

The paint on the door smelled new, its texture uneven and lumpy from years of DIY refreshing. A strongly worded sign instructed visitors to remove their shoes before entering and a dog barked incessantly from a room within. MariaSofia had not mentioned a dog.

Alison knocked several times. She pressed the doorbell. The only indication she'd been heard at all was a distinct change in the barking in both volume and timbre, and the addition of a new sound—squawking, cawing—from yet another interior room. MariaSofia had not mentioned a bird either.

Her phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Alicia, hi.” MariaSofia’s voice was flustered, but authoritative. “You’re there? At my apartment?”

“It’s Alison—sorry, and yes. The doorman sent me up. You said 3A?”

“Terrific. I’m in the neighborhood, but I can’t seem to find my car.”

“Okay—”

“I’ll be there soon. Just go on in.”

Alison was at a point in her life where she was eating black beans straight from the can. She was new to the city, sharing a one-bedroom so small that she and her roommate had resorted to bunk beds. At twenty-five, she needed a job, direction, some meaning. She thought about calling the woman back, mumbling an excuse. Instead, she removed her shoes. The door jingled as she pressed it open, and she was greeted by the smell of onions and garlic, essential oils and the distinct must of old carpets. The animals, yet unseen, cried out with renewed enthusiasm.

When Alison responded to the ad, MariaSofia had self-identified as *eccentric*; the word did not do her justice. A statue of a pot-bellied elephant stood just inside the door, multiple arms raised as if in greeting. Each surface in sight was covered with wooden and ceramic masks, skulls, rich fabrics—and mail. Piles of mail. Everywhere Alison looked was cluttered, chaotic—but *cultured*. A large poster of Barack Obama—iconic, stylized “Hope” in red, beige, and blue—hung on the wall. The barking continued.

To Alison’s left was a long tiled hallway leading, she guessed, to the kitchen. To her right was the living room. It was a large space with an even larger rug, folded at the ends to fit. More masks, more clutter. Plants and flowers, stacks of large, tasseled pillows where another person might have an armchair—and in the far corner of the room, a Christmas tree.

It was April.

The decorations were still in tact, and lovely, but the tree was long dead. What few needles remained on the branches were brown, crunchy; the floor was littered with the rest. The trunk in its metal base lilted sadly to the side, and the ornamental topper—not the typical angel or star of Alison’s youth, but a glittering glass polar bear—looked in danger of crashing down at any moment.

Alison didn’t know whether to laugh or cry or document the bizarreness of it all with an Instagram post. Before she could do anything, she was reminded of the presence of the bird. Not six feet from her, in a metal cage on the floor, it emitted a high-pitched shriek loud enough to make her ears ring. It was big—a parrot or something—and looked directly at her, rapidly bobbing its blue head and blinking its eyes.

“Hi,” Alison said, attempting soothing tones. “Nice bird.”

She backed away to the opposite corner of the room, where she found a desk, a half-eaten Mounds bar, a computer. The screen was peppered with Post-its, each a handwritten reminder—*Dientes 2pm* and *DO YOUR TAXES DAMMIT!* and also *You deserve to be happy.*

Alison sat there, far from the bird, for nearly an hour, thinking often of fleeing. When the front door finally opened, the bells and beads and baubles that dangled there announced the arrival of her new employer. Alison stood to greet her, but MariaSofia didn't give her the chance.

“Stop everything,” she commanded from the door. “The tulips are blooming.”

The name on her birth certificate was Anne but lacked the flare she required in life, so she'd chosen one for herself. Born to expats in Mexico City—*a white woman with a Mexican heart*, she'd say—MariaSofia lived by her whims, and her inheritance.

She had a lumbering, uneven gait, rocking side to side with each step.

“Bad hip,” she explained.

Despite this, the result of falling from a horse when she was a child, MariaSofia was surprisingly spry for her age—Alison guessed late sixties—and for her shape: pear. She smiled widely as she guided them toward Riverside Drive, toward the tulips.

“You never know how many days you have,” she told Alison, panting slightly.

“When it's mild like this, the bloom might only last a few.”

