

SUNFLOWER

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Prologue

Some people are born with the wish of being different: some want to be politicians to mark the History in their country, others want to be football players, others want to have an “ability” that makes them special, like flying, reading people’s minds, mind control, etc, but aren’t we perfect as we are? Normality is the only perfection in our lives, but the thirst for power prevents us from doing the right thing. Even if we have a good heart, we are always prone to corruption, so as to fulfill our thirst for power.

We have the example of some politicians and other people in charge of enterprises who had power but used it for their own good, even if that meant harming people others.

The short story that I present is completely original, but it’s a criticism of the corruptive influence of power. We can say that “If you want to know a man, give him power”.

I - The Birth

On 12th August 1989, in Chaves, an uncommon excitement took over the Ferreira family.

“It’s today! Oh my god! It’s today” Anthony had been repeating this for hours at work. His first son was about to be born and he was feeling something that he had never felt before. His wife, Maria, was in hospital and Anthony couldn’t leave work.

Finally that hour arrived, and he went to a shop near his workplace to buy a toy to give his son after his birth. He bought a green bear; green because it was the color of his football club and Anthony always said “My son will always be like me, at least as far as football choices are concerned”.

When Anthony arrived at the hospital he almost punched a nurse that was preventing him from participating in his son’s birth.

When he arrived, the child was almost out and the excitement was uncontrollable, but finally the little baby got out. Anthony jumped and screamed “My

son! My little baby! My boy!”, while Maria was crying of happiness. Anthony didn’t want to lose time and asked to take the baby in his arms. The nurse gave him the baby and Anthony whispered in the boy’s ears “Now you’re the only reason that I live for. I’ll love you as I’ve never loved anyone before!”.

Maria recovered a bit and asked Anthony to give her the child. Anthony gave him to her and said to Maria “This is the fruit of our love, Maria. He’ll be special and one day we will be proud of him. I want him to be called Richard.” “Richard? Why Richard?” asked Maria. “Richard, The Lion Heart. I’ve always wanted a son with the strength and courage of a lion and he’ll be like this for the rest of his life! Richard, of course, is the name of a much known King of England! So let’s give him a very important name!”

Maria agreed and started crying because of Anthony’s words. He was right.

Their son would be special for them. What they didn’t know was that their son would be really special, not only for them, but for the world!

II – Little Richard’s Born Gift

Five years passed and young Richard was almost going to school. His childhood had been a bit difficult because Anthony had left the country to work in Germany. Even with only five years of age, Richard had a lot of dreams for the future: he wanted to work in Astronomy, once looking at the stars at night fascinated him, and he always prayed to God before going to sleep to bring his father safely back home.

On 12th July 1994, his father came home for vacation. Richard was happy beyond words. That night, he went to sleep with his father and before sleeping Anthony told him a story and Richard whispered “Dad, do not leave again! I need you.” Anthony smiled and said “Yes, my son, I’ll never leave you again, because money means nothing compared to you”

One month had passed since Anthony had returned and Richard couldn’t be happier. When his birthday arrived, Richard invited some friends from his old nursery school.

Richard was playing a lot with his friends outside, in the garden, when he fell and hurt himself on the leg. Some blood appeared on the jeans he was wearing, and Mark, a supposed friend of Richard’s, started teasing him: “Ah, ah! Your father didn’t teach you how to run” said Mark. Richard couldn’t bear to be reminded of his father’s absence. “STOP!” screamed Richard “You can’t tell me those things. Now go away from my party! NOW!”. To everyone’s surprise, Mark, who with six years of age couldn’t stand receiving “orders”, just left and went home.

Even Richard was surprised with himself, but he went inside to try to heal the bruises on his leg! While Maria was taking care of Richard’s injury, she asked “What

have you done or said to Mark to make him leave?" Richard answered "He was laughing at me because I had fallen and he was saying to me that it had been dad's fault for not having told me to run more slowly. I asked him to stop and leave my party and he just went home! Mark isn't the type of person who likes receiving orders!" Maria smiled and said "Now you're ready to run again, go play with your friends, and forget this incident!".

Richard went out to the garden, but a feeling of guilt about Mark was consuming him. He couldn't play with true happiness. For a six-year old child he thought too much of what had happened that afternoon and decided to go to Mark's house the next day.

