Alice and the Old Lady

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Translated by Johnny Lorenz

THE AUDACITY OF PUTTING AN AD IN THE newspaper – Writing Consultant, along with my phone number and two vague specifications (classes and proofreading) – paid off the very next morning. The voice was female, elderly and hoarse. In fact, the woman seemed rather deaf, with the type of aggressive deafness of someone who chooses not to hear. I tried to clarify a few details, but she only gave me her address and said she'd be available in the afternoon, then she cut me off and hung up the phone. I would face an authoritarian woman, but my uneasiness was soon forgotten; I was excited by the quickness of her reply. It's hard living alone; the money that was left to me from those two and a half years of conjugal disaster wasn't worth a thing, and in the end, I had to get back to living. Since reading and writing are the only things I know how to do, I returned to the world of letters. Maybe soon I'd be able to teach some classes. Aside from the classified ad, I circulated my résumé. I was anxious: how much should I charge? The business side of things–that's the difficult part.

I walked down the sidewalk, looking for the address near the Plaza Santos Andrade until I came upon the building; it was an old building with a good view of the tree–lined promenade, the Passeio Publico, and I immediately sketched an imaginary biography of my first client: widow of a retired, eminent civil servant, receiving a fat pension with all the benefits and adjustments to which she'd be entitled, inheritor of some apartments, wanting someone to… but what did she want? I arrived at the ancient, imposing front desk, and behind it a doorman barely raised his eyes from the newspaper and indicated the dark corridor. I took the noisy elevator, with its old ironwork, and walked out of the cage like I was in

some classic film, and soon I was at number 703, the golden metal of the numbers shining above the door. I rang the doorbell and heard a scratchy "Hold on a second," undoubtedly authoritarian; it was almost a reprimand. But I was pleased that my premonition was correct. It's best not to be fooled by people. What followed was a jingling of metals–two specialized keys for strong locks and then a regular key that the old woman, it seemed, was slow to find (I heard her tremulous hand struggling with that heavy manacle of keys). But she wasn't done–when the door opened, there was still the chain. In the opening, I saw the small eyes of the old woman gazing at me from the middle of a detailed map of wrinkles beneath her hair, which was cut short and tinged with yellow. The weight of a gold earring seemed to cause her head to tilt to the side.

– Are vou Alice?

I smiled, in order to pacify any evil spirits, and replied that indeed I was. She closed the door brusquely, then opened it again, the chain now unlocked.

– Come in. Don't mind the mess.

It was the tone of someone who gives orders, but I preferred to see something pleasant hidden in her rude demeanor. There wasn't any mess at all–nothing seemed out of place. While she returned to her struggle with the keys, I moved slowly forward through the corridor crowded with antiques, plates on the walls, small towels and tables, porcelain figurines, little silver dolls, some dim lamps here and there, and the yellowed photograph of a child with a large ribbon tied into her small quantity of hair. Already feeling nervous, I picked up the photograph to look at it more closely, a gesture more timid than tactless, as I heard still those keys jingling behind me. I thought of asking something just to warm myself–there was in everything, I thought, a distinct chill, as though the lady belonged to another era. I returned the photo to the dark shelf, and I heard a sudden voice:

–That was me.

– So pretty, I said, without lying completely, and I continued advancing

toward the living room that opened before me, dimly lit due to the heavy curtains. The woman liked the shadows.

– Sit here, she ordered, indicating a small circular table and a worn–out chair that retained a certain dignity.

I obeyed. She dragged another chair close to mine, though not quite in front, making sure (I imagined) to keep her good ear in the best spot so that she could hear me well. She was a small and tense woman, with a contained vivacity; she lived alone in that apartment, and after nights of little sleep, each morning she would dress herself as if to attend a party that did not exist; the blouse, the shoes, the earrings and make–up–random signs of crumbled desires, a parallel world that she could not enter, yet could not let go of. This is bad literature, I thought, in a moment of selfcritique. Perhaps I had been describing myself all along. Look at her but don't think–that's what I did, now fully attentive. She sighed, and I felt that her authoritarian armor loosened a little. She rested her arms on her lap (but her hands trembled), and I smiled as if to encourage her to talk. Finally, she said something–not the thing she wanted to say, but as if to verify:

– You are very young.

