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The Censors

Luisa Valenzuela

Poor Juan! He was caught off guard that day and he couldn't realize that what he thought was a stroke of luck was really an accursed trick of fate. Those things happen when you're not careful, and as sure as you're hearing me one gets careless very, very often. Juancito let happiness -- an otherwise disturbing sentiment -- overwhelm him when, from a confidential source, he received Mariana's new address, now in Paris, and he knew that she hadn't forgotten him. Without thinking twice, he sat down at his desk and wrote a letter. *The* letter. The same one that now prevents him from concentrating on his work during the day and doesn't let him sleep when night comes (what did he put in that letter, what had stuck to that sheet of paper that he sent to Mariana?)

Juan knew there wouldn't be any problem with the text, that the text is irreproachable, innocuous. But the rest? He knows that they probe the letters, sniff them, feel them, read between the lines and their insignificant punctuation, even the accidental stains. He knows that the letters pass from hand to hand through the vast censorship bureaus and that few finally pass the tests and are able to continue their journey. Usually it's a question of months, years if complications arise, a long time in which the freedom and perhaps even the life of the sender and receiver are in suspense. And that's what has our Juan so deeply depressed: the idea that something could happen to Mariana, in Paris, through his fault. Mariana, of all people, who must feel so safe, so at ease there where she always dreamed of living. But he knows that the Secret Commandos of Censorship operate the world over and are granted a large discount on airline fares; therefore there's nothing to prevent them from going even to the darkest Paris *quartier*, kidnap Mariana and go home convinced of the nobility of their earthly mission.

So you have to outsmart them, you have to do what everyone does: try to sabotage the mechanism, throw sand in the gears, that is, go to the source of the problem in order to obstruct it.

That was the plan when Juan, like so many others, applied to be a censor. Not because of conviction like a few others or because he needed work like still others, no. He applied simply in order to try to intercept his own letter, not at all an original idea, but a comforting one. He was hired immediately, because more censors are needed every day and there's no time to be squeamish about references.

The Directorate of Censorship was aware of the secret motive behind the desire of more than one to work in the bureau, but they were in no condition to be too strict and anyway -- What for? They knew how difficult it would be for those poor innocents to find the letter they were looking for, and even if they did, what importance does a letter or two that slips though the barrier have compared to the others that the new censor would shoot down. That's how our Juan was able to join the Censorship Bureau of the Ministry of Communications.

The building, seen from outside, had a festive air because of the smoked glass that reflected the sky, an air that was in total contrast to the austere atmosphere of its interior. And little by little Juan became accustomed to the climate of concentration which his new work required, and the knowledge that he was doing everything possible for his letter -- that is for Mariana -- assuaged his anxieties. He wasn't even worried when, the first month, he was assigned to Section K where the envelopes are opened with painstaking care to see if they contain some explosive.

It's true that on the third day a letter blew a fellow worker's hand off and disfigured his face, but the bureau chief claimed it had been mere negligence on the victim's part and Juan and the other employees could continue working as before, although with much less assurance. At quitting time another fellow worker tried to organize a strike to demand more pay for hazardous work, but Juan didn't participate and after thinking it over a while he denounced him to the authorities in order to be promoted.

Once doesn't form a habit, Juan thought as he left the chief's office, and when they transferred him to Section J where they unfold the letters with infinite care to see if they contain poisonous powder, he felt that he had ascended a step and could therefore return to his healthy habit of not getting involved in external affairs.

From J, thanks to his merits, he rose rapidly until reaching E, where the work became more interesting, for there begins the reading and analysis

of the letters. In that Section he could even cherish hopes of coming across his own missive written to Mariana which, judging by the time elapsed, should have reached this level after a very long procession through the other departments.

Little by little there were days when his work so absorbed him that the noble mission that brought him to the Bureau became momentarily blurred. Days of crossing out long paragraphs with red ink, of tossing many letters into the Condemned Basket. Days of horror at the subtle and scheming ways people found to transmit subversive messages. Days of intuition so sharp that behind a simple "the weather is unsettled" or "prices are sky high", he detected the vacillating hand of someone whose secret intention was to overthrow the Government.

So much zeal brought him rapid promotion. We don't know if it made him very happy. In Section B the amount of letters which reached him daily was minimal--very few cleared the previous hurdles--but as compensation he had to read them often, put them under the magnifying glass, look for microdots with the electronic microscope and so tune his sense of smell that upon returning home at night he was exhausted. He barely managed to heat up some soup, eat some fruit and fall asleep with the satisfaction of having complied with his duty. Only his Sainted Mother worried about him, and tried without success to guide him back onto the right path. She'd say, although it wasn't necessarily true: Lola called, says she's with the girls in the café, that they miss you, are expecting you. But Juan didn't want to have anything to do with nonessentials: any distractions could cause him to lose the astuteness of his senses and he needed them alert, sharp, attentive, tuned, in order to be the perfect censor and detect deceit. His was a true patriotic labor. Self-denying and sublime.

His Basket of Condemned Letters soon became the best nourished but also the most subtle in the whole Censorship Bureau. He was at the point of feeling proud of himself, he was at the point of knowing that he had finally found his true path, when his own letter to Mariana reached his hands. Naturally he condemned it without remorse. And just as naturally he couldn't prevent them from executing him at dawn, one more victim of his devotion to work.

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Translation: FTS

Luisa Valenzuela is one of Argentina's foremost writers. She was born and resides now in Buenos Aires, after many years abroad. From 1979 to 1989 she lived in New York, where she was Writer in Residence at Columbia and New York Universities. She received a Guggenheim scholarship and was a Fulbright Fellow (International Writers Workshop), Iowa. She has published six novels and eight short story collections, which have been translated into various languages -- all into English. Her work is studied in universities in the United States, England and Australia. She has just completed her latest novel, entitled "La Travesía".

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