Richard woke up earlier, threw himself onto his parents' bed, started jumping up and down and saying "Mom! Dad! Wake up! Come on!" "Oh, come on Richard, let me sleep!" said Anthony sleepily. "I need to go to Mark's house and talk to him!" said Richard. "Get up, Anthony, or your son will never shut up. Go with him!" said Maria. Anthony got up, took a quick shower and got dressed. Richard was ready, and they headed to Mark's house.

When they arrived, Richard rang and Mark, after seeing who was at the door, opened it. "Hello Mark, I want to apologize for what I said to you." said Richard. Mark just started laughing at Richard's words. "I don't know why I left, I couldn't stop laughing at you and deep inside I'm still laughing! You're a loser..." said Mark ironically. Enraged, Richard said "I'll leave you, but you'll never talk to me anymore or laugh at my face!" and Mark answered "Ok!"

Richard left Mark's house sadly and even his father couldn't raise his morale. Anthony started driving home, but Richard just said "Let's go to McDonald's and have something to eat!" Anthony answered "Ok son, let's do it!" Richard found it strange, because his father didn't like McDonald's and had never wanted to go there and now he wanted to have lunch there without Mom!

Richard couldn't stop thinking about that, but he liked the idea. After having lunch at McDonald's, Richard asked "Dad, why did we go to McDonald's now if you don't like it?" Anthony didn't know what to answer. He just replied "I don't know! I just said Ok and went there, but to be sincere I didn't want to go there!" Richard smiled to his father "I know you went for me!"

III – The Discoveries

Thirteen years had passed and Richard was now 20 years old, time to go to university. He chose Media Studies instead of Astronomy, because it was easier for him to interact with people, something he loved doing.

His first day was very hard, as he didn't know the new city, Viseu, and he didn't know anyone and when he tried to connect, people just "left him talking alone". The next days things became better and he made some new friends, but nothing was as he had expected. He was angry, sad, because his peers were no more than partners for the night.

On 26th November, Richard woke up with a strange headache, he hadn't drunk or gone to sleep late, but the pain appeared. He took a pill for the pain, but hours passed and it became worse. During classes he couldn't stay focused, the pain was killing him. He said to the teacher that he'd leave because he couldn't handle the pain, so the teacher let him leave without complaining. Richard was going home when he started to feel dizzy and he just fainted in the middle of street. He was woken up by a girl with blue eyes, and, even with the daze that he was still feeling, he looked her straight in the eyes, "Hi!" she said; "Hi! What happened?" asked Richard. The girl laughed and said "You've just fainted right here, I was passing nearby and I slapped your face to wake you up. Here, take some water!" Richard drank the water and got up. "So...Can I know the name of the girl who saved me?" asked Richard. "My name is Lyla, and what is the name of the boy I've just saved?" said Lyla laughing. Richard was very nervous, those eyes... He'd never seen eyes like those! "My...My name...is Richard" he said nervously. "Come, let's go to a nearby café, I think you need to eat something and drink something hot!" said Lyla. "Ok! Let's get something to eat!"

They went and stayed for an hour talking. He told her briefly about his life and why he was studying Media Studies in Viseu. She told him about her life too, but she was studying something he couldn't understand, in another city that he didn't understand either, but he didn't ask again because it would not be appropriate for a first date. They left the café and she offered to drive him home. Richard accepted gladly. He was tired and without strength.

When they arrived at Richard's home he said "Well, it was a pleasure to have met you and I want to thank you. Maybe you want to have dinner with me some evening!". "Well, I can have dinner with you tomorrow, because after that I'll leave the city." "Awesome, so let's dine tomorrow then. Now give me your phone number to call you!" Lyla started writing her phone number on a piece of paper, unhesitantly. She gave him the piece of paper and simply left without a word. Richard found it strange, but he took it.

Richard couldn't stop thinking of this situation, but the most important thing he was thinking about was what had happened to him: destiny...? sickness...?, everything came to his mind and he couldn't find an answer. Richard fell asleep, and he slept for hours, waking only the next day, with a little headache again, but this time it was "not out of control".

At school, everyone was worried about Richard, and he was tired of saying “I’m fine now!”

Richard almost forgot the dinner he was going to have with Lyla, and when he remembered, he just went to a flower shop to buy some flowers. The problem was that he really didn’t know which flowers he would give her. When he arrived at the flower shop a woman who worked there asked Richard “Can I help you?” Richard answered “Yes! I want some flowers to give to a girl this evening on our first date!”. The woman smiled and said, “Nothing better than just one flower for a first date. Any idea?” Richard was a little bit embarrassed, because he really didn’t know which flower he would give her. “I don’t really know...It’s hard to choose!” “Well! Why don’t you try to remember something or some feeling you had when you saw her for the first time?” Richard thought for a while. Then, he remembered her eyes and the sun above her head... “Got it! A sunflower...The sun made her blue eyes shine so brightly that I really wanted to offer her a sun!” said Richard with enthusiasm. The woman smiled and started to wrap it up neatly. “Here it is! I’ve tried to make the flower look even more beautiful, so good luck, young man! I think you deserve it!”

