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***The Maid's Protocol***

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**1.**

You will go ring their doorbell on a Wednesday. In May. You will be well-dressed, with what's necessary in terms of combing your hair. You will feel a light tingling sensation on your fingertips. You will have to turn your head and look around the neighborhood to gather your senses. Which will end up happening, at the sight of manicured lawns and the sun highlighting the outline of everything. Behind his mustache, the neighbor will wave to you. Standing there before him, resting on its center stand, will be a 1996 Triumph Thunderbird 900, whose intake pipes will have been removed, the rocker covers detached, the cylinder head carefully taken off, with assembly bolts and studs sitting on the granite slabs of the driveway.

**2.**

She will be the one opening the door. She's young. That's the first thing you'll tell yourself when you see her, thirty-five years old, maximum forty, which doesn't mean anything. Shapes and bodies moving in a certain volume.

**3.**

If he's there, you'll feel comfortable. You won't be able to not think that they're nice, and if that happens, it's a good thing, because everything will be better that way. You, too, you will have to appear nice, sitting there on the edge of their cream sofa. They will feel obliged to say that for them it's OK, for us it's OK, he'll be the one saying those words while glancing at his watch, right before smiling at you as he should, good timing—always. He will add that the ideal situation, what we already discussed, is that you'll be available for Elena in the morning and late afternoon.

**4.**

If he's not there, it will be a little more complicated. She'll have you wait, tell you my husband isn't here and invite you to wait for him in the living room. You'll wait for him together in the living room. It will last a long time. It will last a long

time because she'll be facing you doing nothing, she'll have offered you tea and cookies that you'll have declined, and, as she won't talk, or very little, nothing remarkable will happen. She'll play with her hair. Nothing will be discussed without him, without his presence.

One hour later, in the early evening, one hour or two, take what we say with a grain of salt, you will hear the front door's knob turn. There he is. She'll enthusiastically stand up and for the first time in front of you she'll act out her husband's arrival as she knows it, and as you will sufficiently observe this ritual to hide the perfected aspect, which will jump out at you that first day, which should jump out at you, and which you'll need to let permeate throughout the slightest details: the husband's arrival, who she'll greet in the entryway, honey, lips that get closer until they hastily touch, honey once again, and you'll understand that it's just the beginning of a longer sentence, everything whispered and barely audible from your distance, her right hand around his waist, her left hand at belly-button height, pointing to the living room with a gently extended forefinger, the girl, Bertrand, the girl is here, still with a low voice, the girl is here, and a fixed gaze signifying that an unordinary event has taken place, before he hangs up his coat, glimpses his face in the

mirror, and going together through the atelier-style double-doors that will separate them from the living room, where you'll have remained politely seated.

He will pause to look you over and a shiver will already travel over him, or perhaps it's nothing, a glance without a particular expression. He'll tell you good evening. He'll extend his hand. You'll stand up to take it. You will feel bizarrely submissive. So you're going to help us with Elena? he'll politely ask before disappearing. You'll hear him washing his hands, the water running and one hand rubbing against the other, the squeaking of the faucet. She'll invite you to sit down again. Do it. She will explain that her husband holds a high-powered position in the luxury sector, which means that with his schedule, and herself being very busy with her job, they can't manage. And then she'll run a hand through her hair, look at the clock on the wall, scratch her nails against her palm, sniffle, raise her eyebrows, and it'll clearly seem to you that a screw's loose, or something's going in circles within her, this woman who'll give you the impression that she's already spiraling downwards.

He will return from the bathroom and sit on the edge of the modular chair before you, having taken care to hike up his pants' canvas material by pinching his fingers on his thighs.

He'll sit with his elbows on his knees and with his hands interlaced, slightly smiling, sure of himself. He'll ask you several questions and will end with saying ok, for us, it's ok. He'll look at his watch and everything will return back to normal, and he'll continue, my wife should have explained to you, she's a calm little girl, you won't have any issues with her, she's just started learning how to read, she gets out of school at 4 p.m. every week day except on Wednesdays. What would work best for us is if you could be available for her in the mornings and late afternoons. During the day we'll maybe have some small tasks for you to do, the mail, things like that, but overall you'll be free once you've dropped her off at school. Do you want something to drink? And yes, accept, a Schweppes, for example.

