortune-teller’s address, paperclips attached to the time clock, occasional snacks at the end of the shift, domestic champagne in plastic cups. In a desert of deserted souls, one special soul immediately recognizes another – perhaps that’s why, who knows? But neither asked himself.

They never used words like “special”, “different”, or anything like that. Despite the fact that, without show, they had recognized each other in the first second of the first minute. Fact is, however, they had no clue as to how to name their emotions, or even how to try and understand them. Not that they were very young, too ignorant or even a little stupid. Raul was a year over thirty. Saul, a year under. But the differences between them were not limited to that time, or those letters. Raul was coming from a failed marriage, three years and no children. Saul from an engagement so endless that it had to come to an end one day, and a frustrated Architecture course. Perhaps that’s why he drew. Just faces with huge eyes, no iris, no pupils. Raul listened to music and, sometimes, on a binge, would play the guitar and sing, especially old boleros in Spanish. And they both liked movies.

They were hired in the same selection at the same company, but had not met

---

© Caio Fernando Abreu. Com permissão especial.

Texto de referência: [www.releituras.com](http://www.releituras.com)

Those two

during the tests. They were introduced to each other on the first day at work. They said nice to meet you, Raul, nice to meet you, Saul, then, what's your name again? grinning, amused at the coincidence. But, discreetly, since they were new with the company and the people, after all, you never know where you stand. They tried to withdraw almost immediately, deliberately limiting themselves to a daily hello, how are you, or, at the most, on Fridays, a cordial have a nice weekend. But, from the start there was something – fate, the stars, destiny, who knows? – conspiring against (or in favor of, why not?) those two.

Their desks were side by side. Nine hours a day, with an hour lunch break. And, lost in the midst of what, months later, Raul (or was it Saul?) would call precisely “a desert of souls”, so they wouldn't feel so cold, so thirsty, or simply because they were human, without wanting to justify them – or, on the contrary, justifying them completely and profoundly, whatever: what else could one expect from those two other than, little by little, to get closer, to get to know each other, to mix? And that is what happened. So gradually, they barely noticed.

## II

They were two lonely young men. Raul had come from the North, Saul from the South. In that city, everyone came from the North, the South, the Midwest, the East – and by that I mean it's a detail that did not make them especially different. But, in the desert all around, everyone else had other references, a wife, an uncle, a mother, a lover. They had no one in that city – nor, in a way, in any other – except themselves. I was about to say they had nothing, but that wouldn't be entirely true.

Besides the guitar, Raul had a rented phone, a turntable with a radio, and a thrush called Carlos Gardel in a cage. Saul, a color TV with a ghost image, sketch books, bottles of Indian ink and a book of Van Gogh prints. On the wall, another Van Gogh print: that bedroom with the small crooked-looking straw chair, the narrow bed, the floorboards, hanging on the wall facing the bed. Lying down, Saul sometimes had the feeling the picture was a mirror reflecting, almost photographically, his own room, with just himself missing. Almost always, it was then that he would draw.

They were two handsome young men too, everyone thought so. The women in the office, married or single, got jittery when they appeared, so tall and proud, as one of the secretaries remarked, wide-eyed. Unlike the other men, some even younger than they, neither had a paunch, or the despondent attitude of someone who stamps or types papers eight hours a day.

Dark, a bluish tone under his shave, Raul was a bit more muscular and had a deep bass voice, so in keeping with the bitter boleros he enjoyed singing. They

were the same height, the same build, but Saul seemed slighter, more fragile, maybe because of his fair hair, tight-curved, his startled eyes, pale blue.

They looked good together, the young women would say. A sight for sore eyes. Without being exactly aware of it, when they were together both stood even straighter and almost glittered, so to speak, the inner beauty of one bringing out the outer beauty of the other, and vice-versa. As if between those two there were a strange and secret harmony.

## III

They crossed paths, silent but amiable, at the table with the coffee thermos, commenting on the weather or their dull jobs, then went back to their desks. Once in a long while, one asked the other for a cigarette, and they nearly always swapped comments like, I really want to quit, but I've never actually tried, or I've tried so often, now I can't be bothered. That went on for a long time. And it would have gone on longer, since they were both so reserved, almost remote, it was a feature they brought from afar. From the North, from the South.

Except that one day Saul came in late, and in reply to a vague what happened, said that he had stayed up watching an old movie on TV. Out of politeness, or as a social ritual, or simply so that the other wouldn't feel so bad for coming to work at almost eleven, in a rush, unshaven, Raul rested his fingers on the typewriter keyboard and asked: what movie? *The Children's Hour*, Saul answered quietly, with Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine, a very old movie, no one knows it. Raul gazed at him slowly, more attentively, what do you mean, no one knows it? I know it and I really like it. Stunned, he invited Saul for a coffee and, during what was left of that chilly June morning, the ugly building looking more than ever like a prison or a psychiatric clinic, they talked and talked about the movie.

