

Turtledove or A love story

Lygia Fagundes Telles

She met him for the first time when she was crowned princess of the Spring Ball and as soon as her heart jolted and her eyes filled with tears she thought: I am going to love him forever. When he asked her to dance she felt dizzy, hastily dried her sweaty palms on the bodice of her dress (pretending she was smoothing out a crease) and, legs shaking, opened her arms to him and smiled. A crooked little smile, to hide the gap from a missing canine, which she had promised herself she would have seen to by Roni's dentist, Dr. Elcio, if she got promoted from assistant to hairdresser. He said only a few words, like, You should be the queen, because the queen is a real cow, pardon the expression. She replied that the queen's boyfriend had bought all the votes, unfortunately she didn't have a boyfriend, and even if she did, it wouldn't make any difference because she only got things the hard way, she was a Capricorn and Capricorns have to struggle twice as hard to succeed. I don't believe in that crap, he said, and excused himself to go out for a smoke, they were already dancing the encore of the *Myosotis Waltz* and it was hot as hell. She excused him. Better not to have, she would later say to the queen when they were going home. Because after that she didn't lay eyes on him again, although she looked for him all over the ballroom and with such determination that the director of the club came over to ask her what she had lost. My boyfriend, she said laughing, when she got nervous she would laugh for no reason. But is Antenor your boyfriend? the director wondered, holding her tightly while they danced *Nosotros*. Because he left straight after the waltz, wrapped around a black girl in a halter dress, he added, distracted. A nice guy but couldn't hold down a

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Texto de referência: Seminário dos Ratos, Editora Rocco, Rio de Janeiro.

job, at the start of the year he was a bus driver, last month he was a tire repairman at a shop on Marechal Deodoro Square, but now he was at a car parts store on Guaianazes Street, almost at the corner of General Osório, he didn't know the number but it was easy to find. Not that easy, she thought, when she found him at the back of the workshop, polishing a part. He didn't recognize her, What can I do for you? She started to laugh, But I'm the princess of São Paulo Chic, remember? He remembered as he shook his head, impressed, But nobody has this address, damn it, how did you get it? He took her to the door: he had tons of work to do, no time to scratch himself, but he thanked her for the visit, she could leave her phone number, did she have a pencil on her? Never mind, he could remember any number by heart; he would give her a call some time, OK? He didn't. She went to the Church of the Hanged Men, lit seven candles for the most afflicted souls and started a Miraculous Novena in praise of Saint Anthony, all of this after having called several times just to hear his voice. On the first Saturday that the horoscope announced as a wonderful day for Capricorns, when the owner of the beauty salon had gone out to do a bride's hair, she phoned again and this time she spoke, but so low that he had to shout, Speak up, damn it, I can't hear a thing. She was frightened by the shout and gently hung up the phone. She only built up courage again with the shot of vermouth Roni got from around the corner, and then she tried again at the exact moment there was an accident on the street and everybody went to the window to have a look. She said she was the princess of the Ball, laughed when she denied having called other times and invited him to see a really interesting local movie that was showing at a theater right near his shop, on São João Avenue. The silence at the other end was so complete that Roni hurried to give her another shot, Drink, dear, you're almost fainting. I think we were cut off, she murmured, leaning on the table, a little dizzy. Sit down, dear, let me call for you, he offered, drinking the rest of the vermouth and speaking with his mouth glued to the receiver: This is Roni, a friend of the princess, you know, she's not very brilliant at this moment, and that's why I'm calling for her, it's nothing serious, thank God, but the poor thing is so anxious for an answer, of course. In a low tense voice (like those Mafia gangsters from the movies, you just *feel* something inside, Roni would say later, rolling his eyes), he calmly asked not to call the shop again, because his boss was pissed off, and besides, (his voice deepened) he couldn't date anyone, he was already seeing someone, if one day I feel like it, I WILL CALL HER MYSELF, OK? Let her wait, for Christ's sake. She waited. Throughout those days of hope she wrote him fourteen letters, nine romantically inspired, and the others based on the book *Erotic Correspondence* by Glenda Edwin, which Roni had lent her with recommendations, Because now, darling, sex is the thing, if he (what a wonderful voice!) is a Taurus, you have to put out right away, a Taurus talks a lot about the moon, about boat rides, but what they really want is to get laid. She signed *Turtledove*,

but when she was about to post the letters, she ripped up the erotic ones and only sent the others. Still during this period she started knitting him a green sweater, double thread (hot as hell, but you never know in this city) and twice she asked Roni to call him and disguise his voice, as if he were the radio announcer from *Intimacy on the Air*, to tell him that at such and such a time, Turtledove had dedicated a special bolero to him. He's very, very macho, Roni commented with a thoughtful smile after hanging up. And only after much insistence he told her that he had snorted angrily and said he didn't want to listen to any fucking bolero, Tell her I'm out of town, that I died! On the evening when the soap opera ended with Dr. Amândio happily by Laurinha's side, when, after so many obstacles, true love was victorious, she dried her tears, finished the hem of her new dress and the next day, claiming strong cramps, left early to catch him on his way out from work. It was raining so hard that when she got there she was a total mess, with one false eyelash clinging to her left eye, the other washed away in the downpour. He pulled her under the umbrella, said he was pissed off because Corinthians had lost their game and asked through gritted teeth where her bus stop was. But we could go to the movies, she invited, trembling as she held his arm, her tears mingling with the rain. On Conselheiro Crispiniano Street, if she wasn't mistaken, there was a really interesting movie playing, wouldn't he like to sit out the rain at the movies? At this moment, he stepped ankle-deep into a puddle, swore twice at the goddamn rain and pushed her inside the crowded smoke-filled bus. Before that, he said right in her ear not to chase after him anymore because he couldn't stand it, he thanked her for the shirt, the little key-ring, the Easter eggs and the box of handkerchiefs, but he didn't want to date her because he already had a girlfriend, Get me out of your head, for God's sake, for GODSAKE! She got off the bus at the next corner, got on another across the street, went to the Church of the Hanged Men, lit another thirteen candles and when she got home, picked up her plaster Saint Anthony, took the baby Jesus away from him, hid him in a dresser drawer and warned him that until Antenor called her, she wouldn't release or return the child. She slept bathed in tears, a woolen sock around her neck because of a sore throat, Antenor's picture (which she had stolen from his São Paulo Chic membership card) with a little branch of rue under her pillow. On the day of the Hydrangea Ball, she bought a gentleman's ticket, tipped the ticket seller who worked on Guaianazes to take it to the workshop and asked the owner of the beauty salon to give her a Catherine Deneuve hairstyle, the one on the cover of the last issue of *Secret Lives*. She spent the whole evening watching the entrance to the ballroom. The following afternoon she bought the record *Ave-Maria for Lovers* on special, wrote on the card the line Lucinha says to Mario in the scene at the station, *I love you today more than yesterday and less than tomorrow*, signed TD, and after borrowing money from Roni, she went to the crossroads near Alzira's house to leave what Father Fuzô had asked of her two weeks before to cheer her

