

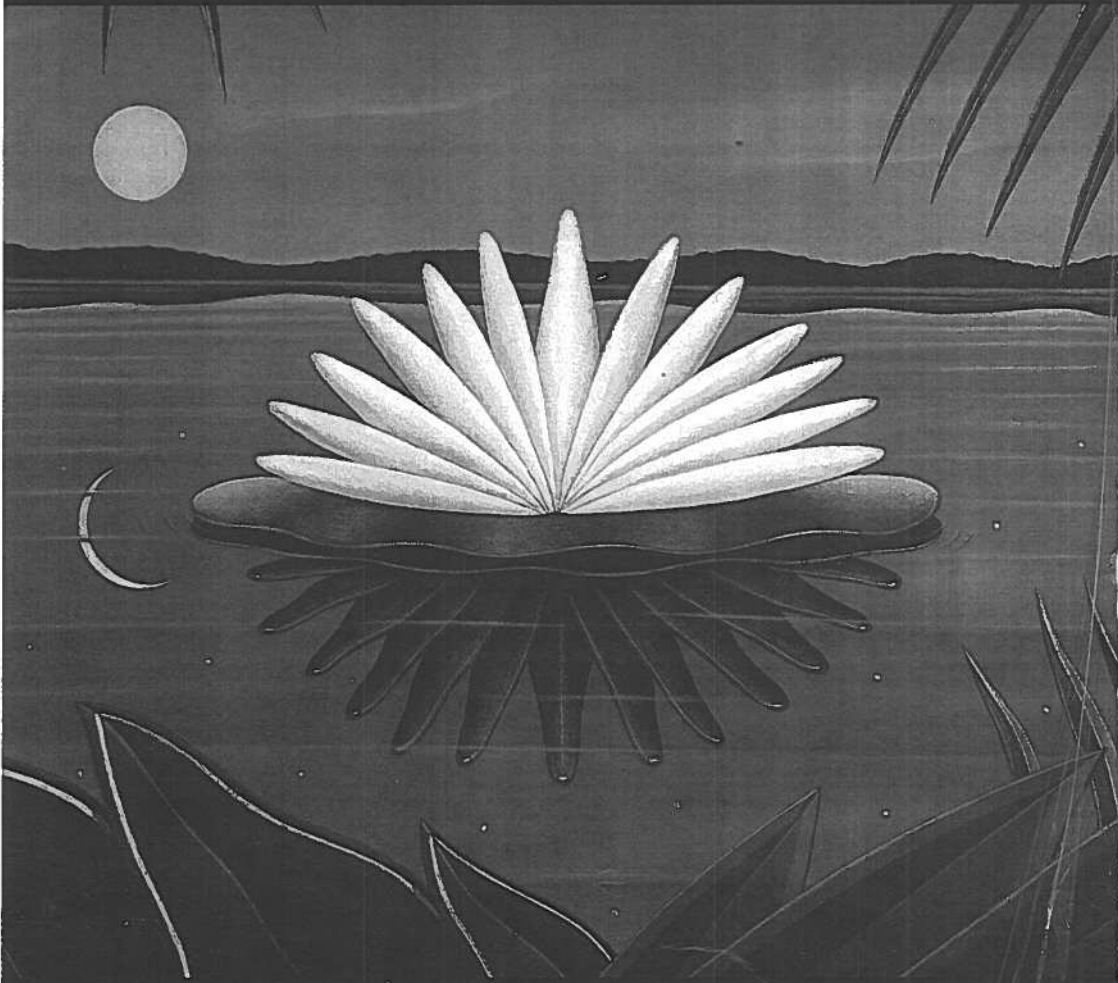
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SHOULDERED WOMAN

TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH BY THE AUTHOR



NOVELS BY MARÍA LUISA BOMBAL

FOREWORD BY NAOMI LINDSTROM




House of Mist

AND

The Shrouded Woman



The Texas Pan American Series



House of Mist
AND
The Shrouded Woman

♦
Two Novels by
MARÍA LUISA BOMBAL

Translated by the author



Foreword by Naomi Lindstrom



University of Texas Press
Austin

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House of Mist

I

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FOREWORD BY NAOMI LINDSTROM

The work of the Chilean novelist and short-story writer María Luisa Bombal (b. June 8, 1910; d. May 6, 1980) has been coming in for fresh attention and new readings. Successfully fusing fantastic elements and innovative construction with a critical vision of society, her fiction of the 1930s anticipated the magical realism that, in later decades, would fascinate an international public. Carlos Fuentes, one of the writers who won worldwide attention with a blend of the fantastic and a novelistic critique of society, has said, "María Luisa Bombal is the mother of us all."¹ At the same time that Bombal is receiving recognition as an early example of the great wave of innovation in the twentieth-century Spanish American novel, readers concerned with women's experience and status are also turning to her fiction.

Bombal spent her teen years in France, returning to Chile in 1931 after pursuing studies in French literature at the Sorbonne. In 1933 she moved to Buenos Aires, where she became part of the elite group of writers associated with the magazine *Sur* and its publishing house. The move to Argentina suited Bombal. The more conservative Chilean public tended to prefer realism. Buenos Aires readers, who had long had a taste for the fantastic, appreciated writers whose work summoned up fantastic, magic, and mythic forces. A number of authors in this experimental, antimimetic mode, such as Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, and Bombal, were published and promoted by the literary matriarch who founded and presided over *Sur*, Victoria Ocampo.

In 1935, Bombal published the short lyrical novel *La última niebla*. It is a curious footnote to literary history that Bombal wrote this novel while sharing an apartment with Pablo Neruda and his wife; Neruda was also in a period of intense literary experimentation, composing portions of his poetic cycle *Residence on Earth*. Lucía Guerra Cunningham reports the two authors, simultaneously engaged in groundbreakingly original writing projects, "sharing the kitchen table."²

La última niebla is the basis of the lengthier work that Farrar, Straus published in 1947 as *House of Mist*, the text reprinted here. However, in the course of producing her own English version of her novel, Bombal felt free to make significant revisions and add entirely new segments. Readers of the English version may care to

know that in the Spanish original the protagonist and her husband never achieve the belated rapprochement they enjoy in *House of Mist*. In *La última niebla*, the heroine, her lover, and her husband's dead wife are all anonymous; little is known of the latter two, and the lover may never have existed. The heroine's lengthy retrospective narration, filling the reader in on her birth and childhood and her husband's first marriage, occurs only in the English version. The allusions to folktales and the fairy-tale atmosphere are also unique to *House of Mist*.

The 1935 publication won the new author the respect of some important taste-setters. The influential Amado Alonso, in the opening and closing words of his 1936 essay "Emergence of a Novelist," emphasizes that *House of Mist* is an important work and that it and its author deserve widespread attention.³ "Alone," the Chilean critic who long exercised the power to confer literary fame, drew attention to Bombal's work. In a 1982 retrospective summary, Borges noted critics' esteem for Bombal: "Today, in Santiago, Chile, or Buenos Aires, in Caracas or Lima, when they name the best names, María Luisa Bombal is never missing from the list."⁴

House of Mist is characteristic of Bombal's fiction in its focus on the intimate experience of a woman of the landowning class. Bombal's heroine is gifted—or burdened—with an extraordinary imagination and an empathetic bond with the natural world. At the same time, she is acutely conscious of the repression she endures in her social role. This combination of attributes allows the novel to be both a highly subjective, first-person account of intensely lived emotional experiences and an often bitter novelistic assessment of the situation of women in the Chilean landed aristocracy.

Bombal's well-to-do heroines have little necessary work to perform. They are the ladies of households where domestic work is left to servants, although the male landowners are often outdoors, actively engaged in the running of their haciendas. While the women are expected to provide their husbands with offspring, maids raise their children and, at times, treat their mistresses like children. The protagonist of *The Shrouded Woman* mentally reproaches her maid: "That Zoila, why had she brought her up to be so helpless? Why hadn't she even taught her how to do her own hair?" In *House of Mist*, the heroine's husband objects even to her passing time with the decorative art of embroidery. These women's idleness enhances their value as luxury possessions that help maintain the

prestige of their fathers and husbands. The concept of dowry is still alive. The heroine of *The Shrouded Woman* may have been separated from her first love by his sisters' belief "that she, Ana Maria, would not have brought enough money to him, in fact only that small piece of land from her father's hacienda."

While well-married daughters and well-bred wives bring men status and wealth, a persistently unmarried woman or one whose husband is absent has no status. Helga's husband offers several un-subtle reminders of this circumstance. He often tells Helga that she is indebted to him for rescuing her from spinsterhood; to the Countess he says, "What do I care about your signature? It's of no use whatsoever on the contract. It's your husband's signature that's required."

Helga, the protagonist-narrator of *House of Mist*, typifies Bombal's heroines. She has a powerfully imaginative inner life and is able to decipher messages from the natural world. Still, her specialness is disregarded by most of those around her. Until the novel's closing pages, she is underappreciated by the man who controls her lot in life, and who prides himself on assessing matters by objective standards. The Bombal heroine preserves, into the rationalistic twentieth century, some of the qualities of the sorceress, divining woman, or nature goddess. She enjoys an exceptional attunement to the natural world, which often provides her with clues as to the course her life is taking. She finds in water and associated entities, as well as trees and earth, a plenitude of significance well beyond the objectively observable.

An example is the ominous opening scene of *House of Mist*. An uneasy bride arriving at her marital home, Helga finds that a winter mist has surrounded the house and befogged its windows—a realistically likely occurrence. But Helga's perceptions go further; she is certain that a tenacious humidity is pursuing her and turning on her in an actively hostile spirit: "It was at that moment that every evening the mist, knowing me to be at last defenseless, would begin the silent, perfidious siege of my being."

Bombal's *La amortajada*, published in 1938 by Sur, was awarded the Premio Municipal de Novela in Santiago de Chile. It appeared in 1948 as *The Shrouded Woman*, again in the author's own translation. In this case, the English version does not represent a drastic departure from the Spanish original.

The Shrouded Woman is known, above all, for its innovative

treatment of narrative voice and point of view. It is principally dedicated to relaying the thoughts and memories of the protagonist, Ana Maria, as she spends the night at her own wake, is carried to the family crypt in the morning, and releases her individual personality to enter into the rhythms of the cosmos. Though lying dead at her wake, she is able to open her eyes enough to see the people who appear at her side to pay their respects. As significant figures from her past come into her field of vision, each unleashes a rush of memories. A third-person narrator often ushers in the heroine's discourse and narrates entire passages, though from Ana Maria's point of view. Yet the novel is most memorable for the shrouded woman's first-person reminiscences and comments.

Other voices make themselves heard in the novel. From time to time, a spirit calls to Ana Maria. This voice is that of a guide in the passage from life to death, encouraging her to release her hold on her living self. Fernando, a family friend who for years remained at the beck and call of the disdainful, already-married Ana Maria, also registers his inner voice in the narrative. His is an ambivalent discourse in which reproaches for Ana Maria's selfishness toward him commingle with expressions of continuing attachment. Near the end, a different voice, that of Ana Maria's longtime father confessor, offers a meditation on her life. The novel's closing passages narrate Ana Maria's experiences in her encrypted coffin. Seeking immersion in "the death of the dead," she allows herself to become part of a fluid, undifferentiated realm. Esther W. Nelson, inquiring "Who speaks in *The Shrouded Woman*?" raises the possibility that all the voices in the novel may be projections of Ana Maria's consciousness, and that she is intuiting the thoughts of others.⁵

Ana Maria retrospectively views her life almost exclusively as a set of personal ties. Her focus reflects the fact that, as a woman of the landed class, she had virtually nothing else to occupy her attention. During the scenes she remembers, Ana Maria appears doing no work more necessary than knitting and embroidery. In a posthumous insight, communicated by the narrator, Ana Maria considers the situation of men, "directing their passion to other things," while "The fate of so many women seems to be to turn over and over in their heart some love sorrow while sitting in a neatly ordered house, facing an unfinished tapestry."

Ana Maria draws some often bitter, reproachful, and remorseful conclusions about the way those in her circle have behaved toward

her and one another. She perceives in the connections between them a general failure to benefit from the possibilities of true intimacy. Friendships, family bonds, and amorous relations are all marred by selfishness, oneupmanship, jealousy, and a self-defeating unwillingness to establish strong ties with others. Though perceiving flaws clearly, Ana Maria must also forgive them as part of letting go of life.

The heroine's ambiguous suspension between life and death is not the only element of myth and magic running through *The Shrouded Woman*. While Bombal often assigns empathetic powers to female protagonists, here the heroine's son, Fred, is gifted with a "sixth sense which linked him to the earth and to that which is secret." Fred, who appears to possess a language all his own, is able to receive communications from nature. The child's special powers come to the fore in the nightmarish scene of the disorienting carriage ride. The riders and horses, suddenly unable to recognize the countryside around them, panic. Fred saves them by reading a warning in a giant flower of ill omen.

The Shrouded Woman was the last new piece of long fiction from Bombal, who experienced enormous difficulty disciplining herself to write. Up to the end of the 1930s, she continued her career as a creative writer, authoring both filmscripts and short stories. In 1939, she published in *Sur* "Las islas nuevas" ("New Islands") and "El árbol" ("The Tree"), two stories to which critics have frequently returned. A less-noted piece of short fiction, "Trenzas" ("Braids"), appeared in *Saber Vivir* in 1940. "Lo secreto" ("The Unknown") appeared in a 1941 edition of *House of Mist*. All these stories appear, translated by Richard Cunningham and Lucía [Guerra] Cunningham, in the 1982 *New Islands and Other Stories*. "La historia de María Griselda" appeared without attracting much attention in 1946, and was rediscovered and republished in 1976. Readers who approach this story hoping for more of Bombal are disappointed to find that it repeats a considerable amount of material already utilized in *The Shrouded Woman*.

During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, while married to Count Raphaël de Saint Phalle, Bombal lived in the United States. Her U.S. residence helps explain a curious circumstance. Bombal virtually ceased publishing new material and concentrated upon reworking her great successes in English. During her last years, many of her followers heard that she was struggling to finish a novel, said

to be entitled *El embrujo* ("The magic spell"). She was also reported to have written English-language plays, short stories in Spanish, and essays. There is no reliable, complete inventory of her unpublished work. According to Isabel Velasco, Bombal left an unfinished novel and many other unpublished works in various stages of completion; they are in a bank vault, and access to them is controlled by her daughter.⁶

Bombal's fame is that of a writer exceptionally able to convey an empathy with magic and mythic forces. Followers of fantastic writing and literary critics with an archetypal approach have always been drawn to her writing. Since the mid-1970s, she has also won an audience concerned with her representation of the haute-bourgeoise woman and her circumstances. Bombal's narrative also extends its appeal to readers who enjoy absorption in stories filled with mysterious symbols, inexplicable happenings, and a general air of myth and magic.

Notes

1. Carlos Fuentes, cited in Lucía Guerra Cunningham, "María Luisa Bombal," in Diane E. Marting, ed., *Spanish American Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 42.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
3. Amado Alonso, "Aparición de una novelista," *Nosotros* (Buenos Aires), No. 3 (June 1936), 241-256.
4. Jorge Luis Borges, "Preface," María Luisa Bombal, *New Islands and Other Stories*, trans. Richard and Lucía Cunningham (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), unpaginated.
5. Esther W. Nelson, "Un viaje fantástico: ¿Quién habla en *La amortajada?*," in Marjorie Agosin et al., eds., *María Luisa Bombal: Apreciaciones críticas* (Tempe, Az.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1987), p. 185. Nelson, p. 198, concludes that the narrator of *The Shrouded Woman* can never be unambiguously identified.
6. Isabel Velasco, "Algo sobre María Luisa Bombal," in Agosin et al., eds., *María Luisa Bombal*, p. 21.

