

A confusing story

Caio Fernando Abreu

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It was Thursday. Like each of the last few Thursdays, he was very nervous. After throwing the envelope he had in his hand on the table, he walked aimlessly around the room.

"Another letter?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He just shrugged impatiently, which could mean so many things. But he didn't say a thing. So, I opened the envelope and read the carefully typed letters:

I saw you behind the roses and there was a stifled yearning in your eyes. As if you wanted to talk to me. I swear I tried to approach you when you were leaving, but I was afraid. I know we are going to be friends one day. I don't want to push. Today is Sunday, a little before lunch. The house is empty. I wish I had written right after that night. It may seem incredible, but twenty years ago this same day – at this same hour – I was born.

"It's lovely", I said. "Perhaps a little juvenile. But, lovely. After all, youth is always charming."

"He's twenty."

"He? How do you know it's he and not her?"

"I can guess, I feel it. A woman wouldn't write things like that. I don't know, the style, there's something about it".

"Might be". I said.

"And there was another letter, I don't think I showed you. He said he was a tired man, that's it, *man*, not a woman".

"I don't remember", I lied. "and he could be lying. This date, for example, this date could be forged."

He avoided my eyes to say:

"I went to an astrologer. He was born September 22, 1954. Between about ten and noon. He's a Virgo, the astrologer said, the last day of Virgo. By his calculations, his ascendant must be Scorpio." "Ascendant?"

- You know, the sign that... whatever." he looked up, annoyed. "Hey, you're not expecting a lesson in astrology, right?"

"No, I just wanted to know what it meant."

"It means he must be smart. Really smart. And secretive, mysterious, intense. Just by reading the letters you can tell He has a certain ... a certain structure. The letters are well-written, the grammar is always correct."

"That's true", I replied, "never a mistake."

He sat on the edge of the bed, then sank into the pillow.

"He knows everything about me, my schedule, everything. Sometimes he talks about people I know, places I've been. He must have always been around, must know so many people I know." "You're in such a state."

"Of course. How should I feel? Every time I get one of these letters I feel like this. It makes me feel weird. I go out in the street and it's like I'm being watched. Someone I don't know follows my every step." "Lovingly," I said.

He lit a cigarette and gazed at the smoke floating up to the ceiling.

"Love? I don't know. It's a little paranoid. It's like he wants to slowly drive me crazy."

"Or make you take an interest in him."

He suddenly sat up and leaned over the table. From where I was I could only see his hunched shoulders and his hands holding his tousled hair.

"I keep imagining the most amazing stories. Sometimes I think someone is playing a joke on me."

"No," I said once again, "It's love."

"Is it? There are things, at least some of the things he writes, that feel like love. I don't know, they seem so sincere, you know? His words touch me, they move me. Maybe I'm flattered that someone appears to be paying me so much attention."

"It's love" I said for the third time.

He walked to the window. I noticed that he was looking at the palm trees lining the street, rustling in the cold wind.

"Sometimes I want to play the detective. But the clues are very subtle. Common stamps, a simple envelope, each letter with a different postmark. And this is the most common typewriter there is."

"Lettera 22."

He threw the cigarette butt out the window, turned to me suddenly and

looked me in the eyes:

"How do you know?"

"Well, anyone who deals with typewriters can recognize it right away. It's unmistakable." I stated. Then I changed subject: "But it is still beautiful."

"Beautiful and confounding".

"And old."

"Anonymous letters. It's like something from a last century novel. An epistolary novel. Platonic". He took a deep breath. "But I need to find out who this guy is soon. No one has ever taken such an interest in me".

He sat against the table, lit up another cigarette. I offered him the ashtray:

"You always smoke too much on Thursdays."

He laughed:

"And now on Wednesdays too. I keep wondering if another letter will arrive the next day." He inhaled deeply, eyes closed. And added, releasing the smoke: "I've written him too."

"What?"

"I have been writing him in secret."

"You haven't told Martha about this?"

"Are you nuts? You know how jealous she is, you're the only one I've told. I have to write in secret. Locked up in my office, I keep thinking that my words must release some kind of ghost that flies out the window - I always leave it open when I write him - and then, floats over the rooftops and through the streets and walls of the city until it reaches him, you know?"

"And what do you do with the letters you write?"

"I keep them. Under lock and key. Maybe some day I'll be able to deliver them to him in person."

I also lit a cigarette.

"And... what do you say in these letters?"