up and to fulfill her destiny: a bottle of champagne and a pack of Minister cigarettes. If she wanted a stronger kind of sorcery, she could ask, Alzira offered. An example? If she sewed up the mouth of a frog, the guy would start to dry up and wither and would only stop wasting away on the day he called her, it was surefire. The mere thought of doing anything so wicked made her depressed, imagine, how could she wish something so horrible on the man she loved so much? The black woman respected her will, but advised her to carry raw garlic in her purse, place some on her door and stick one clove right in there. In *there?*, she was startled and hung around listening to other spells, only out of consideration because they were impossible for a virgin: how could she take a hair from his privates to braid with hers and bury them together in a cemetery? On the last day of the year, during a break barely long enough for her to swallow a sandwich, Roni called her aside, caressed her hair (so soft, dear, it was the oil treatment, wasn't it?) and, after taking the cup of coffee from her hands, told her that Antenor's wedding was set for the first week of January. She fainted right there, on top of the costumer who was under the dryer. When she got home her Portuguese neighbor made her an eggnog (my girl, you are skin and bones!) and taught her an infallible spell, Did she, by any chance, have a picture of the animal? Well, she should glue it to a red felt heart and at midday she should stick a pair of steel scissors three times into the ingrate's chest and say, what was his name, Antenor? Well, as she stabbed him, she should say with all her might, Antenor, Antenor, Antenor, you will not eat nor sleep nor rest until come to my door! She also took a plate of sweets to Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian, left it in the garden with the most flowers she could find on the way (a very difficult task since public gardens didn't have any flowers and private ones were locked and guarded by dogs) and went to watch him from a distance as he left work. She didn't see him because (she found out through Gilvan, a very nice taxi driver and a friend of Antenor's) he was getting married that afternoon, with a little reception after the religious ceremony at São Paulo Chic. This time she didn't cry: she went to Mappin Department Store and bought a liqueur set on credit, wrote a card wishing him all the happiness in the world, asked Gilvan to deliver the gift, scrawled a big TD on the wrapping paper (she had forgotten to sign the card) and when she got home drank caustic soda. She left the hospital five kilos thinner, helped by Gilvan on one side and Roni on the other, Gilvan's cab was full of gifts the crowd at the salon had sent her. It's over now, she said to Gilvan in a whisper. I don't think of him anymore, she added, but paid close attention when Roni said that the gypsy was now working as a valet at a parking lot at Vila Pompéia, he heard it was on Tito Street. She wrote him a note telling him that she had almost died, but she regretted her reckless act which had given her a burn on the chin and another on her leg, that she was getting married to Gilvan who had been very good to her while she was in hospital and asked him to forgive her for everything that had happened. It

would have been better if she had died because then she would be off my back, Antenor had said when he received the note which he tore into a thousand pieces in front of an acquaintance of Roni's who spread the news at the feast of Saint John at the São Paulo Chic. Gilvan, Gilvan, you were my salvation, she sobbed on her wedding night, closing her eyes to better recall the night she had held Antenor's arm under the umbrella. When she got pregnant, she sent him a postcard of the statue of Christ the Redeemer (he was living in Piracicaba with his wife and the twins) telling him how happy she was in a modest but clean house, with her color TV, her canary and her little dog called Perereca. She signed just out of habit and crossed out the signature right away, but lightly, leaving *Turtle Dove* under the tenuous net of lines and a heart with an arrow. On Gilvan Jr.'s third birthday, holding a handkerchief to her mouth (she was so nauseous with this second pregnancy) she wrote him a letter wishing him all the luck in the world as a driver for the Piracicaba – São Pedro bus line. She pasted a dried pansy to the letter. During the engagement party of her youngest daughter, Maria Aparecida, just for fun, she asked a gypsy who was famous in the neighborhood to read her future in the cards. The woman shuffled the grimy cards, spread them out on the table and told her that if she went to the bus station next Sunday she would see the arrival of a man that would change her life completely, Look, there is the King of Clubs with the Queen of Hearts on the left. He would come in a red and yellow bus, she could even see what he looked like, gray hair, sideburns. His name started with an A, look here, the Ace of Spades with the first letter of his name. She laughed her crooked little laugh (the gap had been filled, but the habit remained) and said that was all in the past, that she was getting too old to think about such nonsense, but on the appointed Sunday she left her granddaughter with the girl's godmother, put on the turquoise dress from her silver wedding anniversary, took a look at the horoscope (it couldn't be better) and went.