## 5.

Later he'll go into the small room off the entryway, closed off by a padded door. She'll go grab the phone to call the neighbor. You'll have time to look around you. Don't expect anything really luxurious. Generally, never expect anything. You will find what you should expect laid out in these lines. For everything else, don't anticipate anything. Be available. In addition to the cream leather sofa that you'll still be sitting

on, the room will be arranged with, in a clockwise direction, a coffee table on top of a warm-hued rug, a chaise-longue, two soft leather chairs with chrome-plated legs, the modular chair upon which he'll have been seated several minutes earlier, an elegantly designed small console table with a TV set and stereo system on top, a large oval table surrounded by eight chairs, a side wall with built-in shelves containing a wicker basket, a phosphorescent clock, and a round wood-burning fireplace in six of the eight shelves. A small table in the corner. Above head, two speakers and a stack of post-its placed on a shallow shelf. On the walls, three abstract painting reproductions, and, on the ceiling, four integrated lights. To the left of the TV set, a large patio door will open to the yard.

## 6.

It's possible that he'll decide not to get up from the chair and stay close to you, especially if something's worrying him. Maybe he'll ask you where you worked before, where you're from, those types of questions. Respond with what you think is appropriate for the situation. He'll nod his head. He won't go further. Don't forget: this evening marks the beginning, this evening is the reference point that you'll think of when

the situation evolves. That evening, their trust will be strong: they'll have had Mézal on the phone, they'll have studied your profile, they will have read your résumé. For that matter it's also possible that they'll stop there and get up without asking you any further questions.

## 7.

She'll heat up slices of quiche. That's what they'll have prepared for your arrival: slices of quiche. Don't hesitate to help set the table. The gift will stick out from your handbag, which you will have previously left on the sofa.

For the second time you'll walk across the entryway, the central space where the stairwell meets the upper floor, and you'll already be able to gauge the comfortable dimensions by examining the white walls, observing the padded door behind which he, the husband, will have disappeared, and then the simple service door, which leads to the garage.

You will come back with her from the kitchen, hands full of plates, glasses, knives, and forks. You will set everything together in a way that ensures the plates are equidistant from one another, and then the knives and forks from the plates, and the glasses with the plates.

8.

He'll join you at the table. Together you'll chew this simple food purchased at a neighborhood take-out place. She will talk about the neighborhood, the take-out place, the shops, and the ambiance, and they'll be pleased with it all. Having selected the right neighborhood is an idea they've gotten used to through habit. These aren't people who fail. This is what you will need to keep in mind. Those who don't fail don't live, Lewis used to say.

9.

They will bring up several rules that you'll transform into your own. The time they wake up. Evening routines. Life with the kids, with Elena especially because Charles, the older child, doesn't need anyone. They will detail the practical organization. Then, under the guise of an imposing woman with an impeccably smooth chignon, the neighbor will ring the doorbell. She'll bring Elena back. You won't understand why they had someone watch their little girl that night, why they preferred to meet you alone. Standing in the doorway, Elena will look radiant. You will admire her hair's bloneness and her frank look. You will realize that she's understood everything, that she clearly sees your game, defying you as



the player until the end, as if she perfectly knew who you are, and for the first time your head will spin a bit, like a warning. She will leave to wash her hands. Their tense bodies, including that of the neighbor, who is ready to leave, will remain beneath the artificial lights' glow. Because of the way the neighbor's staring at you, you'll understand that they spoke about you with her. Observe them when she says she's leaving: hugging one another, smiling, perfunctory words, thank you for the favor, but she's so cute, whenever you'd like, I'm happy to, thank you, Dora, or Dorine, or Justine, Julia, thank you for everything, holding the door open, saying other things like kiss Jean-Paul, or Jean-Pierre, for me, I'll tell him, and then the last flutter of eyelids, the door closed, the smile that brutally disappears, the weariness on their faces, a short moment, before locking eyes with you and coming back to their senses, and smiling again.

## 10.

Back in the living room, you'll go fetch the package in your bag. It's a little gift for Elena. Half-smiling, she will acquiesce, allowing you to give it to her daughter, but Elena, overtaken with shyness, won't come closer, so her mother will encourage her, go on Elena, it's for you, maybe frightened by

the wrapping paper's metallic reflections, and then Elena will end up coming toward you and unsuccessfully trying to untie the ribbon and rip open the paper. Her mother will become annoyed, grabbing the package to open it with several quick gestures, discovering the book by Strand, quickly looking it over and nonchalantly flipping through it before giving it to her daughter, it's a book, Elena, you see, say thank you. And already, maybe, Elena's eyes won't be able to tear away from the cover illustration. She'll take her time to decipher one-by-one the syllables of the title, and will end up saying aloud, proud and surprised, it's called *Tales of the Forest*, mommy. She'll look up at you with eyes filled with curiosity.

