

The Secret Lodge

ELDA ORETO

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To Lars,
you are the only one.

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1.

The sounds of Alice's footsteps in the snow fell like leaves on the ground.

That afternoon, the wind was blowing so hard, it cut her face. It was only 4:00 p.m., but it was already night in Berlin. No prostitutes and no drug addicts on Kurfürstenstraße. For a Saturday afternoon, it was strangely quiet.

Alice walked faster, toward the brown gate through which she reached her gallery, The Secret Lodge.

She had opened the gallery space almost five years before, first for her own use and then as a space for contemporary art, where she could display the work of young, emerging talent she had discovered. The Secret Lodge was on the first floor, in the secluded backyard of a building in the center of town.

It was a place she had always dreamed about. She had put everything she had into it.

But now, after everything, she was closing the gallery. Her investment money had all gone into the production of the shows and of the art pieces. She had not wasted it on herself, but had spent it on the artists' work over the last five years.

The few artists she actually represented were leaving her for other galleries or were selling their work under the table for their own benefit, ignoring their agreements with Alice. There was nothing she could do about it. Artists had all the power, even when they were young, emerging conceptual artists who didn't really influence anything in this world or on any other planet. What hurt her the most was an awkward feeling—a kind of shame about a lack of reputation that made her feel exposed when she walked around in public. Her dream was a vessel that was moving away from the mainland in the fog. These people and what they had done were keeping her down.

Holding a backpack in one hand, she opened the gate with the other. In the dark of the garden, her thin figure was barely recognizable. The old, heavy, red-brick office building was empty. Hidden in a backyard, it had once been a tobacco factory.

The garden was dark and abandoned. The only light came from the bright neon of the empty white room.

Alice went inside and took off her coat; she put the backpack on the table in front of the door, where brochures and press releases were displayed.

The carpet had been covered in plastic sheeting, to protect it when she painted the walls,

something she was required to do before vacating the space. Alice lit a cigarette and looked out the window. It was time. She had never felt so lucid.

Now the only thing she could do was wait. She could feel a tingling in her legs, and her heart began to beat faster.

Alex Marinko would arrive in a few minutes.

The decision had struck her that morning, after he had called her. "I'm going to pass by the gallery later this afternoon," the Russian artist had told her.

Alice had been the first art dealer to show his work, when nobody had believed in him.

"Ok. I'll gather up your work for you," Alice told him.

"Is there much stuff in there to carry?" he asked.

(Alex was a big, good guy but not completely focused on reality. He had a certain sensitivity, but he was accustomed to paying too much attention to what people thought of him. Plus, he was kind of burned out).

"Not too many items, but they're actually heavy to lift."

At that moment she had a feeling, a kind of a rush. She worried that Alex might arrive with someone else. "Maybe you can come and have a look tonight, but I can't stay too long; I have an appointment. It'd be better if you could arrange the transfer for another day," she added.

"That's fine with me. It's Saturday night, and I'm going out later. Yeah, that works well for me, too."

Alex had left her gallery for another, unknown space after one solo show, after she had spent a lot of money on the production of the work, on promotion and in putting on an art fair. They had spent a great deal of time together, putting up the show, and they were so excited that they had made a lot of mistakes. Everything was uncertain but the trust they had for one another. The day of the opening, Alex said to her, "From this moment on, it'll be nothing like before."

Things had come together little by little, but now Alex was chasing success and money. He didn't see that by taking this approach, he was moving backward and not forward. He had finally turned his back on Alice because he felt he was not important enough to her. He had left his artwork behind.

Now he wanted everything back, including the art pieces she had produced. Alex owed Alice 1,000 euros or so, but he never mentioned this debt. Alice was used to sharing production costs with the artists fifty-fifty. She did not ask for a fee, or any bullshit like that, but rather for 50% of the profit if she sold the piece. She was honest, and she kept her promises with artists and with all the other people she knew. Alex's solo show at the gallery was also the first opening in the space, so Alice had invested what she had to, not without some difficulty, but with the certainty that she was investing in something that would reap returns in the future. She could not have imagined that Alex would jump ship so fast.

He was not completely convinced by Alice's attitude and her skills as a gallerist, and he never hid that feeling. To him, she was a nice girl. A couple of times, he had also tried to have sex with her, but Alice had not been interested. . . . To him, she was a sensitive and interesting person and—for sure—brave and kind of aggressive, but she was completely without any business sense.

Alice had given everything to those people. In the beginning, this total absence of respect

on their part made her feel confused, but now everything was making sense. There was always a reason things had to happen in a certain way. Was what was going to happen that night a natural consequence of that fact?

Alice answered her ringing phone: It was Alex.

Alice felt so excited, she could hardly control herself. Her heart exploded in her chest. Earlier, she had not imagined that she would feel this way, and she remembered what people said about first times: “You never forget!”

She had been waiting for this moment for weeks now, anticipating it so much that it was as if it had already happened a thousand times.

She switched off the neon light in the exhibition room, so that from outside, the room looked much darker, and she switched on the light in the entrance.

Then she walked into the exhibition room, opened the door to the storage room, and switched on the faint light in there.

She went back to the entrance and opened her backpack. Reaching inside, she removed a hard leather case. Opening this, she removed a beautiful twenty-centimeter knife, its handle inlaid with precious stones and mother-of-pearl.

Holding the knife up, she moved to the left side of the door. From there, she could hear Alex walking through the building and coming up to the first floor. He was standing just outside the door. He rang the bell, and she answered in a calm, happy voice. “Please come in!”

A tall, broad-shouldered man stepped in. He was wearing a black jacket and a blue hat.

Before Alex had time to turn around, Alice jumped on him, stabbing him in the back once, twice. Then she stabbed him in the chest, under his left arm, reaching his heart. He fell down, looking at her with big blue eyes, angry and astounded at the same time. Alice looked at him with great joy. She wriggled around the body and knelt, facing him. The man moved frantically and gasped desperately for help. Anchoring herself firmly on the floor, Alice took his head between her hands and cut his throat with a simple and composed horizontal movement.

Even as he looked her, he had no time to say anything—in one minute, he was dead.