House of Mist

Anna-Maria is a
"Femme Fatale"

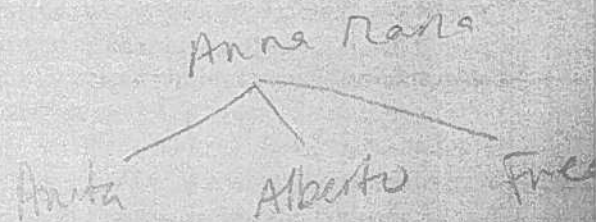
Everyone is in search of
(the ♀) affection/love

The Shrouded Woman

look at back of book.

- Artificial useless lives of upper
class women

- a woman's
perspective



ONE

As night was beginning to fall, slowly her eyes opened. Oh, a little, just a little. It was as if, hidden behind her long lashes, she was trying to see.

And in the glow of the tall candles, those who were keeping watch leaned forward to observe the clarity and transparency in that narrow fringe of pupil death had failed to dim. With wonder and reverence, they leaned forward, unaware that she could see them.

For she was seeing, she was feeling.



TWO

And thus, she sees herself lying motionless face upward in the spacious bed, presently made up with the embroidered sheets perfumed with lavender, those usually kept under lock and key. And she sees herself dressed in that robe of white satin which made her look so slender.

Lightly crossed over her breast and pressing a crucifix, she notices her hands, her hands that seem to have acquired the frivolous delicacy of two peaceful doves.

Under the nape of her neck, the thick coil of hair which during her illness was becoming minute by minute more heavy and moist, no longer bothers her. For they had at last succeeded in disentangling it, smoothing it, parting it over her forehead. It is true, they had neglected to gather it together, but she knows that a dark mass of displayed hair lends to any woman reclining or asleep, a touch of mystery, a disturbing charm.

And all at once, she sees herself without a single wrinkle, pale and beautiful as never before.

A very great happiness comes over her in being thus admired by those who could only remember her as a woman tormented by futile anxieties, worn down by many sorrows, and withered by the sharp air of the hacienda.

For now that they know she is dead, here they are, all of them, gathered around her.

Here is her daughter, that golden resilient girl so proud of her

twenty years, who would smile mockingly when, while showing old portraits to her, she would shyly remark how elegant and graceful she once had been too. Here and her two sons who seemed unwilling to grant her any longer the right to enjoy life; her sons, who seemed annoyed by her whims, ashamed when they found her running around the sunny garden; her sons, always reluctant to pay her the slightest compliment, even though secretly flattered when their young friends pretended to mistake her for their elder sister.

Here is Zoila, who saw her born and in whose care her mother entrusted her from that moment on, old Zoila, whose arms rocked away her sorrow each time her mother, leaving in her carriage for the city, would forcefully disengage her from her skirts to which she clung screaming. Zoila! the confidant of bad moments, the sweet and timid one, usually forgotten on happy days. Here she is, gray-haired but still hardy and of indiscernible age, as if the drop of Araucanian blood running through her veins had had the power of petrifying her arrogant profile.

Here are some friends, old friends, who also seemed to have forgotten that she had once been slender and happy.

And for a long time, though conscious of her own childish vanity, she takes delight in submitting herself to the gaze of all, so perfectly still, serene and beautiful.

THREE

The murmur of the rain falling over the woods and on the roof of the house very soon makes her surrender herself, body and soul, to that sensation of well-being and melancholy into which she was always plunged by the sighing of the waters on the interminable nights of Autumn.

The rain falls, finely, obstinately, quietly. And she listens to it falling. Falling on the rooftops, falling until it bends the high heads of the pine trees and the broad arms of the blue cedars, falling. Falling until it drowns the clover and obliterates the paths, falling.

The rain stops and she hears clearly the rusty flat note that the wind is rhythmically tearing out of the old windmill. And each wrench of the tin paddles seems to pluck a particular string in her

shrouded breast. And for a long time, completely absorbed, she listens to that grave, sonorous note vibrating within herself, a note she never knew was there in her.

Then the rain starts again. And it falls, obstinately, quietly. And she listens to it falling. Falling and sliding like tears down the windowpanes; falling and expanding the lagoons to the far end of the horizon, falling. Falling on her heart and drenching it, dissolving it into sadness and languor.

Now once more the rain stops, and the mill wheel resumes its heavy regular turning, but within her, it no longer finds the musical string to prolong its monotonous rusty note. The sound now plunges down from a very great height, like something tremendous that envelops and overwhelms her. Each wrench of the paddle now seems to her like the tick-tock of a gigantic clock, marking time beneath the clouds and over the fields . . . She does not remember ever having enjoyed, ever having drained an emotion so completely.

So many people, so many worries and small physical annoyances had always come between her and the secret of a night. Now, however, no unwelcome thoughts appear to disturb her. A circle of silence has been drawn around her and even the throbbing of the invisible artery that so often beat violently at her temple, seems to have definitely stopped.

At dawn, the rain finally subsides. A ray of light outlines the window frames. In the tall candelabra, the flame of the candle is dying out, flickering in a clot of wax. Someone is sleeping with head sunk on shoulder, and the diligent rosaries hang down, motionless.

In the meantime, far off, way off, a rhythmic sound rises.

She alone perceives it and recognizes in it the clatter of horses' hoofs, the clatter of eight hoofs that approach, resounding.

They sound, now spongy and light, now loud and near, suddenly uneven, hushed, as if scattered by the wind. Now coupled together again, they draw near, keep on drawing nearer, yet seem as if they would never arrive.

A deafening rumble of wheels finally engulfs the gallop of the horses. Only then does everyone wake up, and all at once start bustling around. She hears them at the other end of the house drawing open the complicated latch and lifting the two bars from the front door.

She watches them now, setting the room in order, coming close to the bed, replacing the burned-out candles, sweeping away a night butterfly from her forehead.

FOUR

It is he, he.

Here he is, standing, looking at her. And his presence suddenly obliterates the long empty years, the hours, the days that destiny slowly, obscurely, tenaciously had interposed between them.

I remember you. I remember you as a youth. I remember your clear eyes, your ruddy complexion tanned by the sun of the hacienda, your body then wiry and nervous.

Over your five sisters, over my sister Alicia and me, whom you considered cousins (we were not, but our haciendas were adjoining and in turn we called your parents uncle and aunt), you reigned by terror.

I see you running after us to lash our bare legs with your whip.

I swear that we hated you from the bottom of our hearts when you set our birds free or hung our dolls by the hair from the high branches of the plantain tree.

One of your favorite jokes was to shriek a savage "Hu! Hu!" into our ears at the most unexpected moment. Neither our fits of nerves nor our tears could move you. You never tired of scaring us by slipping down our backs whatever strange insects you caught in the woods.

You were a cruel torturer. And yet you exerted over us a strange fascination. I think we admired you.

At night you lured us and held us terrified with stories about a gentleman half-wizard, half-lawyer, all dressed in black, who lived in the garret. He was somehow like the Governor of everything that was hostile to us in the forest. He had pockets full of bats and had command of hairy spiders, centipedes and caterpillars. It was he who infused life into those dry twigs which writhed in a frenzy the moment we touched them, unawares, and became the frightful insects known as "devil-horses." It was he who lighted up the eyes of the owls at night, he who ordered the rats and mice to come out.

Besides, he kept in a special account book an exact census of all the subjects in his loathsome domain. And in this book, the pages of which were made of nettle, he posted his entries with the tail of a live lizard, smeared in the slime of bottomless swamps. For several years we could hardly sleep, in dread of the visits of this sinister little man.

Harvest time brought us days of joy, days spent playing at climbing the enormous mountains of hay piled up beyond the harvest field, and jumping from one haystack to another, oblivious of danger, as if intoxicated by sunshine.

It was during one of those mad afternoons that my sister, catching me unawares, hurled me from the top of a stack onto a passing cart overflowing with sheaves of wheat upon which you lay outstretched.

I had already resigned myself to the worst possible treatment or to the cruelest mockery, according to your whim of the moment, when I became aware that you were asleep. You were sleeping and so, with unheard-of-courage, I stretched myself alongside of you in the hay, while the oxen, guided by Anibal the peon, slowly pursued their course. Very soon the harsh panting of the threshing machine was left behind, very soon the shrill chirping of the crickets rose above the creaking of the heavy wheels of the cart.

Pressing against your hip, I was holding my breath, trying to make my presence light. You were asleep and under the spell of an intense emotion, almost doubting my eyes, I kept watching you, our cruel tyrant, lying defenseless at my side!

Rendered childish, disarmed by sleep, all of a sudden did you seem to me infinitely fragile? The truth is that not even a single idea of revenge entered my mind.

You tossed about, sighing, and under the hay one of your bare feet became entangled with mine.

And I did not understand why the surrender in that gesture awakened such tenderness in me, nor why the warm touch of your skin seemed so sweet to me.

A wide open porch stretched out, all around your house.

It was there you started, late one morning, a really original game.

While two peons prodded the rafters with long sticks, one by one, you riddled with bullets the bats forced out of their hiding places.

I can still hear the screams of the cook; I recall the absurd fainting fit of Aunt Isabel, and my terror at your father's sudden appearance.

A curt order from him instantly dispersed your bodyguard and compelled you to surrender your shotgun while with his narrow, clear, cold eyes, so much like yours, he kept staring hard at you. Whereupon, raising the whip he always carried with him, he laid it across your face, once, twice, three times . . .

Facing him, stunned by the unexpectedness of the punishment, you remained at first motionless. Then all at once, you turned red and putting your fists to your mouth, started to shake from head to foot.

"Get out!" your father uttered low between clenched teeth.

And as if that command had been the final blow, suddenly, you gave vent to your rage in a scream, a heart-rending, atrocious scream which you sustained, and prolonged while running to hide yourself in the woods.

At lunchtime you had not reappeared.

"He is ashamed," we girls told one another, somewhat impressed yet perversely pleased. And Alicia and I had to leave, annoyed and spiteful that we should miss your return.

Next morning, however, as we rushed over, eager for news, we found out that you had not come back the entire night.

"He has lost himself in the woods purposely or thrown himself into the river. I know my son . . ." Aunt Isabel sobbed.

"Enough," shouted her husband. "He is trying to worry us, that's all. I know him too."

No one ate lunch that day. Your father, the overseer, the farm manager, all the men, scoured the hacienda, the neighboring haciendas.

"He may have climbed into the cart of some peon and be in the village," they said.

For us and also for the servants—all of whom the event had liberated from their usual tasks—it seemed every moment that we were hearing a carriage arrive, that we were hearing the trot of many horses. In our imagination, we could see you being brought

in, sometimes bound like a criminal, sometimes laid out on a stretcher, naked and white—drowned.

Meanwhile, in the distance, the alarm bell of the sawmill kept giving out constantly a repetition of abrupt, sharp beats.

Toward the end of the afternoon, you suddenly entered the dining room in a rush.

I was there alone, sitting on the divan; that horrible divan of dark leather that wobbled, remember?

You came in with torso half-naked, hair wild, your cheekbones burning with two red spots.

"Water," you ordered. I could do no more than stare at you, terrified.

Then, contemptuously you walked over to the sideboard and tipped the pitcher of water roughly without bothering to look for a glass. I drew close to you. Your whole body released heat, was like burning coal.

Moved by a strange desire, I placed my usually cold finger tips on your arm. You suddenly stopped drinking, and seizing my two hands, made me press them to your chest. Your flesh was on fire.

I remember an interval during which I heard the buzzing of a bee lost on the ceiling of the room.

A sound of footsteps made you let go of me so violently that we stumbled. I can still see your hands clutching at the pitcher of water which you had picked up again, quickly.

Afterwards . . .

Years afterwards came between us that sweet and terrible gesture, the nostalgia of which may bind forever.

It happened one Autumn during which it rained almost continuously.

One afternoon, the leaden veil that covered the sky was torn to shreds, and from north to south ran streaks of livid light.

I remember. I was standing at the foot of the outer staircase, shaking the branches of a fir tree clustered with rain drops. I barely had time to hear the splash of a horse's hoofs when I felt myself seized around the waist, carried off the ground.

It was you, Ricardo, who just arrived from the city where you

had spent the entire Summer preparing your examinations, had taken me by surprise and lifted me onto the front of your saddle.

The chestnut horse bit the bridle, turned angrily—and suddenly I felt around my waist the pressure of a strong arm, of an unknown arm.

The animal started to go. An unexpected sense of well-being took possession of me and I did not know whether to ascribe it to the measured sway which pushed me against you, or to the pressure of that arm still holding me tightly.

The wind twisted the trees, whipped furiously against the horse's skin. And we struggled against the wind, we pushed forward against the wind. I turned my face to look at you. Your head was strangely outlined against a background of sky where great clouds galloped, they too, as if gone mad. I noticed that your hair and your eyelashes had grown darker; you looked like the older brother of that Ricardo who had left us the year before.

The wind. My tresses were flying undone, entwined around your neck.

All at once we sank into shadow and silence, the eternal silence and shadow of the forest.

The horse shortened its step. Cautiously and noiselessly it went over obstacles: prickly rose bushes, fallen trees with damp, moss-corroded trunks; it trod on beds of pale, scentless violets, and spongy mushrooms which gave forth when crushed a poisonous fragrance.

But I was aware only of that arm of yours which imprisoned me relentlessly.

And you might have carried me off to the depth of the woods, even to that cave you once had imagined to terrorize us, that dark cavern where slept coiled the hideous, bellowing thing whose cries we used to hear rising and receding on long stormy nights.

Yes, you might have done it. I would not have been afraid, as long as that arm supported me.

Mysterious clappings as of frightened wings rustled as we passed through the foliage. From the depth of a ravine came a gentle murmur.

Descending, we skirted a narrow stream half-hidden through ferns. Suddenly, at our back, a rustle of branches and the cautious drop of a body into the waters. We turned our heads. It was a deer in flight.

Tongues of blue vapor rose from the dry leaves. The approaching night was suggesting to us to retrace our steps.

Slowly, we started on our way back.

Oh, what an absurd temptation took possession of me then! So great a desire to sigh, to implore, to kiss!

I looked at you. Your face was the same as it had been every day; taciturn, it remained something apart from your strong embrace.

My cheek suddenly pressed against your chest.

And it was not toward the brother, nor toward the companion, that went this impulse; it was toward the strong, gentle man that was trembling in your arm. The wind from the plains came upon us again. And we struggled against it, pushed forward against it. My tresses flew back undone, they entwined themselves around your neck.

Seconds later, while you were holding me by the waist to help me get off the horse, I realized that from the moment you had put your arm around me, I had been assailed by the fear which I was now experiencing, the fear that your arm would cease to press against me.

And then, remember? I clung to you desperately, murmuring, "Come," sighing: "Don't leave me," and the words "Always" and "Never." That night I surrendered to you, for no other reason than to feel your arm encircling my waist.

During three vacations, I was yours.

You found me cold because you never succeeded in making me share your passion; because I had no desire beyond the taste of dark wild flower in your kisses.

That sudden, cowardly desertion of me, did it result from a pe-remptory order of your parents or from some rebelliousness in your own impetuous nature? I did not know. I never knew.

"You know Father wants to send me to Europe!" you told me one day.

"What for?"

"To study scientific farming."

There was a silence. "And I, what am I going to do?" I exclaimed, all at once.

