

THE HOUSE OF DOLORES

"She's a strange woman. She lives alone. Her house has salt everywhere, starting at the front door and spread throughout the place. It's infested with scorpions and spiders. She looks like a witch." Elmita

"She's crazy, and she almost never goes out anywhere, except on Saturdays, when she goes to the flea market in the town to sell vegetables and blocks of raw brown sugar that she makes in her backyard." João

"Your father is a generous man, giving her a place to live like that, but that side of the farm doesn't grow anything because of her witchcraft." Walderci

"She says that her son disappeared, and she built a cross on the top of the hill where people now go to pray for rain." Valmir

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By Maria Alice

I grew up listening to these stories about a woman who lived on my father's farm in an abandoned house far away from the main house. The house was on a piece of land that was not good for growing rice or corn, but good for growing herbage for the cattle and horses. The windows and door were always closed, making it appear phantasmagoric. As a child I was frightened by the place. People were scared to pass by there at night and they put a large cross next to the house to keep away the maledictions of the woman who lived there.

I believe that this story, like many others I heard in my childhood, and my experience growing up in a small town in Brazil's countryside influenced my decision to become a journalist. I write monthly stories for *Jornal O Tempo* (The Time Newspaper). In 2001 I went to visit my parents, who still live in the town where I grew up, five kilometers from the farm *Sol Nascente* (Sunrise) where the mysterious woman lived.

I was surprised to hear that she was still living in the same house. As I needed a story for the news-

paper, I started asking people in the town and on the farm about her, and it seemed that people had forgotten about her. I went to the farm. I knocked on the door. By the front door there was fresh salt, sparkling white. A woman with long white hair, maybe in her 50s, wearing a floral dress, appeared at the door. I didn't know what to say, really, so I introduced myself as the daughter of the farm's owner. She asked me if I needed anything, if she could do something for me, and I told her I was just passing by and was thirsty. She invited me in and I followed her.

I was astonished by what I saw. The house was old, but it was simple, clean and organized; the room had a few pieces of old style furniture: a sideboard, a table, three chairs, a chest of drawers, a bench used as a table, and a nightstand. There was no couch. While she went to get me a glass of water I could see accumulated piles of cardboard boxes forming a pyramid in one corner of the room and some others dispersed on the floor. The boxes had objects and clothes inside, soaked in salt. The boxes all had the same size, height, white paper and salt inside. Some looked older, and some looked very recently made. A stamp of

Supermercado Três Irmãos revealed where they came from. On the walls there were fabrics like flags with dates and names embroidered on them. They reminded me of the flags of saints used during processions in Catholic religious celebrations. There was an image of Nossa Senhora Aparecida with candles, a chapel, and a little teddy bear on a small table. A framed panel on the wall had nails holding children's objects. A fabric covering it had embroidered names, places and dates. On the table, small boxes were carefully arranged in a very organized way. They were closed and I noticed one of them was missing a lid. I approached and saw a piece of paper in salt with some notations. I looked carefully all over the room and I realized that the drawers of the sideboard were opened and in one of them there was a t-shirt in salt, probably of a 10 year old boy.

I opened the second drawer of the sideboard and I saw a small plastic truck missing two wheels. The other drawer had a doll, and above it a wooden box with a dress. "That toy belonged to my son, Gerson," said the woman as she came into the room. "He was my only child. One afternoon, he

got on his horse and went to the field to bring back the cattle. He did that job since he was seven, with his father. That afternoon he went alone, and never returned home. For days the corral remained empty and the horse was lost in the field."

Her name was Dolores and for years she lived alone in that house. She told me that in 1982 her 11 year old son Gerson disappeared from the farm without a trace, and her husband died two years later, suffering from depression. Since then she started collecting children's objects to keep close to her son. Dolores was eager to speak with me.

Dolores died two years ago and her house was going to be demolished. All her belongings were left behind. I went back to the farm and brought with me all objects, boxes and furniture. I set up the house of Dolores in a small room in my apartment, and I named it "the room of memory."

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