– Not really, and I smiled again, thinking nervously that my 28 years, precisely counted and spoken out loud, might seem an act of aggression against the probable 80 years of that woman, a woman who appeared, I thought, exactly her age, just like me. But it seems that the confirmation of my youth satisfied her, as if this were more important than my abilities as a proofreader. The woman sighed more audibly now, her head tilting this way and that as if she were someone trying to regain her balance, her eyes spinning without direction until, finally, they concentrated directly on mine, and she said without blinking:

– My husband betrayed me.

It was a shock, not so much for the confession itself but for the fact that I, fifty years younger than this woman, could honestly say the same thing to her. I kept quiet, but with my mouth half–open. I wondered if she had correctly read the

classified ads.

– Wait, she ordered, and she lifted herself up from the chair (but remained at almost the same height; when she was sitting down, her feet dangled), and she took off like someone who forgot something urgent and was running now in search of it. I imagined as I sat in the dim apartment that she would appear from the shadows where she had disappeared bringing with her undeniable proof, a detective's photographs, the terrible encounters, handwritten confessions; I imagined a rosary of lamentations would follow. I would be paid to listen. We would drink tea; we would eat homemade cookies. It wouldn't be awful; I resigned myself.

But she returned in two minutes with a fistful of blank sheets of foolscap, really a large notebook, the kind used for school exams long ago. She spilled them on the table, somewhat aggressively, and on top of the notebook she put down a pen and gave me the look of an angry teacher:

– I want you to write down what happened–and so she made her confession at the very moment she allowed me a glimpse of her weakness. My hand–and the fingers of her left hand clutched the fist of her right hand–is no longer capable, and I…

She wanted to add something, it seemed, some secret motive, but she said nothing. She grabbed the pen again and extended it toward me in silence.

Many thoughts passed through my mind, including the most practical, such as the fact that it would have been better to write on a laptop than to write by hand on sheets of foolscap. And I felt the small irritations of intimacy; I wasn't her maid, for her to speak to me this way. "Writing Consultant" does not mean taking dictation. I was beginning a new line of work, all alone, and I needed money; that was the reason I rang her doorbell. I began to suspect I was wasting my time with a crazy old lady. But, in the end, I obeyed. I pulled my chair closer, took the pen from her tremulous and manicured hand and organized the stack of papers in front of me like a medieval scribe. There wasn't enough light, which she perceived

before I mentioned it. She looked around, as if she didn't know her own living room, found a floor lamp that came from the belle époque, dragged it to the side of the table while untangling her feet from the coils of its cord, and turned it on. Tranquil now–all her orders having been carried out she returned to staring sharply into my eyes. As if she had guessed one of my fears–the intentional darkness in the middle of a bright afternoon in Curitiba that transformed her figure into a Rembrandt sketch–she explained:

– I suffer from photophobia. Bright light ruins my vision.

I thought of taking advantage of the momentary peace to speak of money, but my timidity shut my mouth; and in any case, she didn't give me time. She reached out her hand like someone asking for silence, looked up at the ceiling, closed her eyes and announced:

– My story.

She shook her fingers in my direction, as if to say "write this down," as if her voice arose out of a spiritual trance that might be lost if I delayed. I wrote at the top of the page, very carefully: *My story*.

She lowered her head, opened her eyes, and brought them toward the paper to confirm the quality of my work. Suddenly, in a situation I found absurd, I became a schoolgirl anxious for the approval of the teacher. I began smiling when she would smile, as she approved of my work with a nod of her head. Reinforcing her silent praise, I appended:

–My calligraphy is rounded and firm–repeating, without even thinking, what a teacher had said to me long ago, and I smiled again, trying to add a little levity, but she didn't hear me and returned to her trance.

–My name is Dolores Maria Rubia de Alicanto, and I am 83 years old. I was born in São Paulo on February 12th, 1923. But this is not what I wish to talk about.