Without looking at me you began to unnerve me by a series of remarks totally foreign to your nature:

"It is highly important for the hacienda and for my profession

Ricardo
studying
+
her?
Nothing
of her
life

that I learn the rudiments of what is being done in other countries, and besides with regard to the future . . .”

“Do you know whom you remind me of at this moment?” I interrupted.

“Of whom?” you asked ingenuously.

“Of your mother, when she begins to talk seriously and everybody yawns. She is the one who has put those ideas into your head in order to separate you from me.”

“You’re crazy. What can my mother know about what’s going on between us!”

“She’s afraid that you will marry me, considering that we’ve lost all our money and besides, she thinks I’m not well brought up. Why, Zoila told me so. Even in the kitchen they know it, they know that she gets very angry because she thinks you’re in love with me. And you, you’re just repeating to me, like an idiot, the nonsense she puts into your head.”

“I . . . Do you think by any chance that I have no mind of my own?”

“How could you! You’ve always been a good-for-nothing! . . . No, Ricardo, don’t go. Ricardo, if you go, I’ll never speak to you again, not as long as I live.”

“I’ll go and what’s more I’ll never come back.”

You returned the next day and I threw myself into your arms, mad with joy.

“Marry me, Ricardo, and take me to Europe.”

“I can’t, I can’t. I love you and I’m sorry, but I can’t. I must think of my future. Didn’t you, yourself, scream at me yesterday that I was a good-for-nothing? Well, perhaps you’re right. Now is the time for me to be doing something.”

Without any dignity—I’ve never learned to be dignified in love—for several months, obstinately, I persisted in linking my life to yours, not understanding why love should be incompatible with your career.

But now, now that I am dead, it occurs to me that possibly all men once in their lifetime long to make some great renunciation; to sacrifice regretfully something vital; to tear to pieces a butterfly, in order to feel themselves masters of their own destiny.

I remember our last lover’s meeting.

We went fishing in the river. The water ran lazily, barely moving the twigs that the willows indolently dropped upon it.

We did not speak. “So as not to scare away the fish,” you said.

It was a gray, sultry day, as silent as we were. It seemed as though all in nature was waiting for something undefinable.

What is the matter with me? Why should I be so anguished? I wondered and yet did not tell you of it so as not to spoil your favorite sport.

“I am despondent,” you said suddenly to me, and your voice sounded strange in the silence, as if it were the echo of my own thought.

And then, I swear to you, I understood. I knew that you had decided not to see me again.

“Will you come back tomorrow?” I inquired, as we said goodbye.

“Naturally, what makes you ask me that?”

“No reason at all. Look into my eyes.”

You looked at me. Your glance for an instant squirmed like a captured eel; then reassured, it held me almost tenderly.

“It’s curious,” you said, “you have curly pupils.”

“Curly!”

“Yes, the design is all rolled up. How pretty!”

“Everyone’s are like that.”

“No, yours are more so.”

“Now, let me see, let me see yours. Yours are full of spirals. Like those crystal marbles we used to play with when we were children.”

And like two children, Ricardo, we forgot our pressing sorrow to look into each other’s eyes, in a silly way, forehead against forehead.

That sudden, cowardly desertion of me, did it result from a pre-emptory order of your parents or from some rebelliousness in your own impetuous nature? I do not know.

I never knew. I only know that the period following your departure was the most disordered and tragic in my entire life.

Oh, the torture of first love, of the first disillusion! When one struggles with the past instead of forgetting it! And so I persisted in laying bare my soft breast to the same memories, the same anger, the same agonies.

I remember the enormous revolver I stole and kept hidden in my closet, its muzzle sunk in a tiny satin shoe. One winter afternoon, I went out into the forest. The dead leaves were packed down on the ground, rotten. The foliage hung drenched and lifeless, like a rag.

Anna →
She wanted
to die

Far away from the house, I stopped at last and took the weapon out from the sleeve of my overcoat, feeling it suspiciously like a giddy little beast that could twist and bite.

With infinite care, I held it against my temple, against my heart. Then, abruptly, I fired at a tree.

There was a crack, an insignificant crack, such as that made by a sheet whipped by the wind. But, oh, Ricardo, there in the trunk of the tree what a hideous gap, jagged and black from gunpowder!

My breast torn thus, my flesh, my veins scattered . . . No, I never would have the courage!

Exhausted, I lay down full length, moaning and beating the earth with clenched fists. No, I never would have the courage!

And yet I wanted to die, I swear to you, I wanted to die.

What day was it? I could not tell at what moment that pleasant weariness began.

It seemed to me at first as if Spring was taking pleasure in making me feel lazy. A Spring still hidden under the Winter soil, but occasionally breathing, damp and fragrant, through the half-closed pores of the earth.

I remember. I felt listless, indifferent in body and spirit, as if satiated with passion and grief.

Believing it to be a respite, I abandoned myself to that unexpected calm. For would not the torment come more bitter again tomorrow?

No longer did I stir or move about.

And that languor, that drowsiness, kept increasing, enveloping me stealthily, day by day.

One morning when I opened the blinds in my room, I noticed that a thousand small buds no bigger than the head of a pin dotted the tops of all the ash-colored twigs in the garden.

Behind me, Zoila was folding the mosquito netting and inviting me to drink my daily glass of milk. Pensively and without answering, I kept on staring at that miracle.

It was curious, my two small breasts also were budding, seemingly wanting to blossom with the Spring.

And suddenly, it was as if someone had whispered it in my ear.

"I am . . . oh! . . ." I sighed, lifting my hands to my breasts, blushing to the roots of my hair.

For many days, I lived stunned with happiness. You had marked

me forever. Even though you repudiated it, you continued to possess my humiliated flesh, caressing it with your absent hand, altering it.

Not for a moment did I think of the consequences of all this. I thought of nothing but the enjoyment of your presence in my body. And I listened to your kiss, let it grow in me.

When Spring arrived at last, I had my hammock suspended between two hazelnut trees and there I lay down for hours.

I did not understand why the landscape, why all things had now become to me a source of diversion, a placidly sensuous enjoyment: the dark undulating mass of the forest poised on the horizon like a monstrous wave ready to hurl itself forward; a flight of doves with their coming and going streaking with fleeting shadows the book opened on my knees; the intermittent chant of the sawmill—that sharp, sustained, soft note, like the humming of a beehive—cutting through the air as far as the houses when the afternoon was very clear.

Unreasonable, frivolous desires suddenly besieged me so furiously, they became almost an agonizing necessity. First of all I wanted for breakfast a bunch of pink grapes. I pictured the stem bursting with fruit, the crystalline pulp.

Very soon, when they convinced me it was a desire impossible to gratify—we had neither grape arbors nor vineyards and the village was two miles away from the hacienda—I longed for strawberries.

I did not, however, like those the gardener picked for me in the woods. I wanted them cold, very cold, red, very red; and tasting a little of raspberries.

Where had I eaten berries like that?

" . . . Then the girl went out into the garden and started to sweep the snow. And little by little the broom began to uncover a great quantity of ripe, perfumed strawberries which she joyfully carried to her stepmother . . ."

Those! Those were the strawberries I wanted! The magic strawberries in the fairy tale!

One whim followed another. Now I yearned to knit with yellow wool, I longed for a field of sunflowers, that I might look at them hours on end.

Oh, to sink my eyes in something yellow!
Thus I lived on, craving smells, colors, tastes . . .

The voice of reality came one day to disturb my childish thoughtlessness.

I can still see Zoila with arms akimbo standing before me. I see her with a hard look on her face as if preparing to meet with possible resistance from me.

"Something is the matter with you! You're sick!"

"Sick, me! You're crazy," I answered insolently, trying to lie to her, more from shame than out of desire to deceive.

"I say sick because I don't know how to say it another way. But you know what I mean."

Faced with her firmness, I suddenly felt an infinite weariness come over me.

"Yes, I'm sick," I confessed brutally. "But what difference does it make to you?"

"What difference does it make to me? What difference does it make to me? I, who am like your own mother! To know what you have done, to know that you are a shameless . . ."

"I! Get out! Get out!" I shouted, infuriated by the name with which she had insulted my love.

"All right, I'll go . . . but to tell all to your father." And she left, slamming the door.

My heart beat violently. A horrible fear grew in me every second, and with it came the realization of the greatness of my crime. "Zoila, Zoila!" I called.

What would my father say? He was so good. I would have preferred to see him hot-tempered, inflexible. I remember how I dreaded his sorrow as the worst of all punishments. So I would just as soon not have seen Zoila coming back, her eyes full of tears.

"I cannot tell on you, poor child! I am the one who's responsible, I didn't know how to take care of you."

I threw myself into her arms, choking with unspeakable anguish and gratitude.

"No, not you, Zoila."

"Yes, you were good. I am to blame, and also that cursed Amanda who bewitched us all with her guitar. It was high time

I chased her out! To think that while I listened to her you went astray with that Judas of a don-Ricardo! Ah, but he'll have to deal with me, Zoila. He'll marry you, I tell you!"

"But since he doesn't love me any more," I sighed weakly.

And it was Zoila who cried bitterly while I kept repeating in a colorless voice, "Since he doesn't love me any more, Zoila, since he doesn't love me any more!"

I think Zoila wrote you. Only now, can I picture her poor letter. Now that I am dead and can no longer weep, I am moved to pity by her queer handwriting, made up of ignorance and love.

I think she even threatened your parents. I think so. I never knew quite what she did; I had surrendered myself to her will.

I remember when she began to awaken me in the morning with a potion of bitter herbs.

"What is this awful stuff?"

"Drink it and ask no questions."

And so I would drink, asking no more questions.

"Don't you feel anything?" she used to ask me occasionally.

"No, nothing."

"My God, Blessed Jesus, what are we going to do! We must make some decision before it's too late."

"Bah, tomorrow, Zoila, tomorrow . . ."

I remember. I felt as though I were quite secure in that web of laziness, of indifference; I felt invulnerable, calm toward everything outside the small tasks of everyday:—existing, sleeping, eating.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, I would say, and so the first month of Spring went by.

The first week of the second month filled me with an unaccountable anguish which seemed to wax with the moon.

On the seventh night, unable to sleep, I arose, went down to the parlor and opened the door leading into the garden.

The cypresses stood out motionless against a sky of deep blue; the pond was like a sheet of metal all blue; the house extended its shadow, velvety and blue.

Absolutely still, the woods seemed hushed as if petrified under the spell of the night, that blue night of the full moon.

For a long time I remained standing on the threshold not daring to enter into that new, unrecognizable world.

Suddenly, from one of the turrets of the house, something like a narrow ribbon of feathers unfolded itself and floated by.

It was a flock of white owls.

They flew by. Their flight was smooth and heavy, silent as the night.

And it was so harmonious that suddenly I burst into tears.

Afterwards I felt complete relief from all pain. It was as if the anguish which had been torturing me had found its way out of my being through the channel of tears.

That anguish, however, I again felt weighing on my heart the following morning; minute by minute its weight increased, oppressed me. And then, after many hours of struggle, it escaped from me in the same way as the day before and again was gone but without revealing to me the secret reason for its being.

The identical thing happened to me the next day, and the day after that.

From then on, I lived in wait of tears. I waited for them as one waits for a storm on the hottest days of Summer. And it happened that a harsh word, a gentle glance, would open the floodgate of those tears. And thus I lived, confined to my physical world.

Now as Spring was drawing into Summer, mottled storms of bluish lightning would at times suddenly explode, like the last burst of some skyrocket.

One afternoon, as I was venturing on the path that led to your hacienda, my heart suddenly began to beat faster.

From out the horizon, an unknown force seemed to be drawing my steps, from out there where the dense black sky was lit up, stabbed by electric discharges—hallucinating signals sent out to meet me.

“Come, come, come,” the storm seemed to be shrieking frantically at me.

“Come,” it murmured again, as it flashed lower and paler.

As I moved forward, a soft, glowing warmth stimulated me; and I kept going forward just to feel myself more and more filled with life.

Almost running, I followed the path that descends toward the glen where your house lay burdened with honeysuckle, while the dogs, barking gaily, were coming up to meet me.

I remember throwing myself exhausted on a chair the caretaker’s

wife had offered me in the kitchen. A torrent of words poured forth from the good woman . . . “What weather! What humidity! Don Ricardo arrived this afternoon. He’s resting. He asked not to be called until dinner time. Perhaps it would be better if the señorita would return to her house before the shower bursts . . .”

I sipped the maté and lowered my head meekly.

“Don Ricardo arrived this afternoon!” Were we then so closely bound to each other that my senses had made known to me your arrival?

I did not send for you, no, for I knew your ill-tempered awakenings. I returned home hastily, as the first drops of rain were beginning to fall.

But as I left you behind, sleeping, half-dressed, in a room with a musty, closed-up smell, I felt subsiding within me the sweet fever which had been pounding at my temples.

My hands felt like ice as I sat down at the table opposite my irate father, and I was shivering with cold. “You always manage to keep everyone waiting. The gong has rung three times. While Alicia and you do no more than loll around, your brothers and I are working side by side with the peons . . . and we must have our meals on time. Oh! if your mother were only living! . . .”

All the following day I spent waiting for you. For I was simple enough to think that you would come to me.

It was dusk and I was lying in the hammock when again I felt the warning throb. I got up and began to walk. And once more the same surge of life welled up in me, and when I paused, the physical enjoyment stopped also, paused within me, pulsating violently again each time I hastened my step.

And so it was, that my heart—my heart of flesh—guided me toward the north fence.

Far off, at the edge of a field of clover, beneath a vast sky made crimson with blood-red clouds and outlined against the disk of the setting sun, I caught sight of a rider driving a pack of horses.

It was you. I recognized you instantly. And while leaning against the wire fence, with my eyes I could follow you for an instant as brief as a sigh. For suddenly, with the sun, you disappeared from the horizon.

How strange! I never bore you any malice for the meeting that was to separate our destinies.

Living
in
Anguish

next to see
Ricardo

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not opp mess

And, yet, and yet, on account of things infinitely less important, I have suffered, I have hated and avenged myself more than once on others. I was very young at the time, Ricardo. And when we are young, feeling a wide road full of possibilities ahead of us, we forgive rather easily, as easily as later on we obstinately cling to a sterile love or to a miserable chance for retaliation, even if it is to bring us torment day after day.

No, strangely enough, I never bore you any malice for the most brutal attitude a man can take toward a woman.

"And if I don't love you any more, what am I going to do about it?" you said to me. "Love affairs are not eternal."

"And is this all you have come here to tell me?" I answered, knowing only too well that if you had not come, I would have been the one to go looking for you, in search of that irretrievable wound.

"Yes, and also to tell you that Zoila's advice to you is not of any use. The thing she's talking about is not true. And if it were true . . . I'm not the one to blame."

Oh, Ricardo, now I know what it must have cost you to tell me that monstrous, filthy lie. But how could I, so young, so impulsive, interpret your paleness and that form of dizziness which made you stammer. I could only hear your words: "I'm not the one to blame."

Because of those words, I threw myself at you with that blind fury which has caused me to lose every battle in life. I began to beat and abuse you. For violence has always been my argument at critical moments when the injustice of others makes the words choke in my throat. Always, always, even when I understood that it was the last argument, the argument of the defeated.

To wrest yourself away from me as I assaulted you like an enraged spider, you had to do violence to me and to yourself. For a long time we fought like two children.

And we were in reality two children appalled by the consequences nature had imposed upon certain acts which we had considered nothing more than a marvelous and forbidden game.

Finally, taking advantage of my utter weariness, in the midst of the battle you escaped from me and ran downstairs.

