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The Date

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The investigation was all-consuming for seven months, but when she finally appeared, it felt like it had taken a lifetime. He read newspapers and visited zoos, he showed up at the offices of various psychiatrists and veterinarians with invented ailments, and he slept in countless hotels. Finally, when he stopped the taxi and told the driver to take him to the Cosmos, he was almost certain she would be there. He gave himself a one percent margin of error. He told the hotel employee that he would like a large room, preferably one on one of the top floors, "to have a better view of the whole city", he explained, and, because it was the low season, he had no problem getting it. It was just a little after six in the evening that he installed himself in his den.

He noticed the aroma almost as soon as he opened the door but restrained himself. When the bellhop left the room, he parsimoniously unfolded his clothing and hung it up on the wooden hooks. He placed his personal hygiene items in the bathroom: the comb, the creams, the shaving brush. Then he re-traced his steps and positioned himself before the window. The city was, effectively, at his feet. The evening window. The thin clouds. A firetruck sped down the narrow street but because the windows were made of sound-proof glass, he couldn't hear the siren. A new Ulysses. From far away, as if they were tiny plastic dolls, many men walked down the sidewalks. Men in suits and men in jeans. Men in rags. Men with hair and men without it. Men with crutches and men who slid through the crowd like eels. The sigh that he emitted, discrete but forceful, seemed to belong to a man in love. Perhaps it was.

The last thing he did that day was to pull out his papers from their folder and to place them, in rigorous order, on the room's desk. He leafed through them as if he had never seen them before. There were all sorts of things there: notes scribbled in pencil and clippings from yellowing newspapers; photocopies that looked like old books and recently printed pages; envelopes with foreign stamps and ancient recipes. It was a collage. A collection of clues and desires. He was just about to finish the activity when someone knocked on the door. He jumped. A jolt of electricity shot up his spine. He seemed to come out of a long paralysis when he finally stood up and walked towards the door. Before saying anything, he peered through the peephole. No one was there. When he discretely opened the door, it was confirmed: the only thing there was the hallway that extended with its soft, scarlet carpet and

its walls covered with old gold paper. The tenuous light shining from the candelabras only accented the absolute solitude of the passageway. At the tip of his shoes, just as he had sensed, was the closed envelope, white and rectangular, that contrasted with the geometric designs and color of the carpet. He opened it before closing the door: *Run away. Get out of this place. Soon you won't be able to escape.* The investigator smiled upon closing the door. A satisfied man.

It was after receiving the message that he picked up the telephone and ordered dinner to the room. Veal in a black apple sauce. Rabbit with artichokes and endives. *Cenzontle* liver pate on slices of rye bread. Plum compote. Champagne. While waiting, he took out the tools from the second suitcase and placed them one by one on the dressing table. A drill. A screwdriver. Some tweezers. A hand saw. A measuring tape. A hammer. A mallet. Some nails. Some screws. A tiny army advancing in a straight line. When the dinner arrived, he threw it all back into the same suitcase.

"So, you are visiting us for the first time?" the boy asked as he removed the crystal covers from the plates, allowing an aroma somewhere between sugary and aged to inundate the room.

The investigator told him that yes, it was.

"You made a peculiar selection", the waiter noted, looking at the dinner plates out of the corner of his eye. Then he smiled. His smile produced the same effect on his spine: a buzzing of racing ants against his bones. He was, right then, a statue. A piece of stone from long ago. Something ripped from eternity. He was going to say something when the young man turned around. The carpet silenced his footsteps. The night noises. Then he commenced his task.

He pulled out the tools once again from his suitcase and with the drill in his right hand he went over to the closet. It didn't take long to clear the clothing he had hung there not long before. With his hands on the wood, feeling its holes with his tightened knuckles, he found the point of the incision. He was going to use the mallet when he realized there were new screws in the corners of the mahogany panel. He got his screwdriver. When he realized that he needed the other one, he went back for the Phillips screwdriver. The drops of sweat that dripped from his temples gave the impression that he was in a rush. Little by little, the panel gave way. Before completely separating it from the wall, before introducing the head into the orifice, he wiped the sweat away with a white handkerchief. Then he knelt down and, then, leaned forward. With the help of his elbows, he slid to the other side of the closet.

He thought that the information he had obtained during so many months of investigation would have prepared him for anything, but that wasn't the case. That is never the case.

Imagination always has its limits. He had thought the cage would be big, like it was, but not that it would have the ancestral glamor of a dressing room. He had imagined that she would be bent over, like he had read in so many journals, in a truly pre-human attitude, but not that she would do so while swaying slowly, oh so slowly, from a swing made of fine metals. He had thought about her gaze hundreds of times, cutting out her figure from the dark eyes of the last woman, but nothing had prepared him for the monotonous sadness of the moment. She smiled, like the waiter had done before. And, when she signaled by placing the tips of her fingers on her mouth, that she was hungry, he went back down the passage to bring the dinner plates one by one.

Then he entertained himself by watching her eat while he slowly savored the bottle of champagne.

"I thought you didn't exist", he said to her.

"So it is", she responded with a voice that was barely used to speaking.