One could say how ordinary her life would have been without a deserted cigarette in an ashtray, but I was the one gazing at it while it slowly turned to ash, shriveled and shrank, while the one who deserted it rubbed her fingers together, coughing repeatedly. She would remember it again and light it up as if she were drowsy, but from all her naps and sleeping till the sun glared at us in its zenith, lighting everything but her bedroom, which was always plunged in darkness by the power of her roller shutters. They were never really up to let the sunbeams in to enliven the walls. She got up at noon, smoked cigarettes in the kitchen, and read for a while—her newspapers, a few pages of her yellow books, some pamphlets that I used to bring over so she could exercise her poor sight on a multitude of different fonts, making her drooping eyes even more weary, her arid orbs even more parched when she shut the door not to be disturbed and chain-smoked for an hour or so. She rubbed them all the time, even when admonished not to do it. She would reply that the rules are meant to be broken and add that at least hers were, by her—that was the phrase she had heard from Bette Davis and never forgot, for the simple fact that it was true. She broke them all the time, and took pleasure in it. You had to wonder how joyous it must have felt to bring a smile to the lips of a woman that smiled seldom and never too fully. She would put a kettle on the stove and walk off, with no thoughts in her head, evidently, as she had burnt a lot of them when the water had evaporated and left the poor metal bare for the flames to burn. She didn't give a toss—she could always buy a new one, she declared often when she was chided for her dereliction. I recall her saying that neglect was the most beautiful way to lead one's life, as being careful always made her dodge a lot of fun. "Good girls go to heaven," she would say, "Bad girls keep on living," she would add after a long pause, and then a triumphant smirk would arrive.

She had long hair, which was always tied up in a fashion only she could manage, while denouncing all attempts of others at it. The woman always prevailed in finding faults in everything we did and panned us with great enjoyment. I was still the chosen one, as she spared me at times. I was believed to be beautiful and gentle, and maybe the only one that tried to be compassionate even after being slammed. At times, I would look at her white hair, wrinkled hands that had fewer liver spots than I had noticed on other women of the same age, her withered eyes and azure stare that was always intent, as if she were assessing every little blemish or fault I had on my face. Her skin looked silky and thin, probably from the age that had made the scratching she was accustomed to an extremely perilous habit. She would sometimes get at it so zealously that she tore it so it bled, and then she would taste the crimson, viscous blood, which she claimed went well with the taste of tobacco. In those moments, her presence felt like that of a crazed lunatic, but she seemed too tame for that title, so I just left it unexpressed in my mind. I

would get mad at myself for not being able to speak badly of her, even in my privacy, when she took so much joy in thrashing me, but after a while I believed it to be a sadistic sublimation of sorts. At the same time, I couldn't affirm for myself that I didn't take some pleasure in her company, even if she was bitter, cold, and ill-mannered intermittently. She would sometimes even put out a cigarette on her own arms, which left me baffled and even more unsettled at her progressively worsening behavior. This wasn't a quirk to be tolerated, but rather a frantic way of expressing her folly.

I reported her to her daughter a few times and received a harsh reply that I was not there to observe her tendencies, but to take care of her so that she didn't do anything too precarious. I tried my best to evade all danger by watching her at all times, but she still managed to get ahead of me too often for my work to be considered at the same rate as that of a professional. Then and again she would come back to her senses and abandon her risky practices, but those moments became less and less frequent with each passing day, until they had grown into my entire life, and then one day, all things halted and came peace—for my mind, anyway, though I was not so sure about hers. Once again, I warned her daughter that she had stopped acting strange and even commenced to be courteous, which, as I imagined, alarmed her more than cigarette butts tied to her skin.

One day, when I had brought a whole stack of pamphlets and sat down with her, she looked extremely bewildered and asked me if I were the new delivery girl. Bemused and rather afraid of a new trick, I asked her what she meant. Clarification came soon after the remark, but I was even more puzzled: she said that she had recently run out of pamphlets to go in the bags when the customers bought the books. I didn't understand what books she kept talking about, so I questioned her again. The old woman looked into my eyes with disbelief and said, "Why, silly, books from my bookstore, of course. I sell them, what else could it be?" I knew for a fact that she had no shop at all and was not allowed to leave the house under any circumstances. I asked again and again, and the story she told was sounding more and more like a stunt she wanted to pull on me, but I went with it anyway. The woman told me that she and her husband (the man had died twenty years before) had bought a place together, since as a little girl she had always dreamed of having a bookstore. At first, they were destitute and in their indigence almost lost hope of any success, but the last year the business began to take off and they made some money and were able to mortgage the house. Every little detail she added to the story made it more and more enthralling, and I almost started to believe that my eyes had tricked me and I was sitting in front of a thirty-year-old woman who had just received a stack of pamphlets she had ordered a week before, and that I was actually a delivery

girl. I was astounded at how good of a storyteller she was. I was waiting for a moment when she would break character, but I went home without her breaching her persona of a young woman who had been ever so nice and ever so different. She also seemed to see a woman every now and then in her window, which I couldn't see, and it unnerved me a bit, so I went home agitated. At last, I was irate at her ploy to have me deceived, but I could not tell the truth and the artifice apart. I almost decided to believe it at last, giving in to her subterfuge.

The day after, I arrived at the house and was dismissed five minutes after twelve by her daughter, who looked a bit more somber than usual, stating that she didn't need my help on that day, after which I received the news of her diagnosis—something I had not heard of before: she seemed to have Alzheimer's disease. The reason for her retelling all those things to me was very simple—they had actually happened, about fifty-five years ago. After the death of her husband, as their neighbor had told me, she became more and more of a recluse, but never forsook the bookshop they had built as a beacon of their love. Well, at least not until she was forced to. I never knew this, as she had never talked of her past with me, saying it was improper to divulge the details of her life, but it seemed that she was sworn to secrecy by her daughter, who had practically imprisoned her in the house, not letting her out, forcing her to shut down the store and leave the hundreds of filled shelves of books for the worms to feast on.

The next day, as I entered the house, I was greeted with the same distaste which I always received when saying hello to her daughter, but this time, I was not so welcoming of her sharp tone and responded in much the same manner. To my surprise, I didn't receive a response, just a set of instructions which ended in a sentence said in a shrill voice, "Well, I didn't expect her mind to hold on, as it had never been her forte, but at least she will be a quiet burden now." She topped these words with a cold smile and left me alone in the hallway. I went to the kitchen, where I knew the woman would be, smoking her cigarette, lost in a cloud of fumes. As I stepped in, she looked at me as if I had been there all along and asked, "Do you think the books will come today?"