Here I imagined I should pause awhile, but no: she proceeded, looking upward but with eyes shut, and her tremulous hand seemed to indicate a reiteration

of her order that I should write down everything that came from her lips, her voice clear, hoarse but easy to follow, slow and commanding, in rhythm with my writing–I was to write down everything, unless directed otherwise. But in fact I would write without stopping for the next two hours.

–I want to talk about the 13th of October, 1950, here in Curitiba, the city in which he, my husband, an elegant man, sometimes even handsome, served at the rank of colonel in the barracks of the Plaza Rui Barbosa, where he would work for the rest of his short life. She stopped and returned to looking upward, her lips only moving silently, reciting some imaginary speech. Suddenly her voice returned, quite firm: On that day, while visiting my friend Lívia Ceres de Donato, then 27 years old, medical student at the Federal University of Paraná, only daughter of the famous judge Antero Fulvio de Morais Donato, later a justice of the Supreme Court–no, he never reached quite that high, he was on the STJ, write that down, on the Superior Tribunal of Justice, and he was our neighbor in the new four–story building on Cândido de Abreu Street, and…

Dona Dolores had complete command over her language; she was one of those people from another generation who, from the cradle, grew up with literature, with good schools and private classes, with the aristocratic remnants of those who knew their place, and that place was one of respect. Listening to her, I felt I was listening to one of those manuals on eloquence from long ago, those distinct sequences of subordinate clauses that would initiate a flood of words that seemed grouped together more for the voluptuousness of speech than for the value of what was being said; but they were sounds articulated with pomp, self–conscious, justified by their simple acoustic impact, demanding silence. And she also had a clear understanding of how to give dictation–at some point in her life she must have been a teacher, for she knew the precise moment to stop and when to proceed, just as my hand paused in the air, waiting. It was as though her words were spoken already punctuated, even if I now and then modified something while transcribing, though I copied without erasures, which made me quite happy, as if I

were in the midst of some difficult competition, a marathon of dictation, knowing that no one could compete with me. And what I was listening to was irresistible. *I opened my neighbor's door–we had that level of intimacy, we were friends for many years, sometimes she went to Sao Paulo, sometimes I'd come to Curitiba and–and what was happening was like a B movie at some trashy drive–in, but I didn't make a scene. I was never one to make a scene, it's something I detest; there are people who must keep their dignity, and I might even say–but it would be saying little, really, because there is little one can say in response to what I saw there in front of me–but I needed to rise to the occasion, to what I was seeing. I have a long family name that I must watch over, and this is the destiny I decided for myself: to live up to who I am.* Here she stopped, to take in some air, but still she seemed afflicted; she didn't want to lose the thread of what she was saying. And she ordered me:

–Write it again, and underline it: *I have always wanted to live up to who I am*.

I bit the tip of my pen and almost asked her what it was, finally, that she had seen, but I preferred to wait. She paused for a long moment. There followed some tedious philosophizing; "to live up to who I am" seemed to have inspired more profound ranting, and I copied everything down impatiently, wanting her to return quickly to the brutality of the superficial, instead of flying off into that profound emptiness, but it was as though she felt afraid of her own voice, afraid to advance through the tunnel she was entering, and I felt tempted to lead her, even–who knows?–to interrogate her. It wasn't necessary. *But how can one elevate oneself when, taking two steps into a dark corridor, one sees what a million other people of all races, beliefs, ethnicities, nations and social classes, people of high extraction and of low extraction, when one sees what so many must have already seen, each of them with a different kind of suffering? I was only 28 years old and the passion I felt for my husband was tarnished only by the fact that I never became pregnant, as he wanted, as we wanted.* I felt a chill in my gut. Again, it

was me. I was sitting beside a fortune-teller; I grew delirious. I felt the woman's breathlessness, and I was worried that she would interrupt our work to continue some other day. She leaned toward the papers, and her hand touched my hand in an awkward gesture of affection:

–Where did we stop, dear?

I reread the last sentence, and Dona Dolores became reanimated:

–Ah, excellent. It's looking good. The next part is going to be difficult. Are you ready?

I indicated that I was, pen in hand, eyes on the next blank line of the page.

