

WINTER LETTERS

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*For my nephews Fernando
and Xulio, and niece Antonia.*

*For I have likewise gazed in sleep
on things my memory scarce can keep.*

H. P. LOVECRAFT, *To a Dreamer*

TAREIXA Louzao's eyes lit up when she read the name of the sender on the thick padded envelope the postman had just given her. Seeing written there the name of her brother she hadn't heard from in almost two months lifted a burden from her. She'd been surprised by such a delay since Xabier, wherever he might be, even during the long time he spent in Quebec, never let more than two weeks go by without calling her or dropping her a line, even just a postcard. They'd been very close since they were children, despite the difference in age, and the bond between them, rather than loosening, had grown stronger with the passage of time.

Almost without realizing, she glanced at the photographs on top of the sideboard and remembered the joke Xabier always made when he came to visit and saw the group of framed photographs arranged like the jumbled pieces of a puzzle: "How is the pantheon of family memories?" Once again she went over these images that preserved some of the most important

moments in her life: with her brother and parents in the garden of the family home; with Xabier on what must have been her thirteenth birthday; Xabier signing books, surrounded by people eager to get a dedication; with her mother sitting on the terrace, the summer before she died...

As on other occasions, Tareixa's eyes were drawn to the photo with her between Adrián and Xabier in front of the small chapel on St Roch's Mount. She remembered the day that photo had been taken, during the August festivities. She had just turned sixteen and felt she had the whole of her life in front of her. How distant that memory now seemed! It was that summer when Adrián and Xabier first began to take her with them on their excursions; this was something she loved, there was no one in whose company she felt better. It was also then Tareixa discovered, almost without realizing, something she must have known for quite some time: she was hopelessly in love with Adrián and, despite the twists and turns of fate, that love would remain with her throughout her life.

She shook her head energetically, as if to drive away the sadness she always felt when thinking about Adrián, and looked at the envelope again. The sender's address indicated that Xabier was back in Galicia, though to begin with Tareixa was unable to recognize the place written under her brother's name: Doroña, Vilarmaior. Wasn't that somewhere near Monfero, by the river Eume? I'll have a look on the map, she thought while opening the padded envelope. She was

expecting to find a recent publication of her brother's, or copies of a translation of one of his books. Xabier always remembered that Tareixa liked to keep a sample of everything he published, even if, as often happened, it was written in a language she didn't know.

But the contents of the envelope were different from before. Inside was another, similar envelope, slightly smaller than the one she'd just opened, accompanied by two sheets covered in her brother's tiny handwriting. The second envelope was closed, and the flap had been reinforced by thick adhesive tape, as if to protect the contents. Tareixa placed both envelopes on the table, sat down in a chair and prepared to read the message Xabier had sent her:

Dear Tareixa,

Forgive me for writing a few, short lines, and not a longer letter, as you must have expected. You'll be surprised I don't mention what I've been up to these last few weeks, but I've something much more urgent to tell you. You know very well you're the only person in the world I can fully trust, which is why I'm writing to you now, to ask for two favours without having to explain myself any further.

The first is that you absolutely do not open the envelope with this letter. I know it's an unusual request, but I'm sure you'll understand I have good reason to make it.

The second will surprise you, but you know I wouldn't ask this if it wasn't absolutely necessary. If you see, a week after receiving this letter, that I still haven't contacted

you by phone, go to the central police station in Vigo and ask for Inspector Soutullo. Tell him you're my sister and hand him the envelope I'm sending you. Do not hesitate, Soutullo is a good friend of mine. We were in close contact three years ago, when I spent some months there carrying out research to write The Defeat of Hope; I think I may even have introduced him to you. I'm sure Soutullo will pay close attention to the contents of the envelope and will know what to do.

I ask you not to open the envelope, but I can't stop you also finding out its contents if you're obliged to hand it over to Soutullo. Though, for your own good, I would ask you not to do this, I can't bear the pain you would feel. Do you remember our first trip to Barcelona, in the autumn of 1969? You'll remember that was when I bought Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos from a kiosk on the Ramblas. It was the first book by Lovecraft I read, his tales fascinated me. Seeing my enthusiasm, you would say you didn't know how I could read those stories you disliked so much. I always answered it was normal you didn't like them, because you made the mistake of believing what they told could be real, when they were just clever inventions that played with our fears. Well, now, as I'm writing to you, from madness or a nightmare, from an unreal world or this village in Vilarmajor, I have to tell you Lovecraft may have been right, you may have been right, and there are things in this world we may not even be able to imagine.

