

## Who is Carlos Ferrão?



The young man was sitting at his desk in the living room. If he peeked to the side of the large computer monitor in his front, he could make out the breathing, living shape of his girlfriend lying on the mattress.

Their bed had been broken by the cleaning ladies, so they had been forced to place the mattress in the only place where there was room: between the couch and the TV, taking over nearly the entire floor space. Just seconds ago, he had turned off all the lights, so he sat there in the dark, his pale face made more so by the monitor's glare.

As usual, sleep had been not kind to him, and, after he had tucked his girlfriend in, he had looked to the computer for entertainment. No, not entertainment. Tonight he was going to finally write something. After all, that's why he put up with that office job all week. Long hours sitting in a desk, revising technical texts and ever so often gazing out the window into the Lisbon skyline. All that waste of time so he could come home at night and have some time to himself and collect his thoughts. Try to make a story out of all those little episodes that he had been through in his life.

This was it: open document in the screen, a keyboard with all the characters in it, go! But he didn't. He couldn't come up with a beginning. He just about knew what he wanted to write about, but the words didn't come out. He tried to start a few times, but ended up deleting it all every single time.

After a few minutes he gave up and closed the document file in subdued frustration. The time at home was to relax and rest for the next day of slavery. He had already worked hard during the day. After all, he should be sleeping by now. This was free time, not working or writing time. The story would have to wait, so he fired up his favorite computer game and went at it.

He glided through the earlier levels but even this familiar game became hard too soon. He hadn't dared to turn on the speakers, so his character kept being attacked from out of his view and dieing with wearisome regularity. In an impulse he shut off the game forgetting to save his position first. He slammed the desk with his fist and cursed, but a vague moan from the mattress immediately quieted him down.

He went through his options. Sleep was out of the question. He was agitated and, after all, he hadn't had his entertainment tonight. He definitely could not face another day at work tomorrow without indulging a bit before going to bed.

His hand reached under the desk and turned on the modem. It was expensive and they could ill-afford to connect but he decided he would just check his email. His friends sometimes sent him jokes and funny videos, and those might distract him enough for sleep to take over.

Neither of his three email accounts had anything new in their inboxes. What now? He had already checked his favorite websites at work so there was nothing else to do.

He opened an internet search engine page. The cursor blinked and blinked but there was nothing he wanted to search, nothing he wanted to know more about. Without thinking, he typed his name and pressed the search button.

He laughed at some of the results. Small parts of his past listed arbitrarily. On the first link, his name in a mailing list for a sci-fi series he had long abandoned as too childish. On the second, a list of trophies won by a 20 th century long-distance runner whose name he shared. The third link caught his attention and made him click.

It was for a message board he had used to visit a couple of years ago. In fact, it was the only place in the internet he had ever voiced his opinions openly and with no shame. The design had changed: lots of hearts and pink ribbons, which made sense considering it was place for discussion of love and relationships. He clicked the link that took him to a list of all his posts. Reading through them the name of his former girlfriend was ubiquitous.

He chose one at random and clicked it. In that post he rambled on and on about how good his relationship was. The memories of that relationship pained him. It hadn't ended well with him kicking her out of the house for a hazy infidelity suspicion. Later, when he had thought about it, it had all seemed just a way to escape from a commitment he hadn't been ready to take.

He clicked some of the other posts and they read like a diary of a model relationship. All those routine moments that when shared with the right person became fantastic, were on proud display. A rush of good memories came back to him, and he had done a thorough job the past few years trying to keep only the bad ones. He closed the window hoping he could also close that part of his brain.

Going back to the list of search results for his name, he picked out an online photo album. Clicking it, he was surprised by the graphic on the top of the page: the silhouette of a lion in an African savannah at dusk. He had never been to Africa!

With no pause to examine the picture thumbnails he clicked one of them. A large black and white picture of a wedding party now filled his screen. In it, several smiling faces looked at him. Going from left to right he went through each of the people in the picture before stopping at the one in the middle. He wasn't smiling.

He blinked after the picture was taken and then helped one of the black servants place the heavy wedding cake on the table.

Rita was literally having the most important day of her life; she had been smiling non-stop ever since entering the church earlier that day. Compared to most of the other young women in Brazzaville she was smart and educated. He liked that about her. In a country where the daughters of most European immigrants didn't bother to think of anything but their marriage, Rita had managed to at least keep some reading habits. He thought the smile made her look foolish, though, as they cut the cake together.

Later, he was on the balcony having a glass of wine and looking at the hills in the distance. His shirt, now without a tie to hold it closed, flapped with the late afternoon wind. The music in the party still drove on relentless, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Someone poked him in the ribs from behind and he turned around to see Mademoiselle Gerard accompanied by three other men.

"Ha, here you are, Rita has been asking about you."

"Tell her I'll be right over."

"By the way, this is Monsieur Lapin and these are the Aubin brothers."

"It's a pleasure," he said as they shook hands.

"I was telling them that you are new here and that you are from Portugal".

He nodded.

"I didn't know it, but apparently Portugal is one of the best countries in roller hockey, isn't it?"

"Yes, I played a bit when I was younger".

"That's wonderful," they were smiling, "you see Monsieur Lapin and the Aubin brothers are all hockey players at the Association Recreative. You really should join the team there."

"It's been a long time since I last played."

"Skating is something you never forget," said Monsieur Lapin, "we would be thrilled to have you playing with us."

"I left my equipment in Portugal, anyway."

"Nonsense," Monsieur Lapin held his shoulder, "we have extra skates and sticks for you."

"Okay then. I'll try to find some time to go there."

"Have you been to the Association already?" asked Rita.

"Once, for a swim."

"We are all members," insisted Mademoiselle Gerard, "I trust Rita has made you one already?"

"She's talked about it."

"Oh come on, it's not like there's anything else to do around these parts. Except of course for the weddings, baptisms and, obviously, the funerals!"

The tipsy quartet laughed and left.

Night had fallen and he couldn't sleep, so he had left Rita in their bed and got up. They were confined to a single room in her parents's house while their new home was being built, so he really couldn't go anywhere.

He remembered the notebook which he carried in his suitcase. Writing had always been a hobby to which he seldom had time to attend to. One day he hoped to become a writer. He thought that after the grueling years getting his engineering degree, he would now have time to sit down and write. In fact, one of his reasons for marrying so young was that he wouldn't have to spend so much time chasing women; time that could be better spent writing.

With notebook in hand he pondered whether to turn on the lights but decided not to. It would wake up Rita, so he walked to the tall windows and tried his best to read with the available moonlight. Some of the ideas in there were good, some were bad, but none had ever been really developed. He chose a good one about a man who was trying to escape from prison and started to write but it was nearly impossible to tell what he was scribbling down. His tries at holding the notebook in different angles to maximize the amount of light were in vain, so he decided to quit and try to find some free time tomorrow. He put the notebook back in his suitcase where Rita wouldn't find it.

"No moonlight like this in the Old Continent", he thought as he walked back to the window. The moon seemed so big to him down here. Everything seemed bigger in Africa . Grassy land as far as he could see, the wild animals out there roaming without a care.

Looking back to bed he recalled that tomorrow he would visit his father-in-law's factory for the first time. There probably wouldn't be any time for writing, but he promised himself to try again in the coming days after the marriage had lost its novelty. Climbing back into the sheets, he pulled himself close to his wife and closed his eyes hoping to fall asleep quickly.