And then, I had to see you leave or rather flee. Yes, flee.

The same night long before dawn, I dreamed . . . an endless corridor along which you and I were flying, closely bound together.

when I want to
bear responsibility
is the woman always

The lightning was pursuing us, striking one by one the poplars, unreal columns holding up a stone vaulting, and that vaulting was continually crashing down behind us without ever catching us in its fall.

A sudden burst of thunder flung me out of bed, and I found myself awake and trembling in the middle of the room.

Then at that moment, I heard the sustained howling, the horrible clamor of an angry wind.

Blinds shook, doors creaked, the whirl of invisible curtains whipped me. I felt as if borne away, lost in the very center of a gigantic waterspout struggling to tear the house from its foundations and drag it yoked to its own wild course.

"Zoila!" I cried; but the crash of the hurricane made my voice scatter.

Even my thoughts seemed to waver, small, flickering, like the flame of a candle.

I wanted . . . what? Even to this moment, I do not know.

I ran to the door and opened it. Painfully, in the darkness, I moved forward with arms outstretched like a sleepwalker, when suddenly the floor sank beneath my feet in an unexpected void.

Zoila picked me up at the foot of the stairs.

Silent and tearful, she spent the rest of the night mopping up the flow of blood in which your flesh joined with mine was slowly disintegrating.

The next day found me once more stretching myself out on the veranda, displaying the same girlish innocent eyes, under the same innocently arched eyebrows. And there I was, knitting, knitting furiously, as if my life depended on it.

FIVE

Did her lover's sudden cowardly desertion of her result from a peccatory order of his parents, or from some rebelliousness in his own impetuous nature?

She does not know, nor does she want to again find grief in the attempt to unravel the enigma which had tortured her so much throughout her early youth.

The truth is that either unconsciously or through fear, both of

separate
at the
wake
he realized
that he
still could

them followed separate paths. And all through their lives they carefully avoided each other, as if by mutual accord.

But now, now that he is standing there, silent and pale; now that at last he dares again look at her, face to face, with that curious blinking of the eyes he always displayed as a boy when under the stress of real emotion, now she understands.

She understands that within her the love that she thought was dead had slept hidden. She understands that this man had never remained entirely apart from her.

And it was as if some of her blood had always been feeding a vital center within her of which she herself was unaware, and that this hidden core had thus grown secretly, aside from her own life, yet always part of it.

And at last, she understands that although she was never aware of it, she had in fact been waiting eagerly, longingly, for this moment.

Must we die in order to know certain things? For now she understands also that in the heart and in the senses of that man she too had planted her roots; that never, though she often might have believed it, was she ever altogether alone; that never, though she often might have thought so, could she ever have been really forgotten by him.

Had she been aware of all this before, she would not on so many sleepless nights have turned on the lights to read some book or other, endeavoring to stop a flood of memories. Neither would she have avoided certain corners of the park, certain solitudes, certain strains of music, nor feared the first breath of some overwarm Spring.

Oh God, dear God! Must we die in order to know?

SIX

"Arise, come!"

"Where?"

Someone, something takes her by the hand, makes her rise.

And as if entering suddenly into a tangle of conflicting winds, she finds herself whirling on a fixed point, as light as a snowflake.

"Come!"

"Where?"

"Farther on."

She goes down the slope of a damp and shadowy garden.

She now perceives the murmurings of hidden waters, and hears the falling of frozen rose leaves all around the bushes.

And she descends, slides down moss-covered lanes, brushed by the wet wings of invisible birds . . .

What is this force enveloping her, carrying her up? All of a sudden, abruptly, she feels herself flowing toward a surface.

And now, she finds herself again, lying face upward in the spacious bed.

At the head of the bed, the sputtering of the two wax candles.

Only now does she notice that a bandage is supporting her chin. Yet she has the curious sensation that she does not feel it.

SEVEN

The day burns hours, minutes, seconds.

An old man comes and sits beside her bed. For a long time he looks at her sadly, then strokes her hair without fear and says that she looks pretty.

Only the woman in the shroud remains unimpressed by his despondent calm. She knows her father well. No, no sudden blow is going to strike him down. He has already seen too many people thus stretched out, pale, and invested with that same implacable stillness, while everything around them breathes and stirs.

"Ana Maria, do you remember your mother?" he would ask her, when she was still a little girl.

And in order to please him, each time she would close her eyes and, concentrating intently, succeed in capturing for an instant the fleeting image of two other very black eyes looking at her playfully from behind a light, transparent veil tied to a small hat. Something like a perfume floated around that tender evocation.

"Of course, I remember her, Papa."

"She was very pretty, wasn't she? Did you love her?"

"Yes, I loved her very much."

"And why did you love her?" he had insisted one day.

She had answered candidly:

Her father
too both here
his
dying &
death

"Because she always wore such a lovely veil tied around her hat and smelled so sweet."

"You are a silly girl," he had said, his eyes suddenly full of tears, and hastily slipped out of the room.

But since that time, all her life, she had suspected that he too had loved her mother for the same reason as she, the silly girl. Yes, he had loved her for her fleeting perfume, her treacherous veils and her premature death, as disconcerting as the frivolous mystery of her eyes.

Now he lifts his hand, traces the sign of the cross on his daughter's forehead. Did he not always bid her good night just in that same tender manner?

No, no sudden blow is going to strike him down. She knows her father well.

Later on, after having closed all the doors, he will stretch himself on his bed, turn his face to the wall, and then, only then, give himself up to suffering. And he will suffer in solitude, rebellious against any reference to his affliction, against the slightest display of sympathy, as if his grief were not within reach of anyone.

And for days, for months, perhaps for years, he will go on mute and resigned, fulfilling that part of sorrow destiny has assigned to him.

EIGHT

Ever since the beginning of the night, and almost without rest, someone has been keeping vigil over the dead body.

Yet the woman in the shroud notices her for the first time, so accustomed is she to see her thus, grave and solicitous, at the bedside of the sick.

Alicia, my poor sister, it is you! You are praying!

Where do you think I am? Rendering account to that terrifying God to whom you offer up day after day in your prayers the brutality of your husband, the burning of your sawmills, and even the loss of your only son, that disobedient, smiling boy, dragged down in the fall of a tree and whose young body was pitifully dislocated when they lifted it from out the mud and the dead leaves?

No, Alicia, I am here, just beginning to disintegrate quite close

to the earth. And I am wondering if I shall ever see the face of your God.

Already at the convent where we were educated, after Sister Marta had turned off the lights in the large dormitory and while with your forehead sunk on the pillow you were tirelessly completing the last two decades of your rosary, I would slip out on tip-toe to the window in the bathroom to spy on the young couple in the house next door.

On the ground floor a lighted balcony and two servants spreading the tablecloth and lighting the silver candelabra on the table. On the second floor another lighted balcony. Seen through the shifting curtain of a willow tree, this was the balcony that attracted my most eager looks. The husband stretching himself on the divan. She, seated before the mirror, absorbed in the contemplation of her own image and from time to time carefully lifting her hand to her cheek, as if to smooth some imaginary wrinkle. She, combing her thick brown hair, flinging it like a banner, perfuming it!

It required some real effort on my part to go back and lie down in my narrow bed under the oil lamp with its flickering flame, distorting and bringing into play on the naked walls the shadow of a big crucifix.

I never liked to look at a crucifix, you know that, Alicia. And if I spent all my money buying holy images, it was only because the white, frothy angels' wings delighted me and because the angels frequently resembled our older cousins, those who had become engaged, went to dances, and wore diamonds in their hair.

Everyone was grieved at my indifference when I made my First Communion.

Neither a sermon nor a retreat ever affected me. God seemed to me so remote, and so severe!

Or perhaps it might be, Alicia, that I have no soul!

Those must have a soul who feel it within themselves stirring and demanding. Or maybe after all, men are like plants, for not all plants have a second crop and there are some that live in the sand dunes without thirst or need of water.

Or it might be also that all deaths are not the same and even that after death each one of us follows a different path.

But pray, Alicia, pray. You know I like to see you pray.

What would I not give though, my poor Alicia, that you might be granted here on earth a particle of that happiness you think is

reserved for you in your heaven. Your paleness, your sadness, grieve me. Sorrows seem even to have faded your hair.

Do you remember the golden hair you had as a child? And do you remember how our cousins and I envied it? Because you were so blond, we admired you and we thought you the most beautiful. Do you remember?

◆
NINE

Luis, my dear brother, now that I see you coming close to me and watching me intently, I remember that it was you who assisted me at my death.

Yes, now I remember that I died clutching at your hand.

Your hand! How many years is it since I felt it between mine? Not since the nights in that far-off Winter, do you remember? Then it happened that your hand often searched for mine at the dinner table beneath the folds of the tablecloth, as if to ask me to hold back the sharp phrases bursting forth from the lips of Elena, my intimate friend and your great love.

Luis, what have you done with yourself during all those years; where did you bury your past and your soul? For a long time, I was looking at you without seeing you, because long since, you had lost all importance and meaning in my eyes. What do our brothers matter to us anyway? They are like extensions of ourselves, prickly extensions falling back on us in the great moments of our lives, wounding us even though they are trying to protect us.

And yet, oh Luis, now that I see you close to my deathbed, watching me intently, I remember there was a time when we loved each other very much; a time you may have dared to deny, a time you had forgotten but which my death reawakened in you, I am sure.

What joy! For this one night at least you have lost that vacant look, that very correct manner that separated you from me; you have become again the anxious boy who used to take refuge in his sister.

Elena, divorced, scandalous, pure and haughty! If my death finally succeeds in making you remember her, I am glad to have died, Luis.

You never knew how grieved I was by the cruelty with which you tore yourself away from her in order to give your life immediately afterwards:—that life for which she craved longingly and tenderly, to that charming fool whom you made your wife, to that Luz-Margarita, model of honesty and of conventional kindheartedness.

Elena would become wild whenever you treated her like a child or when you reproached her for her imprudent and much talked-of passions.

“What does it matter losing one’s reputation, the support of a husband or the respect of a stupid family. The one really important thing is to save one’s heart,” she used to say to me.

And proudly she would shake her splendid head, curly and dark. Her hair was chestnut-brown, but when she came near a window it lighted up all over making her appear redheaded.

And at dinner time, she would relate and enlarge upon her love affairs, insulting you with veiled words. And you, Luis, groping beneath the tablecloth, would search with your trembling hand for mine and press it as if to beg me to make her stop talking.

“Why don’t you marry Elena?” I asked you one day. “Then she would stop insulting you and you would no longer suffer needlessly.”

“Marry Elena! You haven’t thought of her past! I adore her, but.”

“I am not judging her, but what guarantees can a woman like Elena offer?” the blond and delicate Luz-Margarita would say to you at the time, wisely instructed by her parents in the way to get you to marry her.

And she was right. What guarantee of mediocrity and of stability could someone like Elena have offered you; someone pure, fanciful and passionate, whom fate had compelled in her heart and in her flesh, to live every second intensely as the drop of dew is compelled to catch eagerly every reflection of the morning. What guarantee! Luz-Margarita, on the other hand, with her sweet name, her concealed energy and her post-card goodness, offered you all that security which gradually has made of you a commonplace man.

Oh Luis, Luis—it isn’t that I blame you!—All men are cowards and it is natural that you too should have looked for an easy quiet life. But if you knew how much I was shocked, always, by your inertia in defending Elena whenever some abusive or sarcastic

anecdote would come forth out of her restless life, ever in search of love.

"I am a vagabond. I have a foreboding that I am going to die on a train," she used to say. And until now, no one knows just how or where she is. Yet slander will always pursue her. That is the tribute women like Elena must ever pay for their liberty.

All I know is that she loved you very much, Luis, and that you were the man with whom she could finally have found appeasement by concentrating on you her passion.

But men like you are unconcerned about making vagabonds. And when Christmas calls at your selfish windows you quickly drive away with a glass of champagne the sad vision of a woman, straight, very pale, alone in the bustle of a large house covered with snow, in some foreign land. You drive away from your mind the idea of her loneliness and of your own loneliness. You drive away the idea of all that loneliness you might possibly have prevented.

In what part of the Bible can be found that sentence which says: "The sin God punishes most sternly is the sin against life"? Did I imagine it or is it really there? I don't know, Luis, but I have the conviction you will have to pay later for those moments of real life your lack of moral courage caused you to elude.

Luz-Margarita? No, nothing will ever make her suffer. There are people so small that life and death will always pass them over without reaching them. And there she will remain, repeating over and over:

"What a scandal! One has no right to have so much bad luck! What guarantees can so much unhappiness offer. God should punish girls who are not born like me—pretty, sweet, rich, and destined to marry the man they love."

TEN

Someone, something, takes her by the hand.

"Arise, come!"

"Where?"

"Come!"

And she goes. Someone, something, drags her along, leads her

through an abandoned city covered with a slight layer of dust of ashes, as if some evil breeze had delicately blown over it.

She walks. Night falls. She walks on.

A lawn. In the very heart of that accursed city, a lawn recently watered and phosphorescent with insects.

She takes a step. She crosses the double ring of mist surrounding it, and enters shoulder high into the fireflies, as in a floating golden dust.

Oh! What is this force enveloping her, carrying her up?

Now, she finds herself again lying motionless, face upward in the spacious bed.

Light, she feels light. She tries to move but cannot. It seems as if the most secret, the deepest layer of her body were revolving, imprisoned within some heavier layers which she cannot lift and which hold her there, fastened, between the waxy sputtering of the two candles.

ELEVEN

Now, only Maria Griselda's husband remains near her.

How is it possible that she too calls her son "Maria Griselda's husband"?

Why? Is it because he watches so jealously over his beautiful wife, because he keeps her isolated, far away down South, in that house lost in the heart of the forest?

Somehow, all through the long night, she has missed the presence of her daughter-in-law and has been annoyed by Alberto's attitude; this son who has done nothing but move about and cast uneasy glances around the room.

Now that he is resting, lying on a chair, sleeping perhaps, what does she notice about him that is new, strange . . . terrible?

His eyelids! It is his eyelids that change him, that frighten her. Those eyelids, rough and dry! It was as if, closed night after night on some taciturn passion, they had withered, burned from within.

It is strange that she should notice them for the first time. Or could it be only natural that the perception of everything that is a sign of death should be sharpened in the dead?

Suddenly those lowered eyelids begin to stare at her fixedly, with that inscrutable fixity with which the insane stare.

Oh! Alberto, open your eyes!

As if in compliance with her request, he actually opens them . . . only to cast another suspicious look around.

And now he approaches her, his shrouded mother, and touches her on the forehead as if to make sure that she is really dead.

Then reassured, he steps resolutely toward the back of the room.

She hears him moving about in the dark, feeling the furniture as if he were looking for something.

And now he is coming back with a picture in his hand, the picture of Maria Griselda. Now he is holding it over the flame of one of the candles concentrating on burning it thoroughly, and as the lovely image vanishes, breaks into ashes, his features distend, pacified . . .

Except for the dead woman, no one knows or will ever know how much those numerous effigies of his wife have made him suffer—channels through which she escapes him in spite of his vigilance.

Does she not give away a little of her beauty in each one of those pictures? Does not every one of them open to her some possible means of communication?

Yes, but now that the last one has been destroyed by fire, there remains only one Maria Griselda, she whom he keeps in seclusion, far down South, in that shabby old house lost in the heart of the forest.

TWELVE

That house! She remembers clearly the day she had sworn never to set foot in it again.

It happened one afternoon when with the help of Anita, her daughter—and that of Anita's intimate friend, Beatriz, she had undertaken to embroider on the long tablecloth the garlands which were fated to remain unfinished . . .