He will come over and ask, tapping his pointer finger on the cover, what's that, Elena? What's the animal? Elena will look at the drawing again, and, hesitantly, a hedgehog, it's a hedgehog, daddy, and her father will ruffle her hair, happy to confirm that it's that, shrimp, it's that, it's a hedgehog, separating the syllables, hedge-hog with a consonant sound, like in honey, that's really good my shrimp. Ok, food's ready, it's time to eat.

**11.**

They will seat Elena on a chair next to you. Her mother will also give her a slice of quiche, which she'll cut into small bites on her plate. He will ask if you'd like some wine. Decline. Ask about the son. They will tell you that he's spending the week at a friend's house, that at his age they're giving him some space, that his grades at school are excellent, that he's a fighter. Her too, she's a fighter, he'll say, pointing to Elena, to whom they've brought a slice of apple tart. She'll make a mess of it. It could make you laugh. Try to stay composed. They'll offer you a yogurt, a fruit purée, a simple dessert. They will discuss an ongoing problem in his company. Is it ok, were you able to handle it, she'll ask, or something similar, and he will make a hand gesture toward her, it was alright. He will get up to wipe his daughter's mouth. As she'll wriggle, he'll scold her, stop, Elena, stop it right now or I'll get angry, leaning toward her and pointing his finger, this is how the meal will end, with the little girl's cries and the pointed finger, you'll finish your yogurts and fruit purées, Elena will be brought to bed, they'll show you her room, the lights will be turned off, and soon you will only hear cars passing through the neighborhood every now and then, the darkness will be complete.

## 12.

They will have left when you rouse yourself. You will inspect the room where you will have slept. It won't have anything special, absolutely nothing, a bed, a small armoire, a rug. A tall, narrow window will overlook the house's driveway below as well as that of the neighbor, and you will notice that, like the day before, he will be bent over his motorcycle, whose multiple metal parts will be spread over the ground, as if they were being slowly blown apart. You will close the curtain. You will feel like you're in your childhood bedroom, the bedroom of the child you aren't anymore, and will never be again.

You will open the door. You will go down the hallway. You will go down to the kitchen. Maybe they will have left a note. You will appreciate their thoughtfulness. It's something you'll appreciate about them, this subtle way of paying attention to you. You'll make yourself a coffee. This will be your first day on the job for them. You will do nothing, absolutely nothing, that day. You will wait for evening to come.

## 13.

That evening, though it will still be warm and light outside, he will come home first. He will carry Elena in his arms. His

arms will be full with his bag, a baguette, and his daughter, who he'll put down in the entryway, breathing heavily, Elena, please, please Elena, exhausted, noticing you, ah, hello, then dropping his bag with one hand while lifting the other to prevent the baguette from touching the ground. You'll grab the baguette and the child, I'll take care of it, and you'll be surprised by the difference in texture of the former's outside, hard and cracked, and that of the latter, velvety. You will drop the baguette off in the kitchen and you'll take Elena to her room. She will timidly smile at you. You'll come back down. He'll thank you under his breath and will disappear through the padded door before coming back out a few minutes later to get his bag and swiftly shut himself away again. As if he was afraid of you.

#### 14.

Arriving a little later, she'll rush into the kitchen to eat dinner in silence, and during your first days there you will have the strange impression of living amidst passing ships, escaping one another in front of you, murmuring in the utility room, eating on the run, turning off the TV when you approach. Shutting themselves away in their room.

You will be tempted to pay them less attention. Stay alert. Be patient. Spaces will open up soon. Dress well, take care of your complexion, walk with a confident step, never raise your voice. If you brought your blue tunic, wear it from time to time. They will like it. This tunic will remind him of the dress that a childhood friend used to wear, whose chest he'd rub with both hands beneath the fabric, on Saturdays after music class. After the school block party. After tennis class. Wait. Be patient. It's your strength. Your decisive advantage.

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