She had graying hair, highlighted reddish-brown. Her puffy purple coat was unzipped to let in the warming weather and swung behind her like a cape, beneath which she wore what Alison could only describe as a muumuu. Billowy, breezy, floral print. Pulled over

that was a soft, pink cashmere sweater. On her feet: a pair of purple UGG boots identical to a pair spotted in the hallway outside her front door—but in better condition.

“Do you speak Spanish?”

Alison was embarrassed to admit she’d forgotten what little she had learned in high school. “Un...poco?” she fumbled.

MariaSofia bustled on ahead as if she hadn’t heard.

They finally slowed at the corner of 91<sup>st</sup> and Riverside. MariaSofia held open a gate, Alison passed through, and the two women entered a secret garden of luscious plant life and a surprising amount of quiet. The buzzing of bees and birdsong masked the squeal of traffic, and the scent of flowers masked the city stench. They sat on a bench facing a bed of pink and blue and yellow. MariaSofia closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

Just a few hours earlier, Alison had opened her eyes to an unfamiliar room, in the bed of a stranger. Now she found herself sitting beside one. The morning, the taste of cheap tequila and stale cigarettes on her tongue, had left her feeling empty, but the warmth and the garden and the woman beside her—her unabashed delight in beauty, in literally smelling the flowers—filled her with a nervous excitement like first-day-of-school butterflies. She wanted this colorful woman to like her.

“Can you tell me a bit more about the position?” she asked timidly.

MariaSofia kept her eyes closed, pursed her lips. “Don’t make yourself small on my account.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Ask like you deserve an answer. No apologies.”

“Okay.” Alison repeated herself.

MariaSofia opened one eye to peek at her. “We’ll work on that, and your Spanish.” She smiled. “I need help with emails—I’m terrible at typing—and with bills, stuff like that. I can be forgetful.”

Alison wondered about the car.

“It’s just one day a week, for now,” MariaSofia went on. “So you’ll have plenty of time for your other pursuits.”

“I don’t really have any other pursuits,” Alison confessed.

“You have sex, don’t you?”

Alison felt her face get hot. If her grandparents were still alive, she would not have been discussing sex—or anything of significance, really—with them. But it felt good to laugh, to talk—so openly in the sunshine, regardless of her companion’s age.

“Yes,” she admitted.

MariaSofia nodded, satisfied. “Good. You can tell me all about it.”

The dog was only a little thing, brown and shaggy, but he made himself known. He barked and snarled, tug and spun on the leash. His owner’s arm swung madly from her shoulder.

“Don’t mind Jefe,” MariaSofia told her, as she led him from a room in the back of the apartment. She fastened the leash to the closet doorknob. “He’ll get his walk soon.”

It seemed he had sunk his teeth into everyone in MariaSofia’s life at least once, but she would not part with him. She was convinced that the spirit of her dead husband was lodged in that dog, and it was her role to protect him—however begrudgingly—when no one else would.

“He guarded the temples of Sri Lanka,” she’d say to justify his terrible temperament. He didn’t; his breed had, but Alison never questioned her. She would come to learn that her employer spoke often like this, with grandeur and hyperbole, rolling her *r*’s whenever she got the chance.

“But *do* mind *him*,” MariaSofia went on, stopping at the elephant statue to rub its belly. “The remover of obstacles. My dear Ganesh.” She peered into its face and smiled fondly, then turned. “What obstacles would you have him remove for you, Alicia?”

“It’s Alison—”

MariaSofia laughed, unapologetic. “How about I call you AI?”

Alison was pleased to be given a nickname. “Sure.” She gestured to the towering pile of unopened mail. “Do you want me to open these?”

“Eventually,” MariaSofia said. “Aren’t you hungry?”

One day a week, Alison did her best to keep MariaSofia out of trouble. She kept track of her bills and credit card statements, responded to emails—texts, too—and appealed her many parking tickets. She memorized her online passwords for those frantic phone calls whenever MariaSofia misplaced the master sheet of personal data—often at inconvenient times like first dates, or in the middle of the night. With this strange woman in her life, each day was an adventure. But as she quickly discovered, what MariaSofia desired in her, more than anything, was an *enabler*.

“Tell me it’s okay to give Barack all of my money,” she said in the days leading up to his reelection. Or grabbing the remote mid-sentence while dictating an email: “There’s a *Law & Order: SVU* marathon on USA!”