Richard went home, took a shower, and dressed up more carefully than he usually did. Then he called Lyla, “Hi Lyla! It’s Richard! How are you?” “Hi, I’m fine and you, Richard?” asked Lyla “Well, I’m fine now!” “So, shall I pick you up at your home in an hour and then we’ll choose the place where we’re going to have dinner?” asked Richard nervously. “Sure!...well, I need to hang up now, because I’m not ready yet” said Lyla. “ Bye! See you in an hour!”

The hour he waited before picking up Lyla seemed to him much longer than two or three hours would ordinarily have seemed, were he not fallen for Lyla already. He couldn’t stop running around his room. Richard didn’t know how he would give the sunflower to Lyla, but he finally had an idea. He would tell Lyla that something was broken in her car, then she would go and check and he would give the sunflower to her. Richard was going to wait outside for Lyla, when he saw that she was already there. He tried to hide the flower, but Lyla saw it. When Richard and Lyla had got into the car, he gave her the sunflower. She smiled and said “A sunflower! My favorite! How did you find out?” “Well, it was sheer luck then!” said Richard smiling.

Richard and Lyla went to a restaurant near Richard’s home. After they finished dinner, Richard went to the bathroom and when he came back Lyla was smoking. He went up to Lyla and said a bit loudly “Please, do not smoke!”, and something strange happened. Everyone in the restaurant who was smoking put out their cigarettes. It was strange, very strange. Richard had wished that Lyla didn’t smoke there and at that moment everyone stopped smoking. Richard was very confused, he thought that he had an “ability”, because along the years many strange things had happened, like his father

going with him to McDonald's, Mark going home on his anniversary, when he was six, Lyla giving him her phone number so easily and leaving without saying anything, besides other strange situations that had happened in his life, and now this incident. So, he started thinking he was crazy, but he wanted to check if he had (or did not have) the ability of making people fulfill his wishes. Richard told a man who was with his wife "Hey you, dance!" and the man just started dancing. "What was that?" asked Lyla. "I don't know, people are fulfilling my wishes!" "Are you crazy?" asked Lyla ironically. "No, I'm not! Tell me something that you don't want to do!" "I won't!" answered Lyla. Then Richard thought for a while and said "Kiss me!", and Lyla ran to Richard and kissed his mouth. "What was that? Sorry, I didn't want to do this, my mind just froze and I kissed you!" said Lyla feeling a little bit uncomfortable. "See...You did something you didn't want to!" Richard said. "And you did it anyhow. I've got some power!" said Richard. Richard talked with Lyla about the strange things that were happening to him all the time and she was a bit confused. but agreed that Richard could have some ability.

IV – Love

That night Richard couldn't sleep. He was very confused about his ability. He had never thought he could be different. Another thing he was thinking about was Lyla's kiss. Even if that kiss hadn't been spontaneous, it had been something special, anyway "Could I be in love with Lyla?" Richard kept asking himself for hours. So many things crossed his mind: falling in love at first sight and having the ability to persuade people to fulfill his wishes was too much for Richard, but he promised to himself that he'd never use the ability on Lyla.

Next morning, Richard woke up late for school, but he still went to classes. At least he could use his ability to persuade teachers that he had good reasons for arriving late or missing classes. He spent that day texting phone messages with Lyla, and after each message he received he felt he liked Lyla more and more, and they promised each other that they would never tell anyone about Richard's ability.

Days went by and Richard was enjoying his ability: he was using it on teachers to give him good marks, on his school mates to make them pay him something to eat or drink, to be the first to enter the disco and pay nothing. Richard was using the ability inadequately, for his own selfish purposes, and he found it funny. At the same time, Richard was talking even more often with Lyla and sometimes he went to her home just a friend, but the love between each other kept growing. As he'd promised, Richard hadn't used the ability on Lyla for his own benefit. He was enjoying the way they were getting along and feared that using the ability could make them break up.

