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Garota

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Garota

Steven Byrd

Antônio pauses from a droning sequence of G-E-D, G-E-D, G-E-D to listen to silence. He rubs his eyes and looks down at the worn and faded middle black keys, sipping the remaining lukewarm coffee with his right hand. His left begins to experiment with some new chords, trying to will life into the G-E-D as he hums. He returns the coffee cup to the cork coaster next to the scrawled notation sheet, pulls a chewed pencil from his ear and violently scribbles out the last line. He exhales a full measure. He then glances at the pictures of his wife and children watching over him, then at an old photograph of his mother and stepfather who had given him this brown piano, then at a blue statuette of Nossa Senhora da Aparecida. “*Nossa Senhora,*” he gently pleases to her, palms pressing into his stubble-filled cheeks.

Antônio closes his eyes and returns to his most memorable recital as a young man, a time and place when he played in the presence of his family and then fiancée Thereza. Feet at peddles, arching proudly, he inhales as his teachers taught him. He senses, hears, and then begins to feel the song following into his fingertips. He raises his palms in the manner of a veteran conductor, “*O Mestre Antônio,*” and gently opens Debussy’s “*Clair de lune*”...

He stops and repeats the opening chords, noticing one of the keys is out of tune. “*Ishhh..., está desafinado,*” he says. He opens the piece again...

Relaxed, Antônio floats away with the chords and notes, feeling them translate from his fingertips into a peaceful ocean of harmonies and melodies. Louder and faster it becomes, crescendo and crescendo. Lifting and filling, it overflows into a cascading tidal wave of

arpeggiated ecstasy, rolling and falling and flowing rhythmically from the sea and onto the sand...

Again Antônio pauses and looks at his undecipherable sheet of scribbles and notes and messages. He attempts again the G-E-D, coupling it with a number of variations of chords that he just played from Debussy. Again he hears the same. He crumples the paper and throws it on the floor and strikes a cacophonous chord with his palm. “*Nossa Senhora,*” Antônio whispers, then walks to the kitchen.

By the sink he reaches for the blue coffee thermos on the wooden tray with used and unused cups and sugar in a white porcelain bowl. There he sees a note left by Thereza when she left this morning. He pours the last of the coffee and rereads Thereza’s note written on a torn piece of scrap paper with hearts and scattered stars.

The kids and I will be back for dinner.

Love always,

Thereza

He takes the chewed pencil from his ear and writes “Thereza my love” inside one of the hearts. He then adds quarter notes in the middle of the other stars drawn above the words while he sips his coffee, standing.

Antônio sits by the window that overlooks the park. In the corner of the window he ponders the shades of pink and blue piercing through the clouds, now ambling after the morning rain. Corcovado and Cristo o Redentor, now visible, bless the marvelous city below. On the table he finds more crumpled cream notation sheets, a song he was teaching Eliseth Cardoso, and a letter from yesterday, probably picked up by Thereza, unopened. On the envelope it simply says,

“Carta ao Tom,” from “O Poetinha.” A gentle breeze enters the window and ruffles the note and crumpled notation sheets. Outside he can hear the palm trees.

Antônio opens the envelope and chuckles. He rubs his eyes and walks to the phone.

“Alô, Vinícius.”

“Oi Tom.”

“Are you free for a drink at the Veloso?”

“Sure, 3 o’clock?”

“See you then.”

At 3:20 Antônio puts on his cream-colored Panama hat by the door, descends the staircase, and steps from his apartment on Rua Nascimento e Silva, 107. He stops to watch the high palm trees swaying above. A breeze softly, then loudly, waves their reeds: pianissimo, crescendo, altissimo. As the breeze eases he hears the song of a Sabiá singing somewhere amidst the lush foliage, perhaps courting a mate in some distant palm tree, perhaps just singing. While looking in vain to find the Sabiá, he lightly whistles his song, smiles, and stares to the misty magnificence of the hunchbacked Corcovado hill rising like a cathedral among the Serra Fluminense, now in full view.

He walks into the diagonal path of the park where the weekend painters and artisans, old and young, gather on the weekend to sell their art to the locals and tourists. He slows down to look at a few, listening to the native sounds of the Cariocas and foreign sounds of the tourists.

