

## OTHER PEOPLE'S MAIL

9 letters to a wrong address

## LIDIA'S MAIL

Two long lines of linden trees splotted here and there with cascades of lilac-colored wisteria bordered the street that the window of Lidia's study looked out upon. She stopped to observe through the now curtainless window that languid alternation of spring colors with a mixture of apprehension and distress that had become nostalgia. After a couple of brief seconds, Lidia shook her shoulders as if from a slight chill, and once again turned her eyes to the inside. The studio, which for so many years had been the invisible confessional of her readers, whose secrets reached her through her column 'Lidia's Mail', now seemed desolately empty, cluttered only with open boxes.

In the pinkish light of the late dawn that great room brought to mind the image of a tortoise shell, empty and abandoned on a deserted beach. She did not like disorder, and maybe that's why she began to mentally catalogue the objects that had populated that space. They were empty footprints giving testimony to a worn-out presence, like the large, symmetrical mark that stood out, honey-colored, on the dark red parquet floor. It was the imprint left by the great Persian rug on which, for years, had stood her old desk. Near this, or rather near the mark it had left, was the print of a light rectangle on the butter-colored wall. There, had hung a tapestry that constituted, together with the desk, a family heredity to which Lidia had become attached. On her work surface (desk) had sat for a long time a little original archeological find that she had always kept within hand's reach. It was the lovely head of a roman doll in terra cotta. Often while working, without taking her eyes off the monitor of her computer, she would distractedly stroke the features of that little face. When she was tired, or could not find the concentration to continue working, she would abandon her post and go lie down on a velvet-covered sleeper right under the big window. She remained next to that window, immobile, while her eyes continued to seek in the now vacant space

the traces of objects that had once filled it. Beside the dormeuse, Lidia remembered, had been a little table. On this she had always placed a silver-plated hourglass that she would turn lazily when lying down, letting herself gradually be hypnotized by the slow movement of the grains of gold-plated sand. Beside the hourglass a round, soft ochra box held perfumed pipe tobacco.

In the circle of her imaginary inventory, Lidia compared the desolate state of the room to the throbbing description of a city destroyed and abandoned. "Troy, after the fire", she thought. That made her smile bitterly. It was not altogether an exaggerated comparison: her studio, which with dogged determination she had always wanted to have at home and not at the newspaper's headquarters, represented for her all the space in which she had ever lived and moved. Enclosed therein, immersed in her reflections, she had seen and received what is not visible and perceptible about humanity -- what in reality she could not see -- an interior that emanated from the letters of her faceless interlocutors. By contrast, she had never seen in real people the immediate and intuitible side that one normally gleans from first sight. In a certain sense, the real world was closed to her: and closed, too, her characters who even in that moment she thought probably were traversing the space beyond her window, like fleeting landscapes that cross the window of a train in motion.

All at once she felt a sudden desire to turn back toward the windows and observe the street and its casual passers-by; but with an awkward movement she knocked over a box that was still open, poised atop a tower of packed objects. She was able with a caper that amazed her to grasp the box which, however, ended up obliquely in her arms, knocking onto the ground part of its content. A pink cardboard folder fell and, hurtling onto the floor, opened, spilling forth all around it dozens and dozens of sheets of paper. She stood watching this scene unfold slowly and silently under her eyes. The papers vaulted lightly and landed without a sound on the floor like lightweight petals. She bent slowly to gather these pages. They were clearly letters just like the hundreds she had received over all these years during which she had written her column. But there was something

special about these sheets that she had chosen to save. They were letters she had not answered, but which she had, almost as a game, re-written. Years earlier, she had judged the subject and tone of these messages not appropriate for her column, and so had decided not to publish them. In truth, much other correspondence had undergone the same fate over the course of time; but these letters, which strangely enough she had received within a short time of each other, had struck her in a particular manner; so much so that one day, after having re-read them, she was seized by a curious desire to try them out in a kind of stylistic exercise. Empathizing with the real authors of those written words, she decided to interpret them, re-writing. The most important change that she brought to her game of recreating, was that of the recipient of the letters, which had originally been she, Dr. Lidia. The result was nine short stories in the form of letters, each addressed to a different person. Lidia no longer remembered how the original letters that inspired hers had ended up; in truth, she had almost forgotten about the existence of her own letters; had it not been for that accidental gesture, she would *certainly* have forgotten them altogether. Distractedly, she bent over to pick them up, but at the same time with a feeling almost of surprise. Her movements did not betray anything new or different; they were the usual that had accompanied in these last days the dismantling of her station -- computer, telephone and fax: the weapons of psychic counter-attack that intercepted the attacks, sometimes sentimental and sometimes quarrelsome, of the feelings and emotions of others.