Months went by, summer came and vacations too. Richard and Lyla were even more in love with each other. The only impediment to their love was the fact that Lyla had a boyfriend. But one day they were talking and Richard thought Lyla was a bit sad, so he asked “What’s the matter with you today? And don’t say ‘It’s nothing’, because I know you.” “Oh! My boyfriend and I just broke up. I feel terrible for him!” answered Lyla. “Yeah ! But why did you break up?” asked Richard. “Because I think I love you!”. Richard didn’t know what to say. He was happy to know that, but didn’t know if telling Lyla he was in love with her too would help. “What do you feel for me Richard? Be honest please!”. Richard took a moment to answer, and, taking a deep breath, said “I love you! I’ve felt something more than friendship for you since the day I met you! That kiss, even if it was something I did to prove to you I had an ability, that kiss was special and made me understand you were more than just a friend to me!” Lyla just smiled and kissed him. After the kiss Richard was nervous, but happy. He didn’t really know what to say to Lyla. He blushed. Lyla said “So? What about us?” Richard answered “I loved the kiss, I felt for moments I was complete. I’ve wanted to be with you for months and I still do!” Lyla smiled and said “We’ve always been together, and we will always be!

V – The Ability Misused

That summer Richard spent a lot of time with Lyla, with his love. They spent really beautiful moments and they were very happy to be with each other, but the ability was not forgotten. With Lyla, Richard hadn’t used the ability for anything, but he was starting to lose control over it.

One day, Richard and Lyla were walking near the river, and a guy was passing near them. Richard just said to the guy “Drop into the river!” and the guy did that. Richard found it funny, but Lyla didn’t. “Why have you done that?” asked Lyla. “I thought it would be funny! Sorry.” answered Richard. “It wasn’t funny Richard! Control yourself!”.

The following days Richard calmed down a little, but always returned with a “joke” that Lyla really disliked.

One day that summer Richard and Lyla were together in a bar one afternoon eating an ice cream, and a friend of Richard’s, John, appeared and sat at their table, until the moment Richard used the ability to make him leave, but the way he did it was awful. “Hey John, go to the bartender, that hot girl and tell her you want to have sex with her.” said Richard “What? Are you crazy?” said Lyla, but John just went, and the bartender was shocked and simply punched John’s face. Richard was laughing and Lyla felt uncomfortable with the situation. John left the bar. “Richard, you’re using your power in the wrong way, you’re hurting your friends.” said Lyla “No, I’m not! This was funny!” replied Richard. “Richard, that girl punched him, because you told him to say

that crap!” said Lyla nervously. “Oh, just forget it Lyla. Don’t worry!” replied Richard, laughing ironically. John didn’t forget what had happened, and for a long time they didn’t see him.

Lyla was concerned about Richard; he had changed; he’d become a selfish, mean person, because he was losing control of his power. She tried to talk with him lots of times, but he wouldn’t listen. Sometimes he was the Richard she had met, but there were times when she was absolutely puzzled at realizing how evil his behavior had been.

Richard was unaware, but this was hurting Lyla, even if he didn’t use the ability on her, until one night Richard drank a bit more as Lyla did too, and they spent the night together. In the middle of the night Richard and Lyla woke up at the same time and started to kiss each other. The atmosphere was one of romance and Richard started to try to make love to Lyla, but Lyla didn’t want to. She only wanted to kiss him, but Richard wanted more and tried lots of times. Without saying a word, Lyla was refusing, as she was not yet prepared to make love to Richard. Richard didn’t stop and he said “Lyla, you’ll make love to me!” Lyla didn’t want to make love then, but she did it because of Richard’s power. After the sexual intercourse between them, Lyla left Richard, saying “You used me; you raped me! I don’t want to see you again. You’re becoming evil and I don’t want to be a part of that.” She left the house with the hands over her ears not to listen to anything Richard could say.

Richard searched for Lyla the rest of the night and for weeks, but never found her. Despair was taking hold of Richard, he cried a lot of times, he couldn’t sleep, eat, or do many other things, but, most important of all, Richard lost control of his power.

VI – The Loss

Richard’s suffering was unquestionable. He wanted to find Lyla, and try to explain what had happened. He didn’t want to have done that, but he had and he couldn’t handle it now.

Anthony and Maria were concerned about Richard; they didn’t know what was happening with their son, they tried to talk with him, but he didn’t answer. He spent very little time with his parents because he didn’t want to hurt them, but the pressure they were making was too much, and they found a psychologist so that Richard could talk about his problems, since he didn’t want to talk with his parents.