"I ask for help. I say my marriage is horrible, and it has been this never-ending horror for three years. Can you believe Martha started calling me 'muffin'? Is there anything more odious than that? On Sundays she asks me for a section of the paper and says 'hey muffin, we need to see this sale, muffin; it'll only last till the 15th, muffin.'"

"But Martha was such a... special woman".

"Before we got married. After that, every woman becomes a lamebrain. You're so lucky you didn't fall into that trap."

I put out the cigarette:

"What else do you say in these letters?"

He leaned over the table again, one hand on his head, the other softly smoothing out the timber table-top. Like a caress:

"I say that sometimes I wish I had a friend like when I was a teenager. The

kind you told everything to, absolutely everything. And in the end, you don't even know whether he is a friend or a brother".

"Or a lover".

"Or a lover," He repeated. Then he fell onto the bed once more, took a crumpled up sheet of paper from his pocket and read: "I can tell you I am willing to do anything", I say, "Get closer to me. Look at me, touch me, say anything. Or don't say a word, but come near. Don't be an idiot, don't let this disappear, go to dust, vanish. Soon, you'll grow older and think this was all so stupid. Before it all goes away, while I can still say yes, please, come closer."

He folded the paper and stuffed it into his pocket, crumpling it even more. We looked at each other. I didn't know what to say. He sank into the bed once again and turned to the wall. I went on listening. "I talk to you as if I were talking to him a little. If you could help, if he could help. It's all so complicated. I walk the streets and look at all twenty-year-old men, as if each and every one could be him. I feel things I don't really understand. I don't like not understanding what I feel. I don't enjoy dealing with what I don't know. I never felt like this before."

A gush of wind opened the window, spreading the ashes from the ashtray all over the table. He looked smaller, shrunken, on the bed. I kept on listening:

"I'm thirty-four, I can't feel things as if I were fifteen. You know how it is, we're almost the same age. How old are you now?"

"Thirty three," I said.

"You see, you get it. We are too old for this frenzy."

"You think so?" I asked. But he kept on speaking without listening.

"It's so uncanny to suddenly find out there is someone thinking about me all the time. Someone I don't know. And who's twenty years old. I keep picturing some crazy things, I can't help it."

"What kinds of things," I whispered, "do you think about?"

He slid his hand over the white wall.

"Lying down beside him. Naked. Holding him close in my arms. Kissing him. On the mouth." On the wall, his hand clenched and moved towards his body, resting between his legs. "It must be the North wind, this bright light, springtime coming, the almost full moon. I don't know, I'm sorry. I'm kind of confused."

He suddenly went quiet. He was looking out the window as if he saw something beyond the palm trees, something I couldn't see. I still didn't know what to say. I got up to stretch out my hand and touch his tousled hair. What if this fellow were not really twenty, I thought about asking, would you still love him? But I thought maybe I shouldn't say a thing. My hand stopped in mid air, I pulled it back and got another cigarette. But I still stood close to him. Closer, really close. It was another Thursday, this time in September, and ever since August, we were both very, very confused.

Romantic Cliche

Daniel Galera

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It was imperative to convince her that I loved her. That's why I avoided looking directly at her lower lip, jutting out moistly, at the gracious stretch of bosom her low-cut top displayed, that spot of muscular softness where her breasts began. Any inkling of excitement would ruin my plan. Because, reader, I'm no fool: I have read enough by evolutionist psychologists to know that a man's chances of convincing a woman of his eternal love improve dramatically when he is not picturing sexual intercourse with her. Devising proof of your love is an intellectual endeavor.

Camila drinks more than me, and focuses her sad eyes on the glass. As any anatomic masterpiece, she is a selective girl. It is not her fault. Natural selection has not yet been able to assimilate the significance of a birth control pill. To Camila's genes, it makes no sense to invest in an unproductive sexual relationship. We actually had a lot of sex in the first few months. It has been a few weeks since she lost interest in carnal issues and what is left are these sad, analytical looks she sheds into the beer glass as a way to force me to say something; to say yes, I am happy with our relationship; to say no, I have not been interested in other women; to say that I love her, of course I do. And I'll say it, yes I will, that's the whole reason I arranged to meet her at a bar tonight. When a woman is in a stalemate, you need to transform her hopes into certainties. If I can't fool her, soon some other dude will.

I will admit, in advance, to all these charges: cynicism, egocentricity, male chauvinism, selfishness. Problem solved, I now suggest the reader imagine Camila: she's hot, a little snobbish, and she loves European films that she barely understands. My opinion is that she could read more, but this can be easily solved with proper guidance. I had already started working on this a few days