"It sounds like Alberto! I hear the tinkle of his spurs . . ." Beatriz had suddenly exclaimed, her needle still in the air, and her sweet

face getting red as the silvery jingle of Alberto's heavy silver spurs was heard coming up the long corridors of the house.

"That fellow! he might as well stay in his forest!" she can still hear her daughter grumbling. "Since Father has given over the management of the hacienda in the South to him, he is getting more and more unsociable. Imagine, Mummy, he has refused to be Beatriz's partner at the ball of . . ."

"But Anita, he's quite right!" Beatriz had protested, with a desperate look toward the door, then turning to her, she had hurriedly concluded: "He wrote me he could not make the journey from the far end of the hacienda to go to a ball just when he has the new mills to get going . . ."

"Yet, he has actually made the trip, and I'm sure it's only on account of some trifling thing!" Anita retorted cruelly.

Poor Beatriz, so much in love with Alberto who had never deigned even to look at her! But who did the handsome, taciturn Alberto ever deign to look at anyway? Young girls would seldom hear the sound of his voice, and nobody ever spoke of his having a mistress. His only interest, his only love, seemed to be for his horses, his dogs, the land, the trees, and lately the new mills on that fabulous hacienda for which the gossips still insisted his mother had married his father . . .

"I would like to have a talk with you, Mother," he had said, kissing her on the forehead.

"That means we must get out, so come along Beatriz." And with a sarcastic laugh, Anita had pulled her friend out of the room behind her.

No sooner was the door closed, when she had dropped her needle and looking at her son: "What a strange face, what's the matter?" she had smilingly inquired.

He had muttered a few meaningless words, then like someone deciding suddenly to throw himself in the water: "I got married a week ago," he brutally let out, "I wanted you to know and tell Father."

She remembers how at first she failed to understand and remained there motionless, staring at him. It was only gradually and through all those words he was now pouring out while taking advantage of her silence, that the truth finally dawned on her:

Alberto had married . . . an unknown girl he had met in that

*Beatriz
1910
w/ Alberto
& his mother
went to*

town down South from where he made his lumber shipments . . . She was good, and so pretty! Yes, there never was a girl prettier than Maria Griselda! Maria Griselda was her name. Her father was not native born though well known in the entire region, and an excellent contractor; really very good people, even if not of the same social class . . .

That was where she blew up. She still can hear her own shrill cry: "Good people! Good! . . . A girl who would get married secretly! People who . . ."

Alberto had interrupted her energetically:

"It's not they, not she! I'm the one who insisted on getting married that way . . ."

"But why? why??" It seems to her she can still feel in her throat choking her that hard knot of distracted words she could not manage to untie.

"I'll admit, it's hard on you, Mother, what I've done . . . but I didn't want a large wedding . . . and I was afraid you'd force me to wait . . . and you know how I am . . . my fiancée, I didn't want all those friends of Anita's, I didn't want anyone to see her, I . . ."

"Well, you'll have your wish. Nobody will see her. Certainly not I. No, I will never see her! I will never, never accept as a daughter that stranger, that little nobody, that adventuress . . ."

The knot of words seemed to have got untied in her throat, and she recalls how, now she could at last pour out all she had on her heart, she wanted to stop but could not.

. . . No, she would never accept that stranger! that adventuress! who had married him for his name, for his money, for the hacienda in the South! He could keep her there hidden in the old house; and she would see to it that his father and all the family would not accept her either; besides, he too, she would disown him; he was no longer her son, he had taken the most serious decision in life without consulting his mother; yes, he could go away, she didn't wish to see him any more, he was no longer her son! . . .

She remembers that she was still talking while the rattle of Alberto's spurs was slowly getting more and more distant down the corridors of the house . . .

Yet, how strangely ironical life can be!

It was not the news of that horrible marriage of Alberto's that had caused her first heart attack. It had come a year later, as she

was returning from the ball where Fred had so nicely consulted her about his own marriage. She can still see him walking across the dance floor, holding the hand of the most popular debutante of the season. She can see them standing in front of her, such a lovely couple! so full of fun and smiles.

"Mummy, this is Silvia. I would like to know if you think her pretty enough to become your daughter-in-law . . ."

That shabby old house lost in the heart of the forest, where she had sworn she would never set foot again! . . . Now in her shroud, she recalls how once again, nevertheless, on that day a year ago she stopped in front of the gate in her carriage, after a long exhausting journey . . .

"It looks as if that gate hasn't been used for centuries!" the old coachman was grumbling, as he struggled with the chain all covered with rust.

"Never mind, Juan de Dios, take your time . . ." she had answered, stepping out of the carriage. "I can go on from here on foot."

She remembers, as she was walking toward the house across the park—that park with its bushy paths, its badly kept lawns, and scant flower beds of wild carnations—a flash of lightning had ripped the sky and shivered livid for the space of a second. Next had come a clap of thunder. And quickly again all was silence.

A clap of thunder! A single brief clap of thunder, like the stroke of a gong, like a signal! Thus from the top of the Cordillera, Autumn was giving warning that it had begun to rustle the sleeping winds, to urge on the waters and to prepare the snowfalls . . . And she recalls, as she was ascending the stone staircase outside the house, how the echo of that brief thundering had reverberated unpleasantly within her as if it was warning her that something evil was about to enter her life . . .

On the top step of the staircase, a toad was lifting up to her its tremulous little head when at last Fred, her younger son, opened the door of the house to her.

"Oh, Mother, I wouldn't have thought . . . I heard a carriage at the gate . . . but I never would have thought it could have been you . . ."

"Where is Alberto?" she had asked as she entered the hall, tak-

Anna's son =
Alberto who
married Maria
Griselda

like a downy-
what would this
give her son
nothing.

disown
son

ing in at a glance the disorder, the untidiness of the room; a curtain dropping down, withered flowers in the vases, the fireplace dead and filled with charred papers.

"At the village . . . I suppose," Fred murmured. A world of veiled allusions trembled in his voice as he stood in the middle of the hall, obstinately avoiding her inquiring look.

"Light the fire, Fred, I feel cold. Isn't there any firewood around? What is Alberto's wife doing? Does she think, perhaps, housework might be harmful to that famed beauty of hers?"

"On no, no, this untidiness is no fault of hers. Alberto hardly allows her to leave her room. He is so jealous of her and there are so many of us here all the time," he concluded with a nervous laugh.

"Then why . . ." she started to say when Fred whispered: "Mother!" just as he used to do when as a little boy he would run to her when he had hurt himself or was afraid. Yet now instead of clinging to her as he used to do then, he drew away as if ashamed and let himself drop down on the sofa.

She came over to him and placing both hands on his shoulders: "What's the matter, Fred?" she asked gently. "What's happening to all of you? Why don't you leave this house which is not yours anyway, since Alberto is the one who . . ."

"Oh, Mother, it's Silvia who doesn't want to leave. I most certainly do and if you will remember, Mother, it was Silvia who insisted on coming here . . ."

Yes, she remembered the absurd plan the girl had confided in her a few days before the wedding, out in the big city.

"We want to spend our honeymoon at the hacienda in the South!"

"Silvia!"

"Señora, please don't feel badly. I know that you have never been willing to meet her or accept her, but I do want so much to meet Maria Griselda. They all say she is the most beautiful woman in the world. I want Fred to see her too and to say: 'No, it isn't true. It isn't true. Silvia is the most beautiful!'"

Yes, she remembered all those things while Fred went on excitedly:

". . . Oh, Mother, I'm so glad you've come! Perhaps you will be able to persuade her that we must leave. She's now got it into her head that I'm in love with Maria Griselda because I think she is so beautiful. And she insists on remaining here to give me a chance

to think things over, so that I can compare them, so that I can choose . . . and I don't know what else! She's simply mad! And I want to leave. I must leave. My studies . . ."

His voice! His quivering like a cornered animal sensing imminent danger!

Indeed, as a woman, she understood Silvia's frenzy, her desire to measure herself against Maria Griselda. She understood and pitied the stupid pride of that vain girl in love, ready to risk even her own happiness provided she could make herself supreme in every way in her husband's eyes.

"Fred, you know Silvia is capricious. She will never go if you ask her that way, as if you were afraid."

"Afraid! Well, Mother, maybe I am. If you could only see her! If you had seen her this morning! She was dressed in white and wore a yellow dahlia at her breast."

"Who?"

Fred had suddenly thrown his arms around his mother's waist, laid his forehead against the fragile hip and closed his eyes.

"Maria Griselda!" he sighed at last. "Oh, Mother, if only you could have seen her! With her pale face and her black hair! With her little head just like a swan's; with her regal and melancholy carriage, all dressed in white with a yellow dahlia at her breast!"

She gave a start. From her memory of the picture Alberto had once sent to arouse her interest, she could see the delicate, haughty creature moving.

"Oh, Mother, every day it's a new image, every day some new admiration I have to fight against. No, no, I must not stay here another day . . . because I can't help admiring her more than I do Silvia, every day more. And Silvia who adores me and hates me, who avoids me and doesn't want to leave. You speak to her, Mother, right now, please! Maria Griselda has not yet returned from her horseback ride . . . this is the time . . ."

"I will speak to Silvia, Fred, but not now, later; I must first see Anita and Zoila . . . Where is Zoila?"

As if it were the very heart of the house, the tick-tock of a clock, now light, now heavy, was sounding relentlessly down the corridors . . . while she was going up the stairs looking for her daughter Anita, and turning over in her mind the letter from Zoila, that strange, disturbing note brought to her secretly by a little peon.

insane

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me

Fred
+
La
fear
full

Señora, come immediately! . . . said the note. Very strange things are happening here. I will not say anything about what is taking place between Fred and his wife; that is none of my business. But although you have sworn never again to set foot in this house, you'd better come for the sake of your daughter.

Anita has always had her own way, but this time it looks as though things were not going her way. It seems to me she made a big mistake when she came here chasing after don Rodolfo.

Since he stopped writing to her it must have been for some good reason, and in my opinion, she should have had enough pride to forget him. That's what I told her when she made up her mind to come out here. But no one listens to me. And you ordered me to come with her.

Well now, getting down to facts, my guess is that although don Rodolfo has been Anita's sweetheart since her first long dress, he doesn't love her any more and maybe even without knowing it himself (and may God forgive me if I'm wrong) he's in love with Señora Maria Griselda.

To me, it has never made sense that don Alberto should have given don Rodolfo employment at the hacienda just when don Rodolfo's own irate father dismissed him, calling him a good-for-nothing. But no one pays any attention to me . . .

Alone, flung on her bed still fully dressed, her face sunk in the pillows, that was the way she had found Anita.

She waited a few seconds before calling to her.

Oh the shyness that would always come over her when she had to face Anita!

For with Fred, although he usually kept himself on the defensive, she always felt sure he would end by giving in to her. And even with the taciturn Alberto, she knew that although somewhat ashamed of it, he would eventually show an impulse of confidence and tenderness toward her.

But Anita, the arrogant Anita, never deigned to let her into her intimate life. Ever since she was a small child, she had called her "Ana Maria," delighted when she answered without heeding the lack of respect which was implied in such a young daughter calling her mother by her first name. And later, with what pious haughtiness she had looked down on her from the height of her studies! "She has an exceptional mind, that girl!" that was the phrase with

which everyone had praised Anita ever since her adolescence. And she, her mother, had always felt proud and at the same time intimidated by that extraordinary daughter . . .

She had waited a few seconds before calling to her, but to her amazement, when she did finally call, Anita lifted to her a face half-incredulous, half-delighted. And she had already started a gesture of endearment toward her, when encouraged by that unexpected reception, she had blurted out quickly, stupidly:—

"Anita, I came to get you. We're going away tomorrow."

Then, immediately, Anita had repressed her impulse and become herself again.

"You forget that I'm no longer of an age to be fetched and carried like an object."

She remembers how already discouraged by this first retort, and foreseeing a struggle too harsh for her sensitiveness to bear, she had then begun to plead, to try to persuade.

"Anita, for that insignificant boy, that good-for-nothing, you're making yourself cheap! You who have your life before you, you who can choose the husband you want, you so proud, so intelligent."

"I don't want to be intelligent, I don't want to be proud, and I don't want any other husband. I love Rodolfo and it doesn't matter to me if he is a good-for-nothing. I love him."

"But since *he* doesn't love you any more . . ."

"And what do I care if he doesn't love me. I love him, that's enough and I will marry him even if he comes to hate me later on!"

"Anita, Anita, you spoiled child . . . Do you think your own wishes are all that matter in such a case? Believe me, you will never get anywhere with a man who doesn't love you any more. Anita, come home with me. Don't expose yourself to worse things."

"To what things?"

"Since you will not release Rodolfo from his promise, he may one of these days ask you to release him from his."

"No! Now he can't."

"Why not?" she had asked ingenuously.

"Because now he can't; not if he is a man and a gentleman."

"Anita!" She had looked at her daughter, a surge of blood burning her face. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Just that. That thing you just thought."

"No!" she had shouted, and the bourgeois feeling in her, in all

touching her children, had rebelled with the ancestral rebellion of all the bourgeois women in the world.

“... Oh, he has dared! Your father! and me! ... Oh, the infamous wretch ... !”

“Calm yourself, Mother. It was I who wanted it. He didn't want to ... he didn't want to ...”

Her voice had broken into a sob, and again dropping her head on her pillow, the proud Anita had started to cry like a child.

“He didn't want to. I kept after him and after him, until ... It was the only way to prevent him from leaving me. Now he is mine, now you have to help me ... you'll have to tell him that you know everything, that he must marry me immediately. Because he wants to wait. And I don't want to wait. I don't want to wait ... I adore him ...”

Anita was crying. And she had covered her face with her hands but actually could not cry.

How long did she remain thus, mute and overwhelmed? She does not remember. She only remembers that suddenly, that clock she had first heard when she went upstairs began to sound once more its noisy tick-tock as if it had, along with her, just emerged out of the frozen waters of a long painful stupor. Only then did she get up and walk out of the room, without even looking at her daughter.

Now on the ground floor again, she had opened the door of Alberto's room and walked in mechanically. A very faint odor of perfume floating about made her very quickly remember that this was also Maria Griselda's room.

She heard footsteps in the corridor. It's “she,” she thought, suddenly moved in spite of herself.

But it was not she, it was Zoila arriving breathless.

“My goodness, Señora, they just told me you had arrived. I was in the laundry. And no one to receive you! How pale you look! Don't you feel well?”

“I am tired. And that? What is that? ... those faces glued to the windowpane? Now, they're gone! Who was it trying to look in?”

“Those are the caretaker's children. They come every day to leave flowers on the window sill for the Señora Griselda. When she happens to be in, they even climb the hazelnut tree to be able to see

better inside the room. They say that the Señora-Maria Griselda is even prettier than the Holy Virgin herself.”

“And where is Alberto?” she had asked, deliberately cutting short Zoila's evident enthusiasm.

“Well, he must be ...” Zoila hesitated one moment, then brutally like one making a radical decision: “He must be in the village drinking somewhere. For I prefer to tell you, once for all, don Alberto spends his time drinking now ... he who never even used to taste wine at dinner. It's not even possible to keep servants in this house any more. They're afraid of him ...”

“Marriage's good influence!” she had sneered, cheaply, and with bitterness.

“You always judge recklessly, Señora. Nothing whatever can be said against doña Griselda. She is very good and has to spend most of her time in her room, when she is not out walking by herself, poor child. I have often found her crying. It looks as if don Alberto has come to hate her only because he loves her too much. Dear God, I'm beginning to think that to be so beautiful is a misfortune, like any other.”