–They were two dogs! Doing it that way. And now Dona Dolores began gesticulating as she spoke, like someone at a bar describing to her friends a vivid scene, emphasizing each word with the force of the horror, the double shame, to see and then to tell, and there was even a residual thread of heroism. Just look at what I went through. *She was on her knees, on the floor, at the foot of the bed, her arms extended out in front*, and in order to demonstrate, she extended her arms over the table as though this were a séance, *her head lifted up a little and turned to the side, and for that reason she didn't see me, she was* yelping, she was yelping, and behind her, there behind her–*Dona* Dolores felt ashamed to say the thing itself, she resisted arriving at those words, for she lived during a time when everything was metaphor–*that, that perky ass of his, pardon my language, but that's what it was, that white, round ass lifted up high, going backwards and forwards, I saw my husband's ass with his pants down, and he was also on his knees, and he was also yelping. Like I said: two dogs. The pleasure that they. . .*

My nervous desire to laugh at that grotesque description was swallowed up by my own anguish, the pain of the ridiculous, and I felt once again the almost delicate touch of Dona Dolores's hand on my hand, as if she had guessed what I was feeling, giving me the sign that now I should stop writing:

–It's obvious, I know: that scene wasn't meant to be witnessed. Nor was it

meant to be told. It was meant for nothing. *The pleasure that they. . .*–and here she stopped short, a woman who for fifty years had relived that supposedly incomprehensible scene, and for that reason, her life ended there and then. *The pleasure that they*...and she kept repeating this phrase, three or four times, the syntax incomplete.

Silence. It took one minute for Dona Dolores to recover herself and, jerking back her head and shoulders, she returned to the narrative of her life. *I left there as I had arrived*, in silence, and in fact she didn't make any kind of scene, not then, not afterward, not ever. She only transformed the tragedy into a private melancholy that would be understood by everyone else as the sadness of not having children. *Never again would I be the same*, and she seemed satisfied with the discovery of her common place, and she looked over what I had written. She was happy when her friend married someone from Rio de Janeiro, *some guy she knew for only a month*, and after two or three postcards, there was no more news from her. And so was my work here now coming to an end? No–suddenly, I heard: *I planned to kill my husband. It wasn't only a question of my dignity that was at stake–if that's all it was, it would have been enough to ask for the dissolution of our marriage, and the problem would have been resolved. That is, his problem would have been resolved, he'd remain a happy bachelor, but not my problem, a woman ruined by a bad marriage at a time when a divorce was a death sentence, especially considering my probable lack of inheritance, the great–great–great–granddaughter of a generation of nobles that left behind not even a coat of arms to hang on the wall. I would have to kill him, and that's what I did. I freed myself from the shame of seeing that dog every single day, and at the same time I took from him the treasure chest of his military career, the usufruct that I enjoy even now. These are the spoils of my own War of Paraguay*–and here she laughed for the first time, a timid laugh, captive, ashamed but undeniably happy. She touched me once again, now with an adolescent coquettishness, casting a naughty glance:

–You wrote all that down, really?

And she laughed aloud, hiding her mouth. Then she returned to her philosophizing–Yes, that was a project that lived up to who I am, and to him I surrendered my body and soul. While she unraveled her reverse altruism, my hand began to tremble, as though at last I was waking from the trance. I was listening to, and transcribing, an assassin's confession. I could have stopped right there–it was an absurd situation, to be at the service of a crazy old woman who would pay me nothing. I was starting off my new career poorly. But the desire to lift myself from that table was opposed by the stubborn image of my ex–husband, and I felt I was being offered the temptation of a similar plot. I couldn't stop listening to Dona Dolores until her story was finished. I began to grow impatient with the list of justifications she began adding to her tale, like someone who unfortunately ruins a good narrative with good intentions. *Yes, a woman should know how to make her way in the world, and I made mine. I regret nothing; and the fact that no one discovered anything, not even my own husband, who died loving me* (and here Dona Dolores smiled dreamily) is definitive and undeniable proof (her own impassioned lawyer, she seemed to direct herself to an imaginary tribunal) *that the hand of Providence guided me*.

– Let's have some tea.