“Oi Tom,” yells a large, wrinkled man, sitting cross-legged on a granite bench in a grey suit with black top hat. To his side rests a rusted saxophone, lying in its case. “Any new sambas?”

“Oi Pixinguinha,” Antônio says, shaking his hand, then his head. He sits next to him on the bench by the sax, adjusting his Panama hat for the afternoon sun.

“It’s ok, *garoto*,” he says in his baritone Carioca voice. “There will always be more.”

Pixinguinha puts his lips to the rusted sax; his burly, coffee-colored hands caressing its body. He taps his shiny black shoe, inhales, and begins to effortlessly move his bulky fingers up and down the faded keys. A buttery melody echoes through the park and beyond the palm trees of the neighborhood. It’s “Desafinado,” one of Antônio’s songs, which he said was inspired by the many local singers who tried to imitate Frank Sinatra off key and in some incomprehensible language. Pixinguinha sustains and fades the final note of the verse, then lets out a hoarse giggle for the applauding foreign women. “Thank you, *obrigado*,” he nods, tipping his hat, and turns to Antônio. “You see, *garoto*? There are more songs to come. There will always be more.”

“*Obrigado*, Pixinguinha. Sorry but I have to go. I’m meeting Vinícius at 3.”

“Tell him I said hello.”

Antônio moves along the stone flower mosaic streets, faintly hearing a Choro from Pixinguinha’s sax, floating somewhere above, the silky notes fading into the now nascent sounds of the ocean breeze. Young Carioca men and women, *garotos e garotas*, dressed for school, for work, for the

beach, walk up and down the streets in dark leather shoes, in high heels, in flip-flops, in unshod feet black and white and brown.

He stops at the corner to wait for the traffic of 1950s automobiles moving left and right, right and left, roaring cacophonously, spewing smoke that dirties the overhanging palm trees and adjacent apartments. He cannot hear the palm trees anymore; nor the *sabiá*, *Pixinguinha*, or the ocean breeze, only the inharmony of civilization.

At this corner is a two-storey pink house where an old woman named *Senhora Amparo* lives. Behind the stern iron bars that rise from the ground like medieval pikes, the freshly painted house, encased with black, steely balconies with dozens of hanging ferns, stands. Three glass doors with wavering white curtains open over the terrace, inhaling the ocean breeze, cooling the old colonial house. Below the terrace, trees and flowers abound throughout the circling maze of stone walkways and round fountains. There, many *Andorinhas* bathe during the heat of the afternoons, as mulatto gardeners trim plants or dig into the tropical, crimson earth.

Antônio crosses diagonally to the house and moves towards the *Bar do Veloso*, located two blocks from the beach. The salty, sandy moisture becomes warmer, denser, and sticky. Beyond the horizon, a soccer ball, *uma bola de futebol*, rises and falls as the players coalesce and move in natural ebb and flow on the sands of the beach. In the distant, immense sea, mounds of lands, tiny islands or oases these, float where the Portuguese caravels passed 460 years ago and entered Guanabara Bay in the month of January. "*Rio de Janeiro*," announced *o capitão*, thinking he had just entered the mouth of an enormous river. But it was the Tupis, perhaps the first inhabitants here, fishers and hunters they, who named that beach. Why the name "bad

water” for such a beautiful place? Perhaps some words are best left in the original, untranslated; or are simply beyond our comprehension?

In the outdoor area of the Bar do Veloso sits Vinícius at a shiny, wooden table, a folded newspaper in hand. With his white shirt unbuttoned, exhibiting his graying chest, he contemplates, or poeticizes, while drinking at least his second whiskey in his right hand; at his left, a pack of cigarettes and smoking ashtray. But, instead of reading, contemplating, or poeticizing, he concentrates on every movement of a soccer game on the cherished black and white television at the back of the bar. The other cherished item – *the most famous photograph of the Veloso* – was an autographed poster of Carmen Miranda (who Vinícius thought looked more Hindu than Carioca).

Antônio enters the Veloso and feels the light breeze of the wooden ceiling fan droning in the middle of the barroom for the few afternoon clients who stopped for a beer or caipirinha or pineapple juice with mint.