As she entered Silvia's room, she found her seated in front of her mirror, wrapped in a loose chiffon negligée.

Her unexpected appearance did not seem to surprise the girl. She scarcely greeted her, so absorbed was she in the contemplation of her own image.

“How lovely you look, Silvia!” she had said, as much from habit as to escape from this disconcerting situation:—Silvia looking at herself in the mirror intently, obstinately, as if she had never seen herself before, and she standing, looking at Silvia.

“Lovely! Do you really think so?” the girl had cried in a harsh voice. “Lovely! No, I thought I was lovely until I met Maria Griselda. You haven't seen her? Maria Griselda is a hundred times more lovely than I!” Silvia's voice broke.

Against the evening darkness, the windowpanes were reflecting the many lighted lamps on her dressing table. From the nearest tree, a chuncho owl was screeching repeatedly its brief, mysterious, soft cry.

“Fred has just told me he is very unhappy and that he adores you, Silvia.”

★
Had sex
to keep a
man.
to loose
honour, meant
to keep a
man

A woman
entirely

insecure

But the girl gave way to bitter laughter.

"What do you think Fred answers when I ask him: 'Who is the loveliest, Maria Griselda or I?'"

"He says, 'You are the loveliest,' of course. I know what Fred thinks."

"No, no, that's not what he says, he answers: 'Both of you are so different.' And then I know, I am sure, he thinks Maria Griselda is the most beautiful."

"But it's you he loves, Silvia!"

"Perhaps, maybe, I don't know. I really don't know what's happening to me. Oh, Señora, I am so unhappy."

And the girl had begun to explain her wretched torment:

Why did Maria Griselda's presence always give her a feeling of inferiority? It was strange. Both were the same age and yet Maria Griselda made her feel shy. It was not that she was proud, no, on the contrary, she was sweet and considerate and very often came and knocked at the door of her room to chat with her. Why then did she bring out that shyness in her? Because of her gestures, perhaps. Those gestures always so harmonious and sure. None of them ever seemed out of place like her own. They never remained in suspense . . . No, she didn't really envy her! Didn't Fred use to say to her: You are blonder than wheat; your skin is as golden and smooth as a ripe peach; you are as tiny and graceful as a squirrel; and many other similar things. But why then, she wanted to know why it was that when she saw Maria Griselda, when she met her narrow eyes of turbid green, why she no longer liked her own blue eyes, as limpid and wide open as stars? And why did it seem so futile to her to have prepared herself for hours in front of her mirror, and why did that so much praised smile in which she delighted to show her small white teeth, why did it now seem so ridiculous to her?

Thus Silvia was talking while from the nearest tree, the chuncho owl continued to screech its brief, mysterious cry, regularly and insidiously.

She still can remember and feel, as if it were yesterday, that sensation of mental and physical suffocation that had pushed her toward the door of the house and made her go out on the terrace looking for a breath of air free from that latent anguish weighing so heavily inside the house.

On the last step of the outer staircase, the toad was still there, lifting to her once again its tremulous little head.

"It is waiting for Maria Griselda. It always climbs up to wait for her when she goes out horseback riding in the afternoon. Sometimes it huddles up in the folds of her riding skirt," Rodolfo quietly explained to her, pushing it delicately with his boot as he went by and up the steps to meet her while apparently on his way back from work.

Rodolfo! she had seen him grow up almost entirely with her own children, frivolous, good-natured and at times even more affectionate toward her than her own sons.

Rodolfo! he kissed her gently, with his usual tact, finding immediately the words that could put her at ease:

"At last you've come, Godmother, it was about time, you know. Maria Griselda will be so delighted to meet you. I wonder why she should have taken such a long walk this afternoon . . . there may be a big storm on the way . . . let's go . . ." he had finally concluded, taking her firmly by the hand with his usual abruptness, ". . . let's go and find her, come along."

And that was how like pursuers of a gazelle in flight, they had started to follow through the forest the tracks of Maria Griselda.

They had first entered on the narrow path leading to the river, a path, Rodolfo had explained to her, traced by Maria Griselda's horse patiently day after day. They had separated the shrubs and leaned over the crevice opening at their feet.

Close, orderly, implacable, like soldiers in line, the trees went down the slope of ferns, until their first row plunged in the mist banked between the steep walls of the canyon below. And from the depth of that sinister ravine rose a strong wet smell, the smell of a forestal beast, the smell of the great river, tossing untiringly its tumultuous back.

And they had begun to walk downhill. Heavy branches of hazelnut trees and frozen copihue-flowers brushed their faces as they passed, while Rodolfo was telling her that with the point of the whiplash she always carried in her hand, Maria Griselda frequently amused herself lifting the bark of certain tree trunks to dislodge the creatures hiding under it: crickets that fled carrying a drop of dew, earth-colored night butterflies, a pair of mating frogs.

And they went down and down the steep winding slope from

where the sound of the river mounted louder and louder; down until they sank into the mist stagnant in the depth of the ravine; there, where birds did not venture, where the light condensed itself, livid and sinister, where the crash of the water roared like a sustained, permanent thunder.

Still another step and they had found themselves at the bottom of the canyon and face to face with the monster.

The vegetation stopped at the edge of a narrow beach of pebbles, as dark and hard as coal. Malcontent in its bed, the river gushed out, dashing furiously its waters filled with whirlpools and black bubbles . . .

The great river!

Rodolfo explained to her that Maria Griselda had no dread of it. He showed her the big rock standing in the middle of the stream on which she was wont to stretch out at full length, the tail of her riding skirt and her long tresses adrift on the water. And he told her how no sooner had her head become alive with tickling and caresses, she would laughingly search her dripping hair to extract from it like a forgotten hairpin some silvery fish, a living gift of the great river.

For the great river was in love with Maria Griselda.

"Maria Griselda, Maria Griselda! . . ." They called her, searched for her, until Rodolfo suggested that they go up again following the path he knew Maria Griselda always took on her way back. And so it was they started to climb the slope, faltering in the shadows now rapidly filling the bottom of the canyon. And the silence of the forest once more came out to meet them.

The first firefly floated before them.

"The first firefly! it always alights on Maria Griselda's shoulder, as if it wanted to guide her!" Rodolfo had explained with sudden tenderness.

And she, finally overcoming all that shyness and weariness which had been oppressing her:

"Rodolfo," she had said, "I've come to find out what is going on between you and Anita. Is it true that you don't love her any more?"

She had asked this cautiously, expecting a noncommittal or evasive answer. But he, with what shamelessness, with what vehemence, he immediately had acknowledged his guilt!

Yes, it was true he no longer loved Anita. And it was true what they were saying, that he was in love with Maria Griselda. But he was not ashamed of it, no, he was not to blame, nor was Maria Griselda, nor anyone else. Only God, assuming that there is a God, was to blame . . . for having created a being so prodigiously beautiful, a being such that when one has known her, one must go on seeing her every day, in order to be able to live.

Oh, to see her! Yet, he would avoid looking at her all at once afraid that the shock might make his heart stop abruptly.

Like one entering cautiously into glacial waters, little by little, he would meet the gaze of her green eyes, the sight of her luminous pallor. And, he would never get tired of seeing her, his desire for her would never be exhausted because that woman's beauty could never be wholly familiar to him. For she changed imperceptibly according to the hour, the light and the mood; and she was ever new, like the foliage of the trees, like the face of the sky, like all that is alive in nature . . . Anita was beautiful too and he really loved her, but . . .

The name of her daughter thus brought into such a confession, offended her in an unexpected way.

Her mind torn between indignation, sorrow and anger made her feel destitute for the time being of all capacity to act wisely and justly. And fearful of betraying herself and losing her daughter's case:

"It's late, let's hurry," she had interrupted dryly.

He did not speak again, as he guided her on the way back through the darkness of the forest.

Only when once again inside the park, the report of a gunshot followed by an immense flurry of frightened wings had come to brush their foreheads:

"They are Maria Griselda's doves! Somebody is killing Maria Griselda's doves!" he had exclaimed, letting go of her hand in order to rush forward.

She had followed him without difficulty through the avenues now illumined by a constant quiver of lightning.

No, Zoila had not lied, or Fred been alarmed in vain; there, on the lawn in front of the house, she saw Alberto, pistol in hand, pursuing Maria Griselda's doves, as if out of his mind.

She saw him bring one down, then another; she saw him rush on

their fluffy bodies but only succeed in imprisoning between his eager palms miserable little remains to which a few feathers soaked in blood were adhering.

"Alberto!" she cried.

"There is always something that escapes out of everything!" he was moaning, as he threw himself in her arms.

"It's just like Maria Griselda!" he suddenly shouted, shaking himself loose. "What's the use of her telling me: I am yours, I am yours! As soon as she moves, I feel her already distant; as soon as she gets dressed, it seems to me she never was mine. Why does she light the lamp just that way? She has a way of lighting the lamp immediately afterwards that makes it seem as if everything that happened had been planned by her long before, frivolously, elaborately."

And Alberto, possessed like all, possessed even more than all the inhabitants of this house, had begun to explain his torment:

Yes, it was in vain that in order to feel secure, he recalled and reminded himself of the many and intimate embraces by which Maria Griselda was bound to him. In vain. No sooner out of his arms, she seemed to live a life of her own, a life that seemed detached and apart from his own physical life. And it was obviously in vain that he would force himself on her, trying once again to impress on her his warmth and his scent. From his desperate embraces, Maria Griselda would emerge once more distant and as if untouched.

"Alberto, Alberto, my son . . ." scandalized and grieved, she was trying to quiet his frenzy, reminding him that she was his mother, while with the help of Fred who had rushed out on hearing the shots, she was pushing him into the house.

But he went on talking and pacing the hall wildly.

Jealousy? Yes, it might be. A strange jealousy! Jealousy of that something in her that always escaped him in every embrace.

Oh, the incomprehensible anguish that tortured him! How to capture, understand and exhaust every one of this woman's gestures! If he could only surround her with a tight net of patience and memory, perhaps he might succeed in understanding and capturing the source of her beauty and of his own anguish. But he cannot, because no sooner does his passionate ardor begin to soften in the contemplation of her round knees, ingenuously placed one behind the other, her arms begin to stretch harmoniously, and he has not

yet apprehended the thousand undulations that this gesture imparts to her slender waist, when . . . No, no, what was the use of having her as his own if . . .

He could not go on. Silvia was coming down the stairs, pale, entangling herself at each step in her loose chiffon negligée.

"Silvia! What's the matter?" Fred barely had time to stammer, when a horribly shrill voice began to issue from that frail body.

"All of them, all, all the same!" cried the strange voice, "All in love with Maria Griselda: Alberto, Rodolfo, and Fred, too! Yes, you too, you too, Fred. You even write poetry to her. Yes, Alberto, now you know it; your brother writes love poems to your wife. He writes them in hiding from me. He thinks I don't know where he keeps them. Señora, I can show them to you, if you don't believe me."

She had not answered, afraid of that disordered and feverish creature, whom one unfortunate word could have thrown into insanity.

"No, Silvia, I am not in love with Maria Griselda," she suddenly heard Fred declare with astonishing serenity. "It is true, however, my whole life has changed since I first met her. Yes, Alberto, it is true, I have written poems to your wife, for because of her, I have at last found my true vocation."

And Fred had begun to recount his first meeting with Maria Griselda:

When, newly married, Silvia and he had arrived unexpectedly at the hacienda, Maria Griselda was not in the house. Eager to meet her at once, they had gone out in search of her, accompanied by Alberto. And that was how one time, in the middle of the forest, he had stayed behind, silent, quite still, almost hearing within his heart the echo of some very light steps. Turning out of the path then, he had parted the foliage haphazardly and . . .

Slender, melancholy and childlike, the end of her riding skirt trailing behind her, he had seen her pass. She was carrying emphatically a yellow flower in her hand as one would carry a golden sceptre, and her horse followed her at a short distance without having to be led by her.

Her narrow eyes, green as the foliage, her serene bearing, her small pale hand! Maria Griselda! He saw her pass.

And through her, through her pure beauty, all at once, he seemed to touch an infinite and wondrous beyond: algae, waters,

warm sands often visited by the moon, roots that decay silently growing deeper into the slime, and his own grief-stricken heart.

From the very depth of his being began to issue ecstatic exclamations, music never heard before; phrases and notes until then sleeping his blood and which were now rising and falling triumphantly with his breathing and with the regularity of his breathing.

And he knew of a joy at once solemn and light, without name, without origin; and of a quiet madness, rich in conflicting sensations.

And he understood what the soul is and felt it within himself . . . timid, vacillating and anxious; and he accepted human life for what it is: ephemeral, mysterious, useless, with at the end its magical death that leads perhaps to nothing.

And he sighed, for he knew at last what it was to sigh, and he had to raise his two hands to his breast, take a few steps and throw himself on the ground between the tall roots.

And meanwhile, in the growing darkness they were calling for him, searching for him a long time—did they remember?—he, with his forehead buried in the grass, was writing his first poetry.

Thus Fred was speaking while Silvia was slowly retreating, without a word, growing paler and paler every second.

Then, oh my God, who could have foreseen that gesture in such a spoiled child, at once so pretty and foolish?

Quickly taking possession of the pistol which Alberto a moment before had carelessly laid on the table, she had pressed the barrel to her temple, and without even closing her eyes, courageously, as men do, she had pulled the trigger . . .

Once convinced that all was over, Fred had closed her eyes which remained wide open as if scared, then Rodolfo had picked her up and carried her to that same sofa in front of the fireplace where she used to lie down every evening at that same hour. Zoila had washed her forehead soaked with blood, Anita had thrown over her that ermine cloak, a wedding gift of her rich godmother, laying there always ready to cover up the knees of her indolent, pretty goddaughter . . . And later, oh what a ghastly thing! as a frightened little servant was lighting as usual the fire it was her duty to light every evening at the same hour, Fred had come to sit by the side of his dead wife, had sought her hand which he had picked up

and was holding in his own . . . as he had been in the habit of doing every evening at that same place, at that same hour.

And while a great silence had fallen over this beginning of a tragic vigil, she, Ana Maria, had all of a sudden become conscious of the responsibilities it was now time for her to assume. She left the room, went out to meet the peons gathered in front of the house awaiting news, spoke of an "accident," sent to the village for the doctor and the mayor, thank God, honest men and old friends.

Only after she had written several telegrams and dictated them herself over the telephone, did she remember Maria Griselda's existence, Alberto's monstrous attitude . . .

For to what extent that tragic death would harm his wife was the only thing which had concerned Alberto from the very first moment; it was the impulse that made him rush not toward the stricken Silvia but toward the door of his own bedroom in order to shield Maria Griselda from all contact with the tragedy she had so unwittingly provoked.

She remembers as if it were yesterday the pent-up hate that was in her heart as she went up to knock at the door of that room where was that woman she wanted above all to curse. Alberto had opened to her, pale and undone. The humble outburst of gratitude he had shown, seeing her there on the threshold of his room!

"Mother, how good of you to have come! Maria Griselda! she fainted . . . for such a long time . . . I didn't know what to do . . . She's better now, I think. She's resting, sleeping, I don't know, come . . ."

She had entered the room, and approached stealthily toward the edge of the big bed.

Maria Griselda! From the pillows her face emerged serene.

Never, oh never, had she seen eyebrows so perfectly arched! It was as if some slim dark swallow had opened its wings over the eyes of her daughter-in-law and had remained there very still in the center of her white forehead.