Richard went to the psychologist, started talking about what had happened and even told him of his ability. The psychologist thought he was going crazy and advised him to go to a psychiatrist. Richard didn’t like the idea at the beginning, but he ended up accepting.

Some days later Richard went to the psychiatrist, and again he needed to reveal everything. The psychiatrist was rude; he didn't say a word, just gave Richard a paper with the medicine he needed to take and provided for another appointment. This angered Richard, and he began to feel hatred for the first time. That day Anthony went to take Richard home after his appointment with the doctor.

"Hi! Did seeing the doctor make you feel better son?" asked Anthony.

"No, no one or anything can make me feel better!" answered Richard.

"Of course there must be a way..."

Richard remained silent until they arrived home. At home, Maria just ran to her son asking if he was alright, but Richard said in an aggressive voice

"Leave me alone! I'm tired of your concern!"

"Don't talk to me that way Richard, I'm not to blame for what happened with you!" said Maria.

"I'll talk to you the way I want to!"

Then Anthony spoke in a very aggressive way to Richard

"Stop it, young man! I'm getting tired of the way you talk to the people who are trying to help you!"

Richard was furious and completely lost control.

"Just leave me alone father, don't pretend you're concerned! "

"I won't put up with it..." said Anthony

"You won't put up with anything...!" , said Richard ironically and furiously.

Anthony just slapped Richard across the face and Richard with an "evil" smile said

"Kill yourself!"

This was a terrible mistake! As he was on his way to his room he thought about what he had said, remembered his ability and started running to his father to unmake what he had done, but it was too late. He heard a scream from Maria! Anthony had cut his throat with a knife. Richard went down on his knees crying, he loved his father and yet he had killed him. Richard left home saying to his mother

"I'm sorry mom!"

He was crying. What had happened was too much for him to bear: the loss of Lyla and the suicide of his father because of his ability made him leave the "world" for some days. When he came back, his friends kept asking if he was ok, but he was no longer capable of controlling his ability; he was constantly forcing people to go and do something and, little by little, people left Richard all on his own.

Loneliness was killing Richard, but he deserved it.

VII – Courage

Some months later Richard was noticeably depressed. Every day he was sad and furious, and alone most of the time. Some people tried to remain on his side, but he felt so miserable that he didn't control what he said and, lots of times, even if he didn't want to, he used the ability on those persons provoking physical damage. One of his friends, for example, tried to talk with Richard, but he was angry and just said

“Go and break your nose!” and the guy just went. These things were driving Richard crazy. He needed help but nothing, except Lyla's forgiveness, would help. Lyla, unfortunately, had disappeared completely, and Richard needed to see her face, her smile, one more time.

Days were passing slowly for Richard, the suffering was too much: what he had done, what he was doing, and the thought about what he would do were killing him inside. But, on 19th March, Richard went to a far off place outside Viseu, a very high place and he sat near a cliff, writing a letter.

“Dear Lyla

If you're reading this letter, it's because I'm dead. Don't consider this a cowardly act, but I needed to do it, I was hurting people. I've never forgotten you, you were everything I had always wished for and I'm sorry to have forced you to make love against your will; I wish I'd never done it.

These months without you were terrible. I became evil as you said. I wished you were near me, but I understand why you left. I couldn't be with you, but I needed you with me.

Dead or alive, please forgive me one day.

With love

Richard”

Richard held a sunflower for minutes in his hands; he was thinking of every moment with Lyla, every smile, every conversation, even the moments that were less good. He got up slowly, looked at the sky and said loudly

“Forgive me father, forgive me Lyla!” He took a deep breath and continued

“Richard, you'll jump off the cliff!”, and Richard just did it, he used the ability on himself. Some think that was he was a coward; others do not.

Richard's body was found days later, and his bag too, holding the sunflower and the letter for Lyla. He couldn't be sure if it would be delivered, but he tried.

VIII – The Sunflower

Richard was buried near his father, one of the persons he had loved more.

Some people couldn't understand what had happened to the Ferreira family. Two suicides in the same family was something strange, but what they didn't know was that only one of the two people had wanted to die.

A year later, on a rainy morning, a girl entered the graveyard alone and went to where Richard's body was buried. She was holding a sunflower in her right hand and when she arrived at Richard's grave, she knelt. It was Lyla, who had returned after having disappeared for almost 2 years.

Lyla looked for some minutes at Richard's grave, then placed the sunflower near Richard's photo, stood up and said crying "I forgive you!"

The End

Recebido: 15 de junho de 2011.

Aceite: 28 de junho de 2011.