“Oi Tom!” shouts Vinícius, saluting with whiskey in hand, in usual unison.

“Sorry I am late. I just ran into Pixinguinha in the park. We talked for a long time about a *samba-canção* I have been trying to compose. He said to say hello.”

Antônio sits down, takes off his hat, and raises his hand for the waiter. A proudly postured young mulatto dressed in all white cotton clothes and shiny black shoes nears the table.

“How is Pixinguinha?”

“Great as always. Still playing great, too. The best sax in Rio he is.”

The waiter quickly arrives with a new ashtray and wipes the counter in front of Antônio. “Good afternoon, Senhor Antônio,” he greets him in a strong Carioca accent.

“Good afternoon, *garoto*,” says Antônio, asking for the usual, *um chopp*, a draught beer.

The waiter affirms, *sim senhor*, and quickly turns to the bar in long steps.

“Who’s playing today?”

“Botafogo – Santos. Santos is winning, of course, two goals by Pelé. Pure theater he is: poetic, graceful, beautiful; the very essence of *o jogo bonito*. Too bad he is playing for the wrong team. *Vamos Botafogo*,” he yells, clapping, cheering a good shot on goal.

The waiter brings the *chopp* on a tray for Antônio and lays a cardboard coaster on the table that says:

Bar do Veloso

O melhor do Rio

Foam spills over the sweating glass.

“Another whiskey, senhor?”

“You better make it a double the way Botafogo are playing.”

“Of course,” says the waiter, exiting in long strides.

“How have you been, Vinícius?”

“The usual: too many women. How can you ask a poet to love only one woman? Can you ask a musician to love only one song? They never understand. But they are all lovely. I want to marry them all.”

“Really? How many times are you going to marry?”

“As many times as it takes.”

Antônio chuckles and sips his beer. “*Saúde*,” he says to Vinícius.

“*Saúde, garoto,*” says Vinícius, toasting his whiskey with Antônio’s *chopp*. They both drink in unison.

“Vinícius, what do you think about this new capital city Presidente Kubischek is constructing? Did they consult you about that?”

“*Garoto,* politicians don’t consult poets. If they did, the world would be a different place.”

“He’s hired Oscar Niemeyer to design the city. ‘Brasília’ it will be named, ‘the capital of hope’.”

“Niemeyer is great, and these are exciting new times of ‘hope’, indeed. But Brazil, *garoto,* is still Brazil. We are not the United States, not Europe. We have enormous social problems here to solve. Do we really want a group of politicians governing from the middle of nowhere?”

“Yes, it seems like the oldest place on earth, a new far west without cowboys, but with politicians instead of *gaúchos.*”

“Exactly. And Rio is, and always will be, the marvelous city. All we can do now is offer our love and hope for the future of Brasília and for Brazil, *não é, garoto? Vamos Botafogo!*”

As Vinícius watches the game, Antônio rubs his eyes, sips his sweating *chopp*, and stares at the rising bubbles in the glass for the answers to the questions left at the piano. The initial melody runs in his head, Debussy, the Sabiá, Pixinguinha. *What can I do with this?*, he thinks. *What if I put it over an F Major?*

Vinícius slams the table and startles Antônio, causing some alarm in the bar. “Sorry, *garoto.* 3-0 Santos. Pelé again.” A distant, euphoric chant of “*Gooooool...*” fills the bar and

captures the attention of the bar's men. The television camera focuses on Pelé, dressed in all white, running and hugging his teammates, *a alegria do futebol*. Vinícius waves in apology to the waiter who approaches with the double whiskey. "*Obrigado, garoto,*" he says, reiterating with a thumbs-up. He swirls the ice into the whiskey, takes a sip, and exhales.