The eyelashes! Black, dense, lustrous eyelashes!—in what generous and pure blood they must have plunged their roots to grow with such violence!

And the nose, the small proud nose, its nostrils so delicately open. And the compressed arch of her enchanting mouth. And the frail slender neck. And the shoulders rounded like ripe fruit. And . . .

In order to help her out of her fainting spell, Alberto had just taken off her blouse, her riding skirt.

Oh, her small firm breasts! so close to her body, with that fine sky-blue vein winding between them. And her round smooth hips. And her long, long legs!

"She's opening her eyes!" Alberto had announced suddenly.

Maria Griselda's eyes! Of how many colors was composed the uniform color of her eyes, of how many different greens their dark green? There is nothing more minute, more complicated than a pupil, than the pupil of Maria Griselda!

A circle of gold, one of clear green, another of turbid green, another very black, and again a circle of gold, and another clear green, and . . . together: Maria Griselda's eyes; those eyes of a green, like the moss that sticks to the tree trunks dampened by Winter; those eyes in the depths of which twinkled and multiplied the flame of the candles. All that resplendent water held there, as if by a miracle! With a pinpoint, to prick those pupils! It would have been like the splitting of a star. She was sure that some kind of a golden mercury would have instantly gushed out, like lightning, to burn the fingers of the criminal who would have dared . . .

"Maria Griselda, this is my mother," Alberto had explained to his wife, helping her now to raise herself on her pillows.

The green glance had caught hers and quivered, clearing up by seconds . . . And then, all at once, she had felt a weight on her heart.

It was Maria Griselda laying her head on her breast.

Amazed, she had remained very still. Very still, yet held by some strange, disconcerting, overwhelming emotion.

"Forgive me," a grave voice had suddenly said.

Yes, "forgive me" had been Maria Griselda's first words.

And a cry, out of the very depth of her innermost tenderness, instantly had escaped from her:

"Forgive what? Are you to blame for being so beautiful?"

"Oh Señora, if you only knew! . . ."

She does not remember very well in what terms Maria Griselda had then begun to complain of her beauty as of a sickness, as of a curse.

Always, always it has been like this, she said. Ever since she was a small child, she had had to suffer on account of her beauty. Her

sister did not love her and her parents as if to make up to her sister for all the beauty they had given her, had always kept for the other child all their affection, all their devotion. As for her, no one had ever petted her. And no one could ever be happy with her:

Neither Anita who could have been like a sister to her, nor Rodolfo, nor Fred and Silvia, oh poor Silvia! . . . and Alberto who loved her with that tormented, insatiable love that seemed to search for something through her, beyond her, and left her so lonely!

If she only could have had a son! That would have made Alberto feel sure of her. But no, she was chosen, she seemed predestined to a solitary beauty which nature for some unknown reason would not allow her to prolong. And in its cruelty, destiny did not even grant her the small privileges always given everyone else. For her parents did not resemble her at all, or her grandparents; and in the old family portraits, she could never find any common feature, any expression that could have made her recognize herself as a link in a human chain. Oh what loneliness was hers! Such loneliness!

She remembers, she once more remembers that experience, the strangest in her life . . . Yes, she remembers how all her hatred for Maria Griselda, that hatred she had thought invincible and final, had faded away while she was there talking to her. She remembers the warmth, the involuntary gratitude she had felt rising in her at each one of the gestures with which Maria Griselda enveloped her, at each one of the words she spoke to her. It was a kind of mellowness, a kind of intimate satisfaction, very much like that awakened in us by the spontaneous and unreasoning confidence given us by a shy animal or an unknown child.

For how could one possibly resist the pure beauty of Maria Griselda? She recalls having at that moment compared it in thought with the daring, healthy beauty of her daughter Anita, with the blond beauty of poor Silvia . . . Both girls were indeed beautiful but their beauty was like a partly conscious means of expression they might possibly have changed to another, while Maria Griselda's beauty, that beauty seemingly ignorant of itself was never a weapon but a rising tide, something inherent in her and inseparably bound to her being.

Maria Griselda! She can still see her wearing her beauty discreetly and modestly, like a soft hidden lamp that lights with a se-

cret charm her glance, her walk, her slightest gesture, the gesture of sinking her hand into a crystal box and taking out the comb with which she dresses her black hair . . . the gesture of winding that clock she had heard resounding in the corridors as if it were the very heart of the house; that clock that had marked with its relentless tick-tock every second of that disconcerting, far-off tragedy!

THIRTEEN

And you, Anita, proud girl, here you are by my bedside, with this man who does not love you and whom you coerced and won! This man who may betray you some day and confide in some other woman: "I married her because I had to."

To tremble for the past, for the present, for all they might possibly be telling you about Rodolfo, for the slightest change in his attitude which might threaten the happiness you should be building up for yourself, day after day; to pretend, to smile, to struggle for the conquest of a little bit of soul every day . . . Such will be your life.

Rodolfo! Here he is at your side, helping you with the candles and with the flowers, holding your hand as you wish him to.

To go through an endless number of acts foreign to his desire, pouring into them a false enthusiasm while a thirst he knows to be insatiable consumes him from within . . . Such will be his life.

Oh, my poor Anita, such is perhaps the fate of all of us: this evasion, this losing of that real self we cover up with an infinity of trifles having the appearance of vital things!

FOURTEEN

The day burns, hours, minutes, seconds.

"Arise, come!"

"No."

Tired, she longs nevertheless to rid herself of that last particle of consciousness which keeps her bound to life, she longs to let herself be borne backwards, down into the deep and soft abyss she feels there below.

But an unsatisfied anxiety prevents her from ridding herself entirely of that last bond.

Meanwhile the day burns, hours, minutes, seconds.

FIFTEEN

This lean, swarthy man whose lips are trembling as if he were speaking. Make him go away! She does not want to hear him.

"Ana Maria, come back!"

"Come back to forbid me once more the entrance of your room. Come back to shun me or wound me, to take life and happiness away from me day after day. But come back, come back!"

"You! dead!"

"You, in a brief second incorporated into that implacable race, disdainful and motionless, ever watching us exerting ourselves!"

"You, minute by minute, drawn down a little deeper into the past. And the live substances of which you were made, separating, slipping away through different channels, like rivers that can never again turn back in their course. Never!"

"Ana Maria, if you only knew how much, how much I have loved you!" . . .

This man! Why does he still want to impose his love on her even now that she is in the shroud!

Isn't it strange a love can humiliate, can do nothing but humiliate.

Fernando's love always humiliated her. It made her feel poorer. It was not the sickness which blighted his skin and embittered his character or even his disagreeable intelligence, positive and haughty, that disturbed her as it did others, no, she despised him because he was unhappy, because he had no luck.

In what way, however, did he succeed in impressing himself on her life until he became to her a necessary evil? He knows it very well; by making himself her confidant.

Her confidences! What remorse always overwhelmed her, afterwards!

She felt obscurely that Fernando thrived on her anger, on her sadness; that while she was speaking, he was analyzing, calculating, enjoying her disappointments, believing that they might perhaps

drive her on until eventually she would fall in his arms. She felt that with her grievances and her complaints she was feeding the secret envy that man harbored against her husband. For he pretended to despise her husband, yet he envied him; he envied precisely the faults he found in him.

Fernando! All through those long years, so many nights, while facing the terror of a lonely evening, she had called him to her side in front of the fire as the heavy logs in the fireplace were beginning to burn. In vain she had wanted to talk about trivial things. With the flame and with the night the venom mounted, went past her throat, up to her lips; and she would begin to speak.

She spoke and he listened. He never gave her a word of solace, offered a solution or allayed a doubt, never. But he listened, listened attentively to what her children used to call her jealousies, her whims.

After the first confidence, the second, the third would flow naturally, and also the next ones, but then almost against her will.

Afterwards it was impossible for her to control her intemperance. She had admitted him into the intimacy of her life and she was not strong enough to cast him out.

But she did not know that she could hate him until that night when he in turn had confided in her.

The coldness with which he told her of his awakening next to the already inert body of his wife, the coldness with which he spoke of the tube of veronal found empty on her bedside table!

For several hours he had slept beside a dead woman and her contact had not marked his flesh with the slightest tremor.

"Poor Inés," he said, "I still cannot explain the reason for her decision. She did not seem sad or depressed. There was nothing about her that seemed unusual either. Yet from time to time, I remember having noticed her staring at me as if she were seeing me for the first time. She left me. What does it matter to me if it wasn't to go off with a lover! She left me. Love has always eluded me, trickled away from me like water trickling through closed hands. Yes, Ana Maria, neither of us was born under a star propitious to love . . ."

He spoke, and she blushed as if he had treacherously slapped her full in the face.

What right did he have to consider himself her equal?

As in a sudden flash, she had then seen him and seen herself,

both sitting together by the fireplace. Two beings outside the realm of love, outside the realm of life, holding hands and sighing, remembering, envying. Two miserable wretches, and because misery is always drawn to itself, perhaps, some day, these two . . . Oh no! Not that! Never, never that!

After that night, many times it happened that she hated him. Yet, she could never escape him.

She tried, yes, many times. But Fernando would smile indulgently at the sudden coolness in her attitude and would accept calmly her vexations, well realizing that she was struggling in vain against the strange feeling that impelled her toward him, knowing that she would very soon again fall on his breast, intoxicated by the need of new confidences.

Her confidences! How often he too wanted to avoid them! Antonio and the children; the children and Antonio. They alone occupied the thoughts of that woman, alone could lay claim to her tenderness, to her sorrow.

How much, how much indeed, he must have loved her to have listened for so many years to her insidious words, to have allowed her thus gently and laboriously to lacerate his heart.

And yet he could not remain weak and humble to the end.

"Ana Maria, your lies! I should also have pretended to believe them. Your husband, jealous of you, of our friendship!

"Why not have accepted this innocent invention of yours if it flattered your vanity? No, I preferred to lose ground in your affection rather than appear credulous in your eyes.

"It was not so much my bad luck as it was my tactlessness that kept you from loving me.

"I see you bending over the edge of the fireplace, throwing ashes on the dying embers, I see you gathering up your knitting, closing the piano, folding up the newspapers scattered about the room. I see you coming to me, disheveled and plaintive:

"Good night, Fernando. I am sorry to have spoken to you again about all this. The truth is that Antonio never loved me. Then, why protest? Why struggle? Good night.' And your hand would clutch mine in an interminable farewell and, in spite of yourself, your eyes would question me, begging for a denial of your last words.

"And I, envious, petty and selfish, would go away without moving my lips, except to murmur 'Good night.'

"However, much should be forgiven me, for my love forgave you much.

"Until I met you, whenever my pride was wounded, I instantly ceased being in love and never forgave. My wife could have told you that, she who received from me neither a reproach, nor a remembrance, nor a flower on her grave.

"For you, only for you, Ana Maria, have I known the love that humbles itself, the love that is able to resist offense and can forgive offense.

"For you, only for you!

"Perhaps the hour of pity had sounded at last for me, that hour in which we commune even with our enemies, knowing that sooner or later they will be called upon to experience a fate as miserable as our own.

"Perhaps did I love in you that pathetic beginning of decline. Never did any beauty move me as much as yours on its wane.

"I loved your fading complexion which brought out the freshness of your lips and the splendor of your girlish eyebrows as smooth and glossy as a fringe of new velvet. I loved your mature body in which the slenderness of the neck and the ankles acquired by contrast a twofold and touching seduction. But I do not wish to deny you any of your merits. I was charmed also by your intelligence because it was the voice of your sensitiveness and of your intuition.

"How often did I ask you to define more exactly some exclamation or comment?

"You remained silent, angered, assuming that I was making fun of you.

"But no, Ana Maria, you always thought me stronger than I really was. I admired you. I admired your calm intelligence the roots of which went deep down into the concealed parts of your being.

"Do you know what makes this room so pleasant and intimate? The reflection and the shadow of that tree so close to the window. Houses should never be higher than trees,' you would say.

"Or again: 'Quiet, Fernando, what silence! The air is like crystal. On afternoons like this, I am almost afraid to move. Who knows how far a gesture might lead? Perhaps, if I should lift my hand, I might bring about in some other world the shattering of a star.'

"Yes, I admired you and I understood you.

"Oh, Ana Maria, if you only had wanted to, out of your sorrow

and of my misfortune we might have built a friendliness, a life; and many would have enviously gathered around our union as they gather around true love, around happiness.

"If you had wanted to! But you did not even take notice of my patience. You never even thanked me for my kindness. Never.

"You felt resentment against me because I appreciated you and knew you better than anyone else, I, the man you did not love."

Poor Fernando, how he trembles! He can hardly stand. He is going to faint.

A boy shares the fear of the shrouded woman. Fred approaches and puts his hand on the sick man's shoulder, and speaks to him in a low voice. But Fernando shakes his head and somehow refuses to leave the room.

Then she observes how Fred leads him toward an easy chair and bends down solicitously. And the tender past that the boy's presence pours into her heart flows over from this picture of Fernando in the arms of Fred, the favorite son.

She remembers that as a boy Fred was afraid of mirrors and that in his dreams he used to speak an unknown language.

She remembers the summer of the great drought and the afternoon, about three o'clock, when Fernando had said, "Shall we go out to see the land I bought yesterday?"

The children climbed into the carriage without waiting a moment.

Antonio, as usual, declared that it was unpleasant to go out at that hour.

But she, because she did not wish to disappoint Fernando and also in order to make sure that the children would not expose their heads to the sun, had accepted the unwelcome invitation.

"We'll be back long before dinner," she called to her husband as the coach drew away. But Antonio who was leaning back in the rocking chair, smoking, did not even deign to wave his hand.

And thus, silent and hurt, she had had to endure the first ten minutes of dusty plain.

Fred's dogs, that pack composed of all the stray dogs on the hacienda, followed the carriage for a while, then lagged behind, lapping the muddy water of a ditch.

The children moved about incessantly, shouting, singing, asking questions. Oppressed by the heat, she smiled without answering

them. And the carriage continued on its way, between a double row of owls gravely poised on the fence posts, watching them go by.

"Uncle Fernando, I want an owl. Here, take your gun and kill an owl for me. Why not? Why not, Uncle Fernando? I want an owl. That one. No, not that one, this one . . ."

And Fernando gave in as he always did when Anita would hang on his sleeve and look into his eyes. For fear of falling into disfavor with the girl, he never failed to gratify her evil desires. He called her "Princess," and used to join her in stoning the little lizards that ran horizontally on the garden walls.

Now he stopped the horses, pressed the gun to his shoulder and took aim at the owl standing on top of a post, watching them confidently.

A sharp report suddenly stopped the immense throbbing of the crickets, and the bird dropped, instantly dead, at the foot of the post. Anita ran to pick it up. The song of the crickets rose again like a scream. And they resumed their way.

On the little girl's knees, the owl kept its eyes open; round eyes, yellow and wet, fixed like a threat. But, undaunted, the child returned the stare:

"It's not quite dead. It's looking at me. Look, it's closing its eyes, little by little . . . Mama, Mama, its eyelids close from the bottom!"

But she was scarcely listening, her attention drawn to a somber violet mass which from the far end of the horizon was advancing toward the carriage.

"Children, put down the hood! A storm is coming!"

It was only a matter of a moment, and a dark wind was sweeping over them dry twigs, pebbles and dead insects.

Once they had successfully passed through it, the old framework of the carriage was trembling all over and the sky was spread out all gray. The silence was so complete that one felt a desire to stir it, as one would stir some very dense water.

Abruptly, they felt as if they had been dropped down to another climate, another time, another region.

