

DEAR MS EDITOR,

They are always doing that. Polite as they are when they come to take the job, doing their best to look concerned, and then, as soon as the door closes on their way out, they can't help but collapse. Or vomit in the plant pot in the hall where the cactus lies in its humble sleep. My whole house is in cactuses; on the window sills, on the winding staircase to the second floor, in the corners of the dining room, even on my bedside table. This home is colorful and sleepy. That's because cactuses sleep all the time and their thorns are just a warning to the noise, to those around who also rarely look where they're going. Me and cactuses – we keep each other safe; they use the needle, which thrusts space tenderly and I use job advertisements.

“A lonely lady at the age of 88 looking for a housemaid. No references required. A good pay.” And of course they come. Young ones, and not so young. Nervous, hysterical, alcohol addicted. Good maintenance or the worn-out type, from near or far, brunettes and blondes, real lookers and ex beauties. Perhaps you will doubt my judgment; I am almost a dead body, aren't I? I'm ten feet under with one foot, just about to kick the bucket and the other foot...well into your petulant world. How dare I bother you with my fading voice on the phone or my tremor-scribbled handwriting? Alas, I have to. For I still exist and while I am freezing, I need compassion. Someone, no previous experience needed, to keep me company while the Almighty eventually gets to my name on the list...but as I never come across the right ones, I decided to drop you a line, my dear Ms Problem Page Editor.

I have been reading your newspaper since before you were born. Then the newspaper advertisements used to be quite different. Old ladies like myself did not seek company in the waiting room at hell, we didn't need to pay women who had come hell knows from where, driven away by God knows what...We had relatives who, in the last few minutes, would help us come to terms with it. And more often than not, I can tell you, our relatives can really make us wish we were dead, even better than loneliness does. For they will step over the threshold once after years of oblivion, fidgeting around, tense-faced and immersed in sympathy. One might as well hear them wonder whether the pillow drenched with an old person's sweat is soft or hard enough so you could peacefully enjoy your last few minutes. Whether you are warm, comfortable or peaceful for that matter. Whether you are fed or watered, or you need anything else...Should they turn the radio on or off? Believe me, Ms Editor, there is nothing more tedious than untimely sorrowful relatives. And nothing more touching than their disappointed faces when they gradually realize that my demise does not depend on their endeavor.

I would never have intended to predispose you, but if you are still reading this, then I have to clarify that it is not boredom that spurred me into writing to you in the first place. The life of elderly ladies from the peaceful areas of town is not as uneventful as you might think. Due to your newspaper and the jobless women that respond to my advertisements, I have come to know the world even more than I have ever thought it possible.

Let's take Emma, for example. She was the first to arrive when years ago I sought your assistance for the first time. She was, as far as I could tell, somewhere from Eastern Europe. She spoke with an accent. She was agile and unobtrusive unless of course we take into account her fondness of jazz, which I found hard to understand. You must agree that jazz is inappropriate for a lady in my position. What's jazz but music that jags the world, it tears it like punctuation dots removing all logic. Besides, as far as my memory is of any help, jazz is a product of war. One era falls apart under the

machine gun case shot and then out of its ruins emerges a world where harmony is downtrodden and screams its lungs out. As for me, Madam, I am still in favor of those old-fashioned things. Oh, I really did try, do not judge me, to have a word with Emma, to somehow imply that the sound coming from her room was bothering me...making me sad...But then instead of understanding, which I was supposed to receive being the employer to the housemaid, I was reprimanded. Old ladies like me were not supposed to eavesdrop other people in their chambers at midnight and that perhaps my sleeping pills didn't work or I desperately wanted to go to the toilet...

Tamara came next. Sort of hybrid, a nice product. Her skin was milk and cocoa colored, her voice shaky yet deep. Thank goodness she was not obsessed with jazz which I guess should be on the same wavelength with her. She was even too accurate, if I should use this word, so inappropriate under these circumstances. She pulled the armchair so close to my bed. She grabbed a book from the bookcase and plunged herself into the pages. I am sure you understand that this was like prison. I couldn't even turn around in bed without her looking at me let alone close my eyes to die. Tamara was like a witness, Madam, before the Judgment Day. I tried to divert her but she explained those were her duties, our contract, to which she stuck like a vow before our ancestors. I gave her a proper farewell, as if it had been a funeral procession. A slight feeling of guilt took over.

And finally, Annabel. There was something Slavonic in her, something disobedient and wild. I think she was a member of some kind of union. Women working abroad were mistreated by the capitalist system and turned into underdogs shoveling excrement. She even asked me, a little disrespectfully, to sign some sort of appeal for the abolition of discrimination that kind of thing. "I am a respectable lady", she said, "with people like me the women's labor union will have a weapon and be able to take down..." (I cannot remember who). Such touching naivety, but I did not mind. I signed what seemed to be even grammatically incorrect to me. And then I fell asleep. Perhaps in the meantime, Annabel's union had gained recognition but I was too exhausted to look it up for details in the press... Even now she probably keeps writing leaflets somewhere...

I beg your forgiveness, Ms Editor, that my letter turned out to be so tediously long. When a person as old as me realizes their mistakes as late as that, it is a blasphemy to go back in time and try to erase them. I am aware that all these years I have been unjustifiably present on the pages of the printed media. And I have long realized that the last breaths of my life should not and cannot claim to divert the world's attention from far more important events. Anyway, your readers are probably hardly able to find time for themselves among so many epidemics, famine, democracy and military conflicts. The elderly lady, who has too long been on the shelf, and the everyday grind of her toiletries and sustenance would hardly manage to impress anyone. Nevertheless, as I am sending the necessary sum as well, I take the liberty to ask the respected editor's team to publish my last advertisement.

"A lonely lady at the age of 88 looking for a housemaid to take care of her cactuses. They do not take much to look after, they drink water twice a month and rarely become dusty. Please leave your motivation letter in p.o. box T. Z. Number 1253. The cactuses are centenarians so please have that in mind if you are interested in applying."