

OLDLADYVOICE



Oldladyvoice

ELISA VICTORIA

Translated from Spanish by Charlotte Whittle



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*To my Uncle Pepe, faithful
protector of childhood*



My mom's dark flamenco dress lurks on top of the wardrobe. It's green with enormous black polka dots. When she puts it on, she's the prettiest woman on the face of the earth, but it's been lying there for months and I'm fed up with seeing it from my bed. It doesn't bother me too much during the day, but when I take off my glasses to go to sleep, its blurry ruffles turn into a gigantic coiled snake and I have to hide under the blanket so it can't see me. It would be easier to admit that I'm scared of it and ask for it to be kept somewhere else – which would also be better for the dress – or try and explain the vision away, but this doesn't even occur to me. Things are the way they are. It makes no difference anyway. I still see the snake as soon as I turn out the light, no matter how tight I shut my eyes.

There's a loud noise coming from the living room. Mom sleeps in there because we live at my grandma's house and there aren't enough bedrooms for all of us. We lived in other places before, but I barely remember them. I have a room of my own. This makes me feel really guilty. An uncomfortable luxury. The wallpaper is pink with white clouds, but the room is way too gloomy, and I only make it worse by covering the window with stickers. I can't help it, sticking them up there makes me feel rich.



I'm scared, I want to complain, to cry a bit rather than know what's going on. But I hold it in and wait. Mom comes into the room, gathers me up in her arms, and lifts me out of bed in the dark. I take up about as much space as a baby, and it makes me dizzy to be held at the height of her chest. She carries me into the living room like a precious offering. I have trouble opening my eyes. The light hurts. I don't know what's going to happen, and I'm still not wearing my glasses. She's on edge, lost in a mixture of haste and exhaustion. You can tell she's just another scared little girl caught up in one hell of a mess. There are some boxes of toys on the armchair that haven't been wrapped. Grandma is by the front door. I notice she's wearing her blue bathrobe and a really serious expression. She opens the door and three men come in wearing shiny clothes and making a ruckus. They claim to be the Three Kings. Mom isn't happy and doesn't ask me to be happy, and she keeps holding me tight. Her heart is pounding like a bull's. I can't reach the floor. Balthazar pushes his face into mine and says something about a gift-laden caravan that'll arrive later in my honor, with so many camels that traffic will be stopped for miles. Why not now, Balthazar? It's supposed to be now. The dark smudges on his face make me feel sick, I don't want them to rub off on me. I'd rather go see those toys up close and open the boxes now, but I'm not allowed. I have to wait until morning.

In less than five minutes I'm back in bed as if nothing's happened, disoriented and bewildered, imagining an unlikely procession of endless gifts. I get no explanation. Grandma's snores soon punctuate the stillness of the house like an

insistent night watchman's. I may not be four yet, but I've got things figured out. Those men can't have been the Three Kings. They smelled funny: pungent, acrid, smoky. Their costumes were fancy, but they were wearing them wrong. They showed up empty-handed. The gifts were already on an armchair when they arrived, and Grandma opened the door to them at the wrong moment. This isn't the kind of royalty I've been taught to believe in, that's clear enough. And anyway, their ringleader was Balthazar. He was the main character, and he was scary. Anyone who knows me knows perfectly well that Melchior is my number-one king.

I have no idea who those three guys are, but all they've done is made me lose sleep and messed up tomorrow's surprise. The real Kings weren't as in tune with me as I was hoping, and they didn't bring what I asked for. I wanted a big stuffed Snoopy dressed as a pilot and a Rainy Day Chabel doll, the one from the commercial where they dance at night, like in that movie I saw some bits of. I love old movies with music and dancing on big stages, where everything's clean and polished, the colors look painted on, and there's never a single curl out of place. I also like the ones set in Roman times. If I could only be grown up and get away from all this confusion. I'd choose a life in black-and-white and the kind of high heels that don't hurt your feet. I'd have a Christmas tree as tall as the ceiling and smother my friends with gifts. Everything would be easier if I weren't so precious. I try to hide it, but it's written all over me. Perfume commercials, TV dances, dolls' houses, Xuxa. I adore all things corny. That thick, tame snake is still looking at me from the top of the wardrobe, but now I have other things on my mind.