Other movies would follow during the next few days, and, as naturally as if somehow it were unavoidable, were followed by personal stories, the past, some dreams, small hopes and, above all, complaints. About that office, that life, that knot that they confessed, on a gray Friday afternoon, lay deep inside their hearts. For the first time, throughout that weekend they obscurely longed, one in his studio apartment, the other in the boarding house, for Saturday and Sunday to go quickly, to turn the corner of midnight and once again flow into Monday morning when they would meet again for: a coffee. And that is exactly what happened, and one told how he had had a few too many, the other that he had slept most of the time. They spoke of many things, those two, on that morning, but not of the longing they hadn't even clearly noticed they had felt.

On the lookout, the women around them arranged after-work gatherings at bars, dance halls, discos, private parties at one or another's place. Initially evasive,

Those two

they eventually gave in, but they almost always ended up hiding away in quiet corners or on balconies to tell each other their endless stories. One evening, Raul took up his guitar and sang *Tú Me Acostumbraste*. At the same party, Saul drank too much and threw up in the bathroom. On their way to their separate cabs, Raul spoke of his broken marriage for the first time. Staggering, Saul spoke of his long engagement. And in their drunkenness they agreed that they were sick of all of the women in the world, their complicated plots, their petty demands. That they enjoyed being the way they were now, alone, masters of their own lives. Even though – and this remained unspoken – they had no idea what to do with them.

The next day, with a hangover, Saul didn't go to work or even call. Restless, Raul spent the whole day wandering through the suddenly cold, deserted corridors, silently singing *Tú Me Acostumbraste*, between countless cups of coffee and half a pack of cigarettes more than usual.

## IV

The weekends became so drawn out that one day, in the middle of some conversation, Raul gave Saul his phone number, if you need anything, if you get sick, you never know. On Sunday after lunch, Saul called just to know what the other was up to, and visited him, and for dinner they had the food from Minas Gerais that the housekeeper had prepared on Saturday. It was then, acid and united, that they spoke of that desert, those souls. They had known each other for almost six months. Saul got along with Carlos Gardel, who attempted a timid tune at nightfall. But the one who sang was Raul: *Perfidia*, *La Barca* and, at Saul's request, once, twice, *Tú Me Acostumbraste*. Saul especially liked that subtle little bit that went *llegaste a mi como una tentación, llenando de inquietud mi corazón*. They played a few rounds of all-fours and, at around nine, Saul left.

On Monday, neither of them said a word about the previous day. But they did talk more than ever and went for lots of coffees. The girls in the office kept watch on them, sometimes whispering, but without their noticing. During that week, for the first time, they had lunch together in Saul's room, since he wanted to go upstairs to show off his drawings; visitors were not allowed in the evenings, but now it was five to two and the time clock was inexorable. They left for lunch and came back to work together from then on, usually in high spirits. Some time after that, with the excuse of watching *Sandra of a Thousand Delights* on Saul's TV, Raul sneaked into the boarding house, a bottle of brandy in the inside pocket of his jacket. Sitting on the floor, their backs against the narrow bed, they paid almost no attention to the movie. They couldn't stop talking. Singing *Io Che Non Vivo*, Raul looked at the drawings and stared for a long time at the Van Gogh print, then asked Saul how he managed to live in such a small room. He seemed genu-

inely concerned. Isn't it sad? he asked. Saul gave a big smile: you get used to it.

Every Sunday, now, Saul would call. And come over. They had lunch or dinner, drank, smoke, talked all the time. While Raul sang – sometimes *El Día Que Me Quieras*, sometimes *Noche de Ronda* – Saul would stroke Carlos Gardel's tiny head, perched on his finger. Sometimes they looked at each other. And always smiled. One night, because it was raining, Saul ended up sleeping on the sofa. The next day, they arrived together at work, their hair wet from the shower. The girls didn't talk to them. The pot-bellied, disheartened clerks exchanged glances that the two would never understand even if they had noticed. But, they didn't, not the looks nor the two or three quips. When it was just ten to six, they left together, tall and proud, to watch the latest Jane Fonda movie.

## V

At the beginning of spring, it was Saul's birthday. Because he thought his friend was lonely, or for some reason or other, Raul gave him the cage with Carlos Gardel. At the beginning of summer, it was Raul's birthday. And, because he was broke and his friend had nothing hanging on the walls of his tiny apartment, Saul gave him the Van Gogh print. But, between these two birthdays, something happened.