Her moods followed the weather. On rainy days, she'd nap while Alison sifted through the never-ending stack of papers, filing things away in folders marked *Keepers* and *Africa*. On sunny days, MariaSofia would declare, "I feel like a latte, don't you?" They would sit outside a café on the bustling street, sipping thick foam from French coffee bowls, a chocolate croissant between them.

"I feel guilty," Alison confided to her mother. "She's paying me to drink coffee."

"Maybe she's lonely."

"Yesterday we had a photo shoot for her *parrot*."

And there was the Christmas tree.

"I just couldn't bear to take it down," MariaSofia explained, eyes on the stark branches. "January is so dreary."

"And February," Alison agreed.

"March, too. And then I didn't want to get those needles everywhere."

"Do you have a tarp? We could wrap it up to carry it to the elevator—"

"That sounds *exhausting*," MariaSofia dropped her weight into the sofa, added a dramatic sigh. "Doesn't that sound exhausting?" She propped herself against a pillow, cupped her chin in her hand. She nodded. "Let's throw it out the window."

Alison reminded MariaSofia that she lived in a third-floor apartment on a busy—and wealthy—Upper West Side street. There were very few homeless people in the neighborhood, little trash; its residents didn't appreciate mess.

"And it's probably against the law."

But MariaSofia was already clearing her way to the window, pulling ornaments off the tree in a cascade of needles and brittle branches.

“Don’t worry, Al,” she cooed. “We’ll say I have dementia.”

When the police arrived, Alison was instructed to hide in the bathroom. MariaSofia hummed as she shuffled to the front door. She spoke to the officer in Spanish and Alison heard the two of them laughing, then the door jingled closed.

“What happened?” Alison asked, peeking around the corner.

“Oh, he was adorable!” MariaSofia beamed. “And wouldn’t you know it?” She patted her chest proudly. “He has family in Mexico City.”

MariaSofia employed two other people: a grumpy, grey-haired handyman from the building who helped her hang, move, or paint things whenever the mood struck; and a middle-aged, Mexican woman named Juana. She’d been with her for years, doing the shopping and cleaning, and wrestling Jefe from MariaSofia’s side so that he could relieve himself out on the sidewalk and not, for once, on the expensive antique carpets. But her calling card was her black beans.

Juana made the most delicious black beans, texture like chocolate, in big batches simmered for hours on the stove. (Alison would carry leftovers home in mason jars for the next eight years.) She served them slathered on homemade tortillas, fresh from the pan and topped with her signature green salsa. On occasion, she poured pulpy glasses of fresh-squeezed orange juice. She never joined them at the table, but would pause—briefly—in her work to chat. The older women delighted in teaching Alison simple

Spanish phrases—like *pase la aspiradora* (“vacuum”), *planche la ropa* (“iron the clothes”), or *el pendejo* (“motherfucker”).

Alison always brought the laptop to the dining room table, where it sat ignored. MariaSofia chewed with her mouth open and moaned in pleasure with every bite while offering Alison advice on anything from cold remedies—*Swallow half a clove of raw garlic at the first sign of symptoms*—to personal grooming—*Don’t cater to the preference of men. Pubic hair is there for a reason.*

She was already feeling under the weather when Bella flew out the window.

MariaSofia had taken the parrot out of her cage so that Juana could clean it, and neither woman had noticed that the window, tossed open to let in the crisp fall air, had been left that way.

Alison arrived to find MariaSofia in tears, frantically calling her friends and neighbors, urging them to be on the lookout for her beautiful blue bird. The day was spent creating and hanging flyers up and down the street, big flashy text and one of the pictures taken by Alison with MariaSofia’s professional, point-and-shoot camera: Bella looking demure with her head tipped, posing on an Oriental rug, her orange-rimmed eyes vacant and probing at the same time.

MariaSofia mourned her parrot, cursed herself. She and Alison burned sage and wrote their desires on slips of paper—*I want Bella to come home. I want Bella to be happy. I want Bella to fly free.* They sat outside in the chilling weather. Alison sipped her latte. MariaSofia’s foam, untouched, receded into the creamy base. The following week, she

clutched her stomach for the entirety of their time together before finally falling asleep on the couch. Alison paid the bills and closed the door softly behind her.