A larger than normal breeze descends into the neighborhood, giving music to the palm trees and capturing Vinícius' attention. He sips his whiskey again and glances toward the mosaic sidewalks adjacent to the bar. Stepping past the iron bars of the pink house appears a lush, sandy brunette in a transparent, wavering sarong that covers her yellow and green bikini. Her hips saunter and sway in the breeze below her straw hat. She ambles smoothly, pacing rhythmically over the stone flower mosaics. Many *garotos* pause and turn their heads on the other side of the street. *Garotas* look too, perhaps in jealousy, perhaps in admiration, perhaps in curiosity. The young waiter smiles from the bar, and whispers a gentle Carioca sibilant that says nothing but everything, like a shore-bound wave on the beach: "*Ishhh.*"

As the *garota* moves toward the bar, Vinícius' deep blue eyes open and fixate on her. His heart races; his mind fills with fantasies, lust, love, then poetry. "*Caneta, caneta!*" he signals frantically to the waiter for a pen, and turns his returns his eyes to the passing beauty. The waiter paces quickly, grabs a pen at the bar, hurries toward the table.

"*Aqui senhor,*" says the waiter, frantically handing him the pen.

Vinícius smiles and winks at the waiter to see for himself. "*Boa?*" he asks him.

The waiter offers a resounding approval, with a mischievous but veiled, professional smile.

Antônio, still lost in thought, turns around to see what Vinícius and the waiter are looking at. Coming at his back, the swaying *garota* moves along the mosaic cobblestones towards the beach. And then he hears it: *G-G-E-E-E-D, G-G-E-E-E-D-G*. With each of the *garota's* steps, he hears *G-G-E-E-E-D, G-G-E-E-E-D-G*.

Vinícius, with one eye on the girl and one hand on the waiter's back, reaches for a thin napkin in the holder between the two drinks. The three men stare at the girl as she approaches, nodding in bliss. "*Oi garota,*" Vinícius greets her as she passes the bar.

"*Oi,*" she answers calmly, slightly turning, smiling with a little red in her cheeks. Others smile too, watching, enjoying the beauty that passes. Vinícius turns to see her move closer to the mounds in the sea. He then begins to write on the napkin. His pen makes a rhythmic, percussive sound like a samba, each beat etched into paper and wood.

Antônio sees the straw hat, the transparent sarong, the yellow and green bikini, the green flip flops moving gracefully on the stone flower sidewalk. And then he follows her in his notes, *G-G-E-E-E-D-G*. His fingertips begin to move on table as Vinícius etches his poem into the napkin. Beyond her, a *bola de futebol* rises into the sky and falls to the horizon. She becomes smaller, one with the beach.

"Another whiskey for inspiration, João. And here's some inspiration for you, Tom."

Another cry of "*Gooooool...*" rang out. Botafogo finally scored. Vinícius missed it.

Antônio sets the napkin in the music holder and clips it with a laundry pin to a fresh sheet of notation paper. He looks at the photo of Thereza sitting atop the piano, smiling, reminiscing.

“Thereza my love,” he whispers, looking at the picture of himself with her, and with little Paulo and Beth, then just a cutie *garotinha* of one year. He remembers all the children’s games Thereza and he played with them in the park after taking that picture, and the chocolate ice cream they all ate afterward that made Beth’s face and dress dirty.

Closing his eyes to focus on the melody running in his mind, Antônio opens with a sequence of two chords. He hums and pauses, then takes the chewed pencil from his ear and taps it on the notation sheet, humming with each word on the napkin. He scribbles a F7M chord above the first bar with G-G-E-E-E-D and G-G-E-E-E-D-G within the bottom lower lines of the treble clef. In the third and fourth bars he writes above G7(13) with G-G-E-E-E-D and G-G-E-E-E-D-F. In the fifth bar he writes Gm7 with F-F-D-D-D-C-E, and then Gb7(#11) with E-E-C-C-C-Bb-C. He lodges the pencil above his right ear and plays the chords and melody written before him, then again, then again, then again. Moving, melding into a mosaic of chords, gently sauntering into a simple, seductive melody, the *garota*, in her transparent sarong and yellow and green bikini, passes by at his fingertips.

“*Obrigado*,” Antônio whispers, kissing his fingertips and touching the feet of the forever majestic Nossa Senhora da Aparecida. He studies the notation sheet and napkin, humming the melody again, *Da-Da-Da-Da-Da-Da*, tapping the chewed pencil on each note.

“Yes, that might just work. I would like to hear Pixinguinha play this melody on his sax, perhaps with a guitar as accompaniment. But I’m not sure about these lyrics; that’s not much from a poet.”