The undertaking of the move that distanced her permanently from that place had gone forward up until now with insufferable slowness, with that monotonous cadence that bleaches the color out of life; but now that she was picking up those papers she felt prey to a new feeling. She was almost disturbed and this was rather unusual for her. Suddenly she felt as though rocked by a kind of murmur. It was a far away and unclear chorus. "Perhaps", thought Lidia, "it is the echo of the voices of the many who had written me" -- strangers who entrusted to her their thoughts and often even their most intimate secrets.

But there was something new in this feeling of being captured, and it had to do with the re-discovered letters.

If it hadn't been for the anguishing work connected with her move, and the accidental spill of the red folder containing these letters, she wouldn't have felt this way: forced to pick them up one by one and, so to speak, re-open an interrupted dialogue; yes, because there must have been a special reason why she had chosen to re-write that group of letters. Doctor Lidia was used to being the first-person recipient of the venting and confessions many. In the illusory game through which a mere verbal exchange could alleviate their anxieties, they entrusted to her maternal professionalism slivers of their souls. Thus, though she knew that for many it was easier to show her their secrets than to turn to the actual recipients, yet for some reason she had thought that those letters, instead, asked of her something special.

They were letters like any others, addressed to her column, and hence to her. But they had something different: they spoke authentically, they told the truth, but in an oblique way, they spoke to her but were addressed to others. These did not ask for any answer from her as expert. Rather, they were tales of persons who, out of weakness, out of cowardice, to give in to a small domestic thrill or just to remind themselves, as in a personal diary, that the past is always with us in the present, lived their little drama, in contrast to the daily routine, in the telling: in the narration.

But then, Lidia thought, the strange overlap/interplay of human nature with time, had brought about that these letters, actually addressed to others, came, as though pushed by the involuntary waft of the wind, to her. Perhaps that was why Lidia felt the need to transform those tales, that seemed to her unfocussed and asymmetrical, by the idea of sending them to their real recipient. At first she had even felt the temptation to answer those persons simply re-writing word for word their letters, but addressing the real referent, then publishing them in her column. And so, with faithful deceit, she had rewritten them. But if she had replied in the first person, she would have been unwitting partner in a prevarication: accomplice with those who had not had the courage to

confront their true interlocutors. Experience and long-term journalism made her feel this form of respect almost with the force of a commandment: "do not usurp the persona of others". So, almost out of poetic justice, she had decided to re-write the stories. But there was more. Suddenly it seemed to her that these letters contained, all of them, a common theme, which however still seemed to her fleeting and confused. And now that she had surprised herself by that distressing feeling that obliged her to turn back, even in the midst of moving full-speed ahead, they reappeared, like fragments of a faraway memory, as shreds of a conversation with herself that, perhaps, she had never interrupted, and presented themselves to her with the inevitable urgency of a fortuitous event. But how was it possible that she had not thought about those letters for so many years? Perhaps all that confusion between sender and sendee, which she had in the meantime surpassed thanks to her transcription work, had definitely caused those poor letters to lose their address. Maybe that was why she decided not to ever publish them. And so, she had set them aside, but hadn't put them with other mail that for various reasons would never receive an answer. Instead she filed the letters in that small cardboard folder that remained up until now on a shelf of her library, right next to a collection of yearbooks of her magazine. The content of that folder was never transcribed on computer, hence was never saved in digital format, something Lidia was used to doing for many years with all the material that her work put into her hands. For some strange reason, she had preferred to leave those letters in their original, unchanged state, as sheets of paper.

Now, surely, she could have thrown them away together with other useless paper that inevitably jumped out of her drawers during the move; basically there was no rational reason for saving the letters, but in the end Lidia gave up: she put on her eyeglasses, sat down on one of the boxes near the window, opened the folder and began to read.