The pile of mail at the door expanded beyond the usual windowed envelopes to include cards and flowers, fruit and soft things: blankets, slippers, robe. The note on the outside of 3A about shoes was amended to include negative energy and Jesus—*Leave them both at the door*. MariaSofia rarely moved from the bed. The emails she dictated to Alison were no longer about making plans—no cruises, or *Hamilton* tickets—but making peace.

“She’s dying,” her niece cried into the phone. “She doesn’t want you to know.”

“What?”

“She has cancer, Al. I’m sorry.”

“How long—?”

“The doctor says a year.”

They went on pretending: in their relationship, death didn’t exist.

Juana cleaned up the vomit, cleaned up the shit. Juana continued to prepare MariaSofia’s favorite foods, scraping plate after untouched plate into the garbage. And Juana was the one to bathe her, dress her. Alison, though she knew what was happening, was kept in the dark.

She still reported to work once or twice a week to email and sort and file. At some point, she stopped paying herself from the envelope of petty cash in the desk.

It was a Wednesday.

MariaSofia had been vomiting all morning. Juana had yet to arrive.

Alison knocked softly on the bedroom door. She heard grunts and groans, water running. Jefe, for once, was silent.

“Don’t come in,” MariaSofia moaned. “I’ll speak to you from here.”

Alison grabbed the laptop and stationed herself on the floor.

“I’m here,” she called. “Want me to read your emails?”

No answer.

“Can I help? What do you need?”

“Don’t come in.” MariaSofia’s voice was thin, but her words sounded thick. Tongue dry, lips cracked. Alison heard the toilet flush, followed by painful heaving, more moaning. “Just go.”

Instead, Alison pushed the door open.

MariaSofia was in her bathroom, a crumpled ball on the floor, loyal guard dog at her ankles. Bunched-up paper towels encircled them, and someone had covered the tile with a layer of Jefe’s pee pads to try and mitigate the mess: the vomit, urine, feces.

Her legs were grossly thin now, sticking out from the filthy robe like toothpicks. No longer a pear. Her head was bald, her skin so gray it was almost translucent, and crinkled—like Saran. Alison stood at the doorway, gawking helplessly, as Jefe turned to her with a growl, teeth bared.

“Go,” MariaSofia said again.

There was so much Alison wanted to say; she wanted nothing more than to leave. She had never seen it before, not in real life. Not like this. Her friend was dying.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, finally, and moved to leave—as Jefe lunged.

She felt his hot breath at the back of her leg, registered a sharp pain as his teeth made contact with her thigh. She yelped and kicked blindly back with her other leg, feeling her sock hit soft body, shaggy fur, and he released her, taking skin and the fabric of her pants with him. She retreated to the hallway, Jefe to his post.

“Al?”

She sounded so weak.

“It’s okay,” Alison assured her, though it wasn’t. She was shaking from adrenaline, and a gash in the back of her pants revealed a streak of blood. “It’s okay.” As the tears came, as MariaSofia barely lifted her head.

“I can’t do this anymore, Al,” she whispered, and turned her cheek to the tile.

No one acknowledged Alison at MariaSofia’s celebration of life. Family and friends gathered over troughs of tacos, cheese congealing as the Mariachi played and people tried to dance. Alison stood by the food. She filled a paper plate with tortilla chips—store bought, already stale—and ate in tiny bites until the salt burned the corners of her mouth. She watched MariaSofia’s sons receive hugs and condolences, saw one look her way. When she waved with greasy fingers, he averted his eyes.

Not two days later, Alison learned that the locks had been changed on the Upper West Side apartment, and that Jefe had been put down.

Alison would forever measure the passing of time in MariaSofia-isms: her birthday; her deathday; tulips blooming and black beans simmering and garlic burps after home cold remedies.

Long after she gave up on New York, Alison imagined Bella cruising through Central Park. Flourishing in freedom. Flying high over the common pigeon, screeching as she soared. A streak of blue on a tourist's snapshot, a blur so brief they might, in later inspection, think it was the scarf of a passerby or maybe just a smudge, a fingerprint, on the film. They'd gather their friends to retell their adventures of the Big Apple, rifling through the glossy stack, struggling to describe the photograph in their lap. They would look at it and pause—*Huh, how strange*—before writing it off as insignificant, a mistake; and while they'd move it off to the side, they would not be able to bring themselves to throw it away.