But it's also possible that everything I'm writing is just the product of a strange nightmare that won't leave me

alone. It's possible that in a few days the two of us will be together again, laughing at these lines and the contents of the envelope I'm sending you. Or perhaps, dear sister, what your eyes are reading will be the last words I ever write.

Now, as I finish this letter, I'm aware I also could get away from here and return to the real world, I'm still in time to escape this awful situation. But that would mean abandoning Adrián to his fate, refusing to heed the message he sent me. And I can't do that, especially after reading the letter, or whatever it is, I just found downstairs. I don't know why I'm telling you this when I swore never to give you cause for worry, because to understand what I'm telling you you'd have to read the papers inside the envelope. I would prefer you not to, but you're my sister and I can't prevent you from reading them when the time comes, if that is your wish. Perhaps then you'll understand why, in these final hours, anxiety and fear course through my body.

Farewell, dear sister. I embrace you with all my strength, and hope it's not for the last time.

Xabier

Tareixa's face grew darker as she read the letter, and she began to feel deeply concerned. What was Xabier trying to tell her? What was the purpose of these unsettling references to Adrián? And why these allusions to Lovecraft, the author of those novels – so many years ago! – Xabier devoured with passion and she could never finish? Was it just a joke her brother was

playing on her, he who had such a way with words? But her heart was telling her what she'd just read was something more than a literary exercise, and in the coming days she would have to live with the fear she now felt inside.

Over the next two days, Tareixa tried to lead a normal life. While she was in the health centre, overwhelmed by the amount of work she had, she managed to forget Xabier's letter. But as soon as she arrived home and saw the sealed envelope lying on the sideboard, her brother's words came back to mind and a sense of unease took hold of her with ever greater intensity. Why didn't Xabier trust her? And why did he trust this stranger, Soutullo, when he had so many friends in Vigo? Everything seemed to indicate that Xabier and Adrián were involved in some murky incident, maybe that was why he didn't want her to intervene. But what if she paid him attention and waited for seven days, and something happened to them?

The idea of opening the envelope may have worked its way into her mind as soon as she'd finished reading her brother's letter. The two days that had passed may have served only to allow the idea to grow, to grow until it became unbearable. On the third day, unable to take any more, Tareixa decided to ignore her brother's request. It was Saturday, she had the whole day free, and the possibility of spending the whole weekend thinking about Xabier and the contents of

the envelope was too much for her. She couldn't wait for so many days to go by, Xabier should never have asked this of her. If it came to it and he rebuked her for being impatient, she could always say it was really his fault, since she'd only opened the envelope because the contents of his letter had worried her so much.

She picked up the sealed envelope and turned it over in her hands, trying to guess what might be inside. It seemed to contain only papers, perhaps it was just a new manuscript of her brother's. After a moment's hesitation, she cut the adhesive tape with a pair of scissors, tore the flap and opened the envelope. She emptied its contents onto the table and examined them closely. There were a few sheets covered in Xabier's unmistakably small, neat handwriting. There were also several letters, all of them addressed to the post office box her brother had in Santiago de Compostela; the envelopes had been opened, so the letters had clearly been read. Tareixa's heart started beating more quickly when she recognized the handwriting that meant so much to her. The sender was always the same, Adrián Novoa, though the addresses the letters had been sent from were different. Some of them came from abroad, but most bore the same address she'd seen in Xabier's letter: Doroña, Vilarmaior. There was also a smaller, padded A5 envelope containing numerous photographs. Tareixa glanced at them quickly and was surprised to see that they were all very similar, as if they belonged to the same series.

She was tempted to read Adrián's letters first, but thought it better to start with the sheets from her brother; they might contain the explanation for so much mystery. Attempting to control her nerves, she gathered together the envelope's contents, sat down in the chair next to the window and started to read.