She stood up and almost seemed to be skipping along, disappearing into the dark corridor. She returned shortly afterward with a silver serving tray of fixings for tea. To avoid thinking, and especially to avoid making any decisions, I reread what I had written, correcting a comma here and there; there were numerous pages, completely filled, practically without any paragraphs, like legal testimony. I imagined myself suddenly before the same tribunal, defending myself from allegations of *the occultation of a corpse*, an absurd expression I remembered from a television show I had seen two days before, and I would argue, with the same clarity and passion, *dear gentlemen, it was only literature; I would never have been able to imagine such a thing*, but yes, I had imagined; more than that, *I*

believed. And ever further, and even worse–I wanted to follow her example.

– Poison was the best road to take, she continued, already impatient after the interruption, after the two sips of tea that she didn't touch again. *I wouldn't be able to consult anyone, I didn't want to leave any traces, and people seem to glue themselves to you as life goes on, only by chance do we ever free ourselves from them, and my crime had to be perfect or he would end up winning in the end. The good thing about my plan is that it freed me from my daily anxiety, from that feeling of nausea at knowing he was with other women, and there were many other women during the next four years, the time it took for him to die. I would visit libraries regularly, and I even consulted medical texts that belonged to Livia herself and had been left behind in moving boxes; we were like hand and glove, and I learned to parcel out in doses those more or less homeopathic pinches that went on tenaciously ruining his stomach, his heart, his intestines, his lungs, his esophagus, his throat, the soul of my husband, poor thing, and he'd wander reluctantly from doctor to doctor hearing "no, it's nothing". Afterward he would improve, then he would worsen, and then one day he simply died. A tragedy. An unknown strain of virus, they said, something like the rotavirus going around today, just one of those things, one of those names that the medical world gives to what they don't understand.* A long pause. Dona Dolores seemed sad. *I cried a lot when they buried him*.

He died on the afternoon of the 24th of December, 1954, which was convenient; the coroner, the medical experts, all of them had had enough of the mystifying medical chart that belonged to an unlikable man who went around fantasizing afflictions; to be honest, nobody liked the colonel, who fancied himself a Casanova and only became more unlikable the more he hunched over his stomach, suffering that damn heartburn, and besides, Christmas was just around the corner. And with one last sentence she immediately stopped talking, letting out a long sigh: *The case is closed forever*. And then Dona Dolores looked directly into my eyes, already with a shadow of suspicion, a distant but growing flicker of

distrust that she tried to hide, a false smile arming itself on her small lips while her hand carefully collected the sheets in front of me, as though I might steal them, and she never took her eyes off mine.

–Would you like more tea?

It was, again, the same dry tone of someone who gives orders. While I served myself the tepid tea, the tremulous hands of Dona Dolores rifled through what had been written. She hurriedly put on her reading glasses to look a few things over here and there. She organized the pages of her confession, thumping the stack on the table as if to place them in a printer, and then decided:

–I need to pay you.

She took away the confession, embraced now against her chest, and returned with a small decorative wooden box from which she took out a number of green bills tied up in a rubber band.

–These are my savings from the money I got from my husband. It's always good to have some cash around.

She took from the pile one, two, three, four, five notes, her fingers trembling.

–Five hundred dollars. These are dollars, she explained, like someone teaching an idiot child. They are worth a lot.

I was immobile, unable to think. The light of the lamp cut across her face; from the dark came only her voice:

–Fine. A thousand dollars! She took out five more notes, her final offer.

She placed the notes in front of me; we had suddenly become mortal enemies. She closed the box and took it far away, disappearing into the corridor with the hard steps of someone who had been offended. The idea entered my mind that I could have remained sitting there for a while, and she would have continued piling notes into my hand until I was reduced to a consenting silence.

For half a second I entertained this thought: she wasn't paying for a service;

she was buying me off. I've always been a woman who realized things too slowly. I stacked the bills just as she had stacked the sheets of paper, tapping them lightly on the table until all of them were lined up together. I could smell the money. I folded the pile and put it in my purse. Already I heard the desperation of the keys as she tried opening the door for me to leave, until finally the door opened with a doubled sigh of relief. I walked past Dona Dolores and felt the cold breeze of the corridor.

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