

Poor Juan! One day they caught him with his guard down before he could even realize that what he had taken to be a stroke of luck was really one of fate's dirty tricks. These things happen the minute you're careless, as one often is. Juancito let happiness — a feeling you can't trust — get the better of him when he received from a confidential source Mariana's new address in Paris and knew that she hadn't forgotten him. Without thinking twice, he sat down at his table and wrote her a letter. The letter. The same one that now keeps his mind off his job during the day and won't let him sleep at night (what had he scrawled, what had he put on that sheet of paper he sent to Mariana?).

Juan knows there won't be a problem with the letter's contents, that it's irreproachable, harmless. But what about the rest? He knows that they examine, sniff, feel, and read between the lines of each and every letter, and check its tiniest comma and most accidental stain. He knows that all letters pass from hand to hand and go through all sorts of tests in the huge censorship offices and that, in the end, very few continue on their way. Usually it takes months, even years, if there aren't any snags; all this time the freedom, maybe even the life, of both sender and receiver is in jeopardy. And that's why Juan's so troubled: thinking that something might happen to Mariana because of his letter. Of all people, Mariana, who must finally feel safe there where she always dreamt about living. But he knows that the *Censor's Secret Command* operates all over the world and cashes in on the discount in air fares; there's nothing to stop them from going as far as that obscure Paris neighborhood, kidnapping Mariana, and returning to their cozy homes, certain of having fulfilled their noble mission.

Well, you've got to beat them to the punch, do what everyone tries to do: sabotage the machinery, throw sand in its gears, that is to say get to the bottom of the problem to try to stop it.

This was Juan's sound plan when he, along with many others, applied for a censor's job — not because he had a calling like others or needed a job: no, he applied simply to intercept his own letter, an idea none too original but comforting. He was hired immediately, for each day more and more censors are needed and no one would bother to check on his references.

Ulterior motives couldn't be overlooked by the *Censorship Division*, but they needn't be too strict with those who applied. They knew how hard it would be for the poor

guys to find the letter they wanted and even if they did, what's a letter or two compared to all the others that the new censor would snap up? That's how Juan managed to join the Post Office's *Censorship Division*, with a certain goal in mind.

The building had a festive air on the outside that contrasted with its inner staidness.

5 Little by little, Juan was absorbed by his job, and he felt at peace since he was doing everything he could to retrieve his letter to Mariana. He didn't even worry when, in his first month, he was sent to *Section K* where envelopes are very carefully screened for explosives.

10 It's true that on the third day a fellow worker had his right hand blown off by a letter, but the division chief claimed it was sheer negligence on the victim's part. Juan and the other employees were allowed to go back to their work, though feeling less secure. After work, one of them tried to organize a strike to demand higher wages for unhealthy work, but Juan didn't join in; after thinking it over, he reported the man to his superiors and thus he got promoted.

15 You don't form a habit by doing something once, he told himself as he left his boss's office. And when he was transferred to *Section J*, where letters are carefully checked for poison dust, he felt he had climbed a rung in the ladder.

By working hard, he quickly reached *Section E* where the job became more interesting, for he could now read and analyze the letters' contents. Here he could
20 even hope to get hold of his letter to Mariana, which, judging by the time that had elapsed, would have gone through the other sections and was probably floating around in this one.

Soon his work became so absorbing that his noble mission blurred in his mind. Day after day he crossed out whole paragraphs in red ink, pitilessly chucking many letters
25 into the censored basket. These were horrible days when he was shocked by the subtle and conniving ways employed by people to pass on subversive messages; his instincts were so sharp that he found behind a simple "the weather's unsettled" or "prices continue to soar" the wavering hand of someone secretly scheming to overthrow the Government.

30 His zeal brought him swift promotion. We don't know if this made him happy. Very few letters reached him in *Section B* — only a handful passed the other hurdles — so he read them over and over again, passed them under a magnifying glass, searched for microdots with an electron microscope, and tuned his sense of smell so that he was beat by the time he made it home. He'd barely manage to warm up his soup, eat
35 some fruit, and fall into bed, satisfied with having done his duty. Only his darling mother worried, but she couldn't get him back on the right track. She'd say, though it wasn't always true: Lola-called, she's at the bar with the girls, they miss you, they're

waiting for you. Or else she'd leave a bottle of red wine on the table. But Juan wouldn't indulge: any distraction could make him lose his edge and the perfect censor had to be alert, keen, attentive, and sharp to nab cheats. He had a truly patriotic task, both self-sacrificing and uplifting.

- 5 His basket for censored letters became the best fed as well as the most cunning in the whole *Censorship Division*. He was about to congratulate himself for having finally discovered his true mission, when his letter to Mariana reached his hands. Naturally, he censored it without regret. And just as naturally, he couldn't stop them from executing him the following morning, one more victim of his devotion to his work.