In the north, at the start of December, Raul's mother died and he had to spend a week away. Disoriented, Saul wandered through the corridors at the company, waiting for a call that never came, trying in vain to concentrate on the invoices, papers and records. At night, in his bedroom, he wasted his time watching trashy soaps or drawing eyes that became bigger and bigger, while he stroked Carlos Gardel. He drank a lot that week. And he had a dream: he was walking between the people at the office, all dressed in black, accusing. All except Raul, all in white, opening his arms to him. They held each other tightly, so close they could smell each other's scent. He awoke thinking, but he's the one who should be mourning.

Raul was not in mourning when he returned. Late on a Friday afternoon, he called the office and asked Saul to go see him. His low bass voice seemed even lower, even deeper. Saul went. Raul had let his beard grow. Oddly, instead of looking older, tougher, he was almost like a young boy. They drank a great deal that evening. For a long time, Raul spoke about his mother – I could have been nicer to her, he said, and he didn't sing. When Saul was about to leave, he started to cry. Without really knowing what he was doing, Saul reached out and, before he realized it, his fingers had touched Raul's beard. Too quickly to really understand, they held each other tight. And they were so close they could smell each other's scent: Raul's, like a wilted flower, a closed drawer; Saul's, after-shave, talcum powder. This went on for a long time. Saul's hand touched Raul's beard;

Those two

Raul stroked Saul's tiny curls. They said nothing. In the silence, they could hear a faucet dripping from afar. It lasted such a long time that when Saul reached out for the ashtray, his cigarette had become one long ash that he crushed without any idea why.

Then they drew apart. Raul said something like I'm all alone in the world, and Saul answered something like, you have me now and forever. They used big words – nobody, world, always – and they squeezed each other's hands at the same time, looking into each other's eyes, shot with smoke and booze. Though it was Friday and they did not have to go to work the next day, Saul said good-bye. He walked for hours through the empty streets, inhabited only by cats and whores. At home, he stroked Carlos Gardel until both fell asleep. But just before, without understanding why, he started to weep, feeling lonely and poor and ugly and unhappy and confused and abandoned and drunk and sad, sad, sad. He wanted to call Raul, but didn't have any change and it was so late.

Some time later, it was Christmas and then New Year, which they spent together, turning down invitations from their workmates at the office. Raul gave Saul a reproduction of the *Birth of Venus*, which he hung on the wall exactly where Van Gogh's room had been. Saul gave Raul a record called *Dalva de Oliveira's Greatest Hits*. The song they most listened to was *Nossas Vidas*, paying close attention to the part that said *even our kisses are like the kisses of one who's never loved*.

On New Year's Eve, after opening the bottle of champagne in Raul's apartment, Saul raised his glass and toasted to our friendship, which will never, never end. They drank until they were completely wasted. When they were getting ready for bed, changing in the bathroom, very drunk, Saul said he would sleep naked. Raul looked at him and said you have a beautiful body. So do you, Saul replied, and lowered his eyes. Both lay down naked, one on the bed behind the closet, the other on the sofa. Almost all night, one could see the other's cigarette burning, penetrating the dark like a devil with burning eyes. In the morning, Saul left without saying goodbye so Raul wouldn't notice the dark circles under his eyes.

January came, it was almost time for their vacation – they had planned it all together, maybe Parati, Ouro Preto, Porto Seguro – and they were surprised the morning when their boss called them, close to midday. It was sweltering. Sweating profusely, the boss cut to the chase. He had received some anonymous letters. He refused to show them. Their faces pale, they listened to words like “an ostensive and abnormal relationship”, “shameless aberration”, “sick behavior”, “deviant character”, always signed by A Watchful Guardian of Morality. Saul lowered his pale eyes, but Raul stood up. He looked very tall when, with one hand on his friend's shoulder and the other held boldly in front of him, he managed to utter the word never, before the boss, among other things, like the-reputation-of-our-company, said coldly: you're both fired.

They slowly emptied out their drawers, the office empty at lunchtime, without looking into each other's eyes. The summer sun scorched the metal desktops. In a big brown envelope, Raul put an enormous pair of eyes, no irises nor pupils, a present from Saul, who placed in his brown, slightly coffee-stained envelope the lyrics to *Tú Me Acostumbraste*, handwritten by Raul on some August afternoon. They took the elevator downstairs together, in silence.

But when they stepped out onto the sidewalk, leaving the huge, old building that looked like a clinic or a prison, seen from above by their workmates who all stood at the windows, one in a white shirt, the other in blue, they seemed even taller and prouder. They stood for a while in front of the building. Then took the same cab, Raul opening the cab door so Saul could get in. Ain't that sweet, someone called from the window. But they didn't hear. The taxi had turned the corner by then.

During the rest of the dusty afternoons that January, when the sun was like an enormous fried egg in the cloudless blue sky, no one else could work in peace at the office. Almost all of them had the unmistakable feeling they would be miserable forever. And they were.