

The Photographer (fragment)

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Cutting through the chaotic jumble of cars honking their horns, squealing brakes and jaywalkers jamming the narrow street, the bus door squeaked open before the bus came to a halt. The photographer jumped down three steps away from the curb, worried about the time – but he had plenty of time, it was still five fifteen, the message said six o'clock, and the park was close by. He excused himself and made his way through the long lines of people waiting for their buses, the smell of fresh popcorn in the air – maybe he could get some popcorn? Forget it. He dodged a woman holding a baby who stretched out her scrawny hand to him, her face a mask of pain and suffering (it wouldn't make a good shot, he thought), and ran down the steps that finally put in Santos Andrade park. It was not crowded, so he took a deep breath, holding on tight to the bag holding his gear. He stopped suddenly to check the message he had crumpled into his pocket: Marechal Deodoro Street, near the corner of Barão do Rio Branco. He looked toward the university colonnade, trying to figure the fastest route there – he took two more steps and looked around, sighing, still unhappy about having to do such a shitty assignment at the end of a beautiful afternoon like this, perfect to just do nothing, or else stay at home developing Íris. The roll of film propped against the light suggested frame after frame of great photos, but he was irritated at the need to do this job, like a weight dragging him down by the neck, not to mention the trace of bitterness of one who tears up money for no apparent reason, like people who do things thoughtlessly and then regret them, but not too much, which is what he was doing like a sort of trapped animal – he could sure use a drink. He looked around for a bar, though he was running a little late for his assignment by now – and he saw her. Maybe not. Yes, it was Lídia, in the distance in front of the Luz Theater, with someone else. He took a couple of steps forward, as if distracted, faking indifference, the

hardest attitude of all, he thought to himself, trying to pretend it was all a game, but failing; he stopped and looked again, moving his head to stand clear of a tree blocking the way. She was too far. Cars cut across between the photographer and them ahead. They had just come out of the movie theater. Or hadn't they? Had they just stumbled on each other, just as he had, by chance? No – the man touched her shoulder, steering her toward the Guaíra Theater. They seemed to smile. She looked happy. At one point, she raised her arm and threw her head back – it sure was her – as a silent sign of happiness. Yes. They had met there. They were work buddies. Perhaps childhood friends. He fantasized: aren't you Lídia? Long time no see! He tried not to stare or even think: he was behaving like a fool. Instinctively, his hand groped for the telephoto lens in the bag he had pried open, and pulled Lídia and her unknown companion up close, framing both: yes, they were talking and, she more openly, he more subdued. His finger sought the camera button to take a picture, but a feeling of shame, a shadow, stopped him from shooting – what he was looking at was not a picture. On another impulse, he put the camera back in the bag, zipped it up and turned. He walked faster toward the columns; that would take him to the pedestrian path at XV. He did not look back. That's it, don't look back. He squeezed the note in his pocket to a pulp, suddenly remembering the key to his childhood. Why hadn't he gone over to talk to Lídia? Well, Mr. Photographer – and waited a long time for the light to turn green – because you are dead to each other, like in those magazine serials (a poster in the newsstand blared: EXCLUSIVE: LÍDIA AND DUARTE ARE SPLITTING!). He tried to make out the smaller print to see what that was all about, transported to an absurd TV soap opera setting, but finally crossed the street with another thirty people. He forgot about the poster, but remembered something else: yes, he had touched her shoulder and led her three or four steps – a kind of discreet intimacy. How many years has it been, Mr. Photographer (this was a crazy way to relax, he knew, but sometimes it worked, him sitting in a defendant's chair, fingers pointing at him) since you softly guided your Lídia by a gentle touch to

her shoulder? His heart started pounding – this is ridiculous – and for a few seconds (another green light) he seriously considered buying a pack of cigarettes (backtracking to the newsstand and reading that poster carefully), how many years after he had quit? He even looked at the newsstand in front of the Post Office and lost another couple of seconds staring at that stupid array of magazine covers, headlines, pictures, and women piled one on top of the others, like stuff drying under the sun; a torn blonde looked at him with lips barely parted. I'm not like this, he thought. I've never been a real nice guy. Lídia knows that, he almost said out loud. He finally crossed the express bus lane (red light) at a run. He stared idiotically at the lottery ticket held out to him by a man shrieking the number loudly. I have nothing to do with this shit, he decided, moving along the sidewalk. This world is not my world. He remembered the man who had hired him: a man about his own age, who just opened a drawer and took out lots and lots of one hundred dollar bills. Take a picture of this girl is all he said. You have nothing to lose, he added in a calming tone: no risk whatsoever. Yes, I've got that girl to lose, just as I lost the key to my childhood. And I can also lose Alice, who was never really mine. I have a lot to lose. Maybe – and this was a scary realization, he thought – I've already lost everything. Except I don't know for sure – I'm waiting for someone to bring me the good news. Lídia, maybe. Or the guy who hired me: he doesn't want my pictures; he wants my cheap soul. He stopped in front of Lustoza Gallery: would it be better to cut through it or walk over to the corner? He decided to go in. Lídia seemed to be holding a book, he recalled. And the man was too old to be someone from work. He might be a teacher. Yes, a teacher: they had run into each other. But what was she doing there at the park? She should have been at work; or else in the human sciences building three blocks from there. There is nothing to do at Santos Andrade park except – except go to a movie at Luz Theater. Or else – and he stopped in front of a clock store looking vaguely for a wall thermometer he had been looking for on and off for months, trying to find out why it was so hard to find one for sale (at airport shops, someone had suggested) – or else she

had gone to the corner bookstore to buy a book. He shifted his glance from the stopped clocks in the store window to his own watch: he still had time to photograph the son of a bitch congressman, and it felt like calling the congressman a son of a bitch each time he thought about him made the world a little better, more logical and clearer, and he finally smiled, thinking about Íris.

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(Translation by Elisabete Hart)