A different, bright, yellow light shines on the morning of January 6. What happened last night doesn't bother me much. I'm used to seeing clear skies but today it's like squinting at scenes on postcards from way back in time. I open my presents as if I'd forgotten about them, and I admit that the new toys give off a special magic. There's a St. Tropez Barbie in a bathing suit that comes with a sizeable comb. I admire the comb for quite a while before opening a box with a pink armoire, also for the Barbie. I don't know what I'll put inside, I don't have any dresses for her, but it comes with three hangers and it's nice and roomy. The seven cotton handkerchiefs decorated with mice, one for each day of the week, don't do much for me at all. Maybe the fad for giving hankies as gifts will pass. Things would have to get pretty bad for a kid to resort to using one of those little rags. I'd rather wipe my snot on a dishcloth. But the pink teddy bear is cute. I hug it and jump up and down and stand it next to me to see how far up it comes. They ask me what I'm going to call it. I know exactly. I'll name it after the uncle I worship, my hero, the doctor who looks out for me every time I need looking out for.

"Pepe!" I answer.

"Another Pepe?"

"Yes!"

"But you already have two Pepes."

"Well, another Pepe. This one's going to be Pink Pepe. Pepito!"

"All right then."

The teddy bear melts my heart and now I can even look at the hankies fondly. I take one out and stroke it to make

up for the uncharitable thoughts I had earlier. The Monday mouse is dressed as a mailman. Really cute. This didn't turn out so badly after all. The king cake is delicious. A few kids parade their new toys around the patio while I have another helping of breakfast. Some neighbors knock at the door. It looks like a package addressed to me has shown up at Tata's apartment. Tata isn't family, but she lives on the next floor up and I've known her all my life. The word *tata* means something sweet and hard to define, but nonetheless very specific. I think it's something less than *grandma* and more than *aunt*, but definitely more than *neighbor*. If I was alone and faced with some unexpected problem, her apartment's the first place I'd go.

The news of this surprise gift piques my curiosity. I find it in the midst of a tangle of grown-up legs. It's a carrying case full of sparkling princess accessories. A crown, some bracelets, and who knows what else. I glare at it without a word. Being corny is one thing, but being tacky is quite another. An awkward silence prevails among the towering bodies, until Tata asks lovingly, "Do you like it?"

I've been taught not to lie, so I look up and shake my head. Everyone is deflated. I thought I was doing the right thing, but now I feel horribly guilty. Tata snatches up the gift and stalks off muttering about returns. I look at Mom and shrug, not understanding what just happened. She crouches down and says, "Marina, sweetheart, when someone gives you a gift you have to pretend you like it even if it's not true."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't, the person who gave it to you gets sad."

"Why?"

“Because they thought you were going to like it and they feel bad for not getting it right.”

“And did Tata get sad?”

“Yes.”

“But I didn’t want her to get sad.”

“I know, sweetheart.” She hugs me and sighs. “But do you understand?”

“Yes, but that means no one will ever give me anything I like.”

“You tell me what you like, you’ll see. And if you don’t like something I give you, you can tell me and it doesn’t matter.”

“Are you mad, Mom?”

“No, it doesn’t matter, you couldn’t be expected to know what you were supposed to do.”

“And Grandma?”

“She’s not mad either.”

“And Tata?”

“I don’t know, but if she gets mad it won’t last long, and anyway there was no need to make such a fuss. If the kid doesn’t like the gift, then fuck it, what can I say?”

After lunch, I throw the loot onto my bed. I pretend that the Barbie is beautiful and evil like the witch in *Snow White* and that she’s trying to destroy everything I own, without any success. Mom comes in to say hi. The wallpaper only looks pretty when she’s there. The afternoon light gives her naturally pale face some color. As she comes closer, some reddish highlights glint in her loose black curls. She’s wearing pajamas and lipstick. That’s her usual look at home, though she’s out a lot of the time. She’s thirty-one years old and has a whole lot of problems.

“How are you doing?”

“Good.”

“Do you like the doll?”

“Yes.”

I’ve learned my lesson. I’ll have a chance to let her know what I really want when we’re both more prepared, but for now we’ve had enough. It’s not what I asked for, but the Barbie is pretty, and it’ll be good for me to practice with. I’ve called her Katrina, because she has the face of a true villain, and the name Katrina suggests terrible evil. It makes me mad that I’m still too clumsy to handle more valuable presents. I want someone to give me a Michael Jackson cassette.

“But Mom.”

“What?”

“Those guys who came last night weren’t really the Three Kings, were they?”

“No, that was your father and a couple of his friends. The real kings are magicians, and you can’t see them.”

“Oh, right. And which one was my dad?”

“Balthazar.”

“Well, I like Melchior better.”

“Of course. Me too.”

It puts my mind at ease to know that the guy last night was my father. You can’t ask too much of mere mortals. Who were his friends? No doubt they meant well. I’ve made Mom laugh, so she gives me a kiss. Her wet lips make it awkward, but my lungs still swell with delight. I wonder how long it’ll take Tata to forgive me, how long this excitement will last.