The horses were now racing, terrified, across a plain that none of them remembered ever having seen before. And as they dashed forth, they dragged the carriage up to a farmhouse in ruins.

Standing on a threshold without doors, a man seemed to be waiting for them.

"The road to San Roberto, please?"

The peon—was he a peon?—he had boots on and a whip in his hand—looked at them queerly, waited a second, then answered:

"Keep to the right. You'll find a bridge. Then turn to the left."

"Thanks."

The horses again resumed their disquieting run. And then Fred cautiously leaning towards her had spoken in a very low tone:

"Mama, did you notice the man's eyes? They were just like those of the . . ."

Appalled, she had turned to her daughter and shouted:

"Throw away that owl; throw it away I said, it will spot your dress."

The bridge? How many hours did they wander in search of it? She does not know.

She only remembers that at some point, she had ordered: "Let's go back."

Silently Fernando obeyed, and then began that unending return journey during which night closed in on them.

The plain, then a hill, the plain again, and then another hill. And still again the plain.

"I'm hungry," mumbled Alberto, timidly.

Anita was sleeping, leaning against Fernando, and Fernando's delight was so evident that she tried not to look at him, suddenly overcome by a strange shyness.

Abruptly, one of the horses slipped and fell.

There was a brief silence, then, as if they had suddenly come to life, the children threw themselves out of the carriage, bursting forth with shouts and cries of joy.

At last Fernando spoke. "Ana Maria, I lost my way hours ago," he said.

The children went scampering about in the darkness of the field. "It must have rained here," yelled Alberto sunk knee-deep in a quagmire.

Urged by Fernando the horse straightened itself up, staggered, fell down, and rose again, neighing low.

"Ana Maria, we'd better not attempt to go on. The horses are worn out. The carriage hasn't any lanterns. Let's wait until morning."

"Antonio!" she had moaned, feeling suddenly very weak.

Instantly Fernando clapped his hands to bring the scattered children together.

"We're leaving! We're leaving! And Fred? Where's Fred? Fred! Fred!"

"Here, here," shouted a voice, while at a distance a point of light shone and went out.

"He has taken the flashlight and is playing 'fire-fly,'" his brother explained.

She remembers how she stepped down and rushed angrily into the brambles, stumbling in her high heels.

"Fred, we're leaving. What are you doing there?"

Standing still, facing a shrub and holding up its branches, Fred, as his only answer, had mysteriously made a signal to her. And as if letting her in on a secret, he focused the circle of light on the muddy ground.

Then she saw, close to the earth, an enormous cineraria, a cineraria of a dark, intense, dark-blue color, trembling slightly.

For the space of a second the boy and she stood with their eyes fixed on the flower, which seemed to be breathing.

Then all at once Fred turned off the light and the ghastly thing sank back into the shadows.

Why did that cold-blue image remain with her? Why did her flesh tighten and shiver as she walked back to the carriage leaning on Fred's shoulder? Why did she say softly to Fernando: "You're right. It's dangerous to go on. Let's wait till morning."

As if they had heard an order, the children spread out the blankets. She then, as in a dream, saw her son Alberto drawing close to her, giving Fred a bump on the head so that he could sleep next to her all by himself under the same covering.

Never, no never, did she forget the terror which gripped them when they woke up in the morning.

One more step and all of them that night would have been swept away. The carriage was standing on the brink of a cliff. And down below, enclosed between two slopes, they could glimpse, running black and deep . . . a river.

After that memorable day she had watched over Fred uneasily, without knowing why. But the child seemed unconscious of this sixth sense which linked him to the earth and to that which is secret.

And even when he grew up into an insolent and robust boy she continued to take care of him as if he were a very delicate creature. Only because suddenly and at the most unexpected moment he

would look at her with the childish, grave eyes of the mysterious boy of yesterday.

"Don't deny it," Antonio often said to her, "he is your favorite, you forgive him everything." And she smiled. It was true she forgave him everything, even the rudeness with which he freed himself when she would bend down to kiss him.

And how could she forget that little hand which for three days and three nights in a room at the hospital had clutched hers without relaxation. For three days, she had not eaten and for three nights she had only dozed seated beside the bed, tormented by this avid hand of Fred's transmitting to her his suffering, forcing her to sink with him into nightmare and suffocation.

Little by little, without realizing it, she had become accustomed to Fernando's vexatious presence.

She loathed the desire burning in his eyes, yet that spontaneous daily homage in a sense flattered her.

Now she remembers Beatriz, her daughter's most intimate friend. She remembers her pathetic contralto voice. The girl scarcely knew how to sing, but there was in her throat a certain velvety note, at once grave and tender, which when she accompanied her at the piano she could make her prolong at will, amplify, extinguish softly.

She remembers the past Autumn with its moonless nights, strident and clear.

We had barely risen from the table when you, Fernando, hurried out with a cigarette to your lips, hoping that I would follow you and lean by your side against the balustrade on the terrace. But instead I ran to settle myself at the piano. And Beatriz began to sing.

For one, two, three *lieder* you stood waiting for me, then sat down on the iron bench, your back against the vines on the wall.

Far into the drawing room floated the smoke of the cigarettes you kept lighting one from the end of the other without regard for your health.

But your nervousness did not matter to me, no, not at all, nor the dampness the honeysuckle breathed on your shoulders. Tomorrow you would be sick, of course, but was I to blame because you stubbornly insisted on waiting for me in the cold; was I to blame because the music thrilled me a hundred times more than your company?

She said that she does not care if he is there at her home or not. But she does care, ~~as~~ as one day she found out that it was not sitting on the iron bench like she always thought. She just never had a...

Many times, immediately after the last chord, I would slip up to my room without waiting for you, denying you even the kindness of a good night.

It never occurred to me to think that this was unnecessary cruelty. I believed your presence or your absence left me totally indifferent.

One night, however, between one song and the next, I peered out on the terrace.

I found no one on the iron bench.

Why had you gone away without telling us? And at what moment? Not even in the distance could be heard the gallop of your horses.

I remember my annoyance. I took a few steps, breathed heavily and lifted my eyes. There was in the sky such a swarming of stars that I lowered them again almost immediately, feeling dizzy. Then I saw the garden, the pastures crudely flooded in a direct, uniform light and I felt cold.

Facing the piano again, a great discouragement came over me.

No longer did the music and Beatriz' singing hold any interest for me. No longer did I find any meaning in anything I was doing.

Oh, Fernando, you had caught me in your snares. From that time on, in order to feel myself alive, I needed your constant suffering by my side.

And how many times during my illness did I not raise myself in bed, for the pleasure of hearing you hovering behind that door I had forbidden to you.

SIXTEEN

Poor Fernando! Now he comes near to her and touches her hair timidly; that long hair of a dead woman, grown longer even that night.

The blinds are suddenly opened. Gray light of daybreak or twilight?

Not a shadow is now possible in the room in that ugly light. Things stand out harshly. Something flutters about heavily among the flowers and alights on the sheet, something abject . . . a fly.

Fernando has lifted his head. At last he will attain what he has so long desired.

But why does he look at her fixedly and not kiss her? Why?

Just then she sees her own feet. She sees them unattractively stretched out and placed there at the end of the bedspread like two things alien to her body.

And because in life she had herself many times attended the dead, the woman in the shroud understands. She understands that in the space of one fleeting moment her nature has changed. She understands that on raising his eyes, Fernando had found a wax statue in the place where the coveted woman was lying.

Those who enter the room now move quietly about, indifferent to this woman's body, livid and remote, whose flesh seems made of a substance different from theirs.

Only Fernando holds his gaze fixed on her; and his trembling lips seem almost to articulate his thoughts.

"Ana Maria, can it be possible! Your death brings me some kind of peace.

"Your death seems to have uprooted in me that restlessness which kept me, a man of fifty, by day and by night, running after your smile, answering your many calls as a woman of leisure.

"No longer on cold winter nights will my poor horses drag between your hacienda and mine that sulky with a sick man inside of it, shivering with cold and bad humor. I will not have to bear any longer the anguish into which a phrase, a reproach of yours, a petty attitude of mine plunged me.

"I needed rest so much, Ana Maria. Your death gives me rest!

"From today on I shall no longer be concerned with your problems but with the work of my farm, with my political interests. Free from your sarcasms and from my own thoughts, I shall lie down to rest several hours a day, as my health requires. I shall find interest in reading a book, in conversing with friends; I shall enjoy my pipe and a new brand of tobacco.

"Yes, I shall again enjoy the humble pleasures that life has not yet taken away from me and that my love for you managed to poison at their source.

"I shall sleep again, Ana Maria, sleep until morning is well along, as those sleep who are not hurried by anyone, or anything. For me, no more will there be any joy but no bitterness either.

“Yes, I am glad. I need no longer defend myself against some new sorrow every day.

“You knew I was selfish, didn’t you? But you did not know how far my selfishness could go. Perhaps I desired your death, Ana Maria.”

◆

SEVENTEEN

“Arise, come!”

“Where?”

“Come!”

This sudden cold. This sudden silence! A bridge white and heavy with snow through which something, someone, drags her.

And there she is now entering into this other secret corridor through which death draws her to its center.

A gentle rustle. The rustle of the snow that falls and falls, down from the sky, fluttering through the crystalline air with a buzzing of phantom bees.

And now a forest.

She penetrates into a petrified thicket, its trees bristling with water drops, pierced by stars and white frost. Now and again, beneath the gust of a cold eerie breeze, their branches clash with a sound of shattering crystals. Now and again, their trunks creak as if bored from inside their skeleton by icy worms of glass.

And now another bridge that leads to a vast plain covered with snow.

Oh! the sad blue magic of snow! Here the earth seems to have swallowed up the moon, and the immense lighted space sheds a kind of eternal silence.

And she understands that on the stairway leading down to earth, one of the last steps is the step of silence . . .

Oh! to cross that bridge and to stretch out full length on the snow on the other side, so that seconds, minutes, hours, days and years of silence might fall and fall on her face, on her limbs, on her tired heart!

But no, within her heart an earthly image endures intact; a sorrowful longing rebellion against eternity, which impels her to re-

turn to the surface of life, to reintegrate herself once more in her shrouded body, stretched out between the two wavering tapers.

Meanwhile, the day burns hours, minutes, seconds.

◆

EIGHTEEN

Quite late in the afternoon, the man she has been waiting for, finally arrives.

As everyone moves away from around her bed, she realizes he is in the house and perhaps in the adjoining room.

For a time, which seems unending to her, nothing disturbs the silence.

Then suddenly, she knows her husband is there, leaning heavily against the side of the door.

They have left him all by himself, lord and master of this death. And there he stands, motionless, gathering strength to face it with dignity.

She then begins to stir the ashes of her memory, and through them recedes to a very far-off time, to an immense, silent, sad city, to a house where she had arrived on a certain night.

At what time? She could not say.

Already, on the train, tired out by the long journey, she had rested her head on Antonio’s shoulder. The bouquet of orange blossoms pinned to her muff exhaled a sugary fragrance which made her slightly dizzy and kept her from paying attention to the things her young husband was whispering to her.

But, did it matter? Was he not merely repeating things he had already told her once, twice, and many times?

. . . that she was knitting, doing nothing but her knitting on the glass porch of her house opening out on the garden . . . and that fate had willed that his property, that black, wild forest adjoining her hacienda, did not have a single open path, and as he was going through on a road her father permitted him to use, he had had occasion to admire her, evening after evening, for a year . . . that a heavy knot of black tresses was binding back her head, her little pale forehead . . . that in the Spring, as if to touch her cheek, a tree had reached into the veranda, its branches laden with flowers and bees . . . that it was then easy for him to spy on her; that he did not

The
between
life & death

even need to get off his horse . . . that scarcely had Winter shortened the days, he had gathered up courage and dared to lean his forehead against the windowpanes and, for a long time, out of the darkness of night, he would lose himself in the contemplation of the lamp, of the flames in the fireplace and of that silent girl who was knitting there, stretched out on a long straw rocking chair. Frequently, as if she had felt him there hiding in the darkness, she had lifted her eyes and smiled absent-mindedly. Her pupils were the color of honey and always cast the same lazy, gentle glance. The snow once fluttered over his intruder's shoulders; in vain did it weigh down the brim of his hat and stick to his eyelashes; already hopelessly in love, he had stayed on in spite of everything, taking delight in that smile that was not directed at him . . .

The bouquet of orange blossoms pinned to her muff! Its sickly aroma that made her drowsy was depriving her of the strength to react and cry out to him: "You are mistaken. That sweetness, that laziness of mine was deceptive. If you had only pulled out the thread of my knitting, if you had only undone it, stitch by stitch . . . in each one was entangled a tempestuous thought and a name I shall never forget."

In that cold bridal chamber, when coming out of her first sleep, how many times had she tried to pierce the thick veil of darkness which clung to her eyes?

Her heart throbbed fearfully. The darkness was so black! Could it be she had gone blind?

She stretched out her arms, groping nervously around, ready to jump out of bed, choking, when a fiery hand placed at her breast would draw her back again. And as if it had touched an open wound, the gesture of that imperious hand made her feel weak and plaintive each time.

She remembers how she had lain motionless, hoping at first to avert, then to discourage by her impassivity the amorous assault and how she had kept still, even to the last final kiss.

But on a certain night something happened, something she had never known before.

It was as if from the very depth of her flesh a seething shiver was born which with each caress would begin to rise, to grow, to envelop her in rings up to the roots of her hair, until it clutched her by

the throat, cut short her breathing and shook her, casting her finally, exhausted and sobered, upon the disordered bed.

Pleasure! So then, this was pleasure! This quivering, this immense flap of wings and this falling back joined in the same shame!

Poor Antonio, how great was his shock at her almost immediate repulse! Never, never did he know to what extent she hated him every night at that moment.

Never did he know how night after night the frantic girl he held in his arms clenched her teeth with rage trying to ward off the urgent shiver. Never did he know that she was struggling not only against his embraces but against the tremor which night after night those embraces made inexorably rise in her flesh.

It's dawn, she thought, after the maid had opened the blinds on the first morning of her marriage, so scant was the light that penetrated into the cold room.

Nevertheless she heard her husband calling her from outside "Get up."

She recalls, as if it were today, the narrow flowerless garden, carpeted with somber moss and the inky water pool on the surface of which was outlined her own image wrapped in a long white dressing gown.

Poor Antonio, what was he saying? "It's a mirror, a big mirror for you to comb your hair in from the balcony."

Alas, to be forever combing her hair in that desolate dawning light!

Distressed, she looked at the landscape reflected upside down at her feet. Some very high walls. A house of greenish stone. She and her husband as if suspended between two chasms: the sky, and the sky in the water.

"Lovely, isn't it? Look, break it and it comes together again . . ."

Always laughing, Antonio had swung his arm and violently hurled a pebble which hit there below, striking his bride right on the forehead.

Thousands of phosphorescent snakes burst in the pool and the landscape within twisted and broke.

She remembers. Clutching at the wrought-iron balustrade she had closed her eyes, shaken by a childish fear.

"The end of the world. It must be like that. I have seen it."

Hated the mood

Her new house.

That uncomfortable, sumptuous house where Antonio's parents had died and where he himself was born, her new home; she remembers having hated it from the very moment she went through the front door.

How different from the pavilion of fragrant wood with its lighted interior inviting one to spy through the windowpanes!

Perhaps it bore some resemblance to her grandmother's old house in the provincial city where she had passed her early childhood, where she had lived in the Winter, where she had come out socially.

But where could be found the billiard room, the sewing room, the garden fragrant with mint?

Not even a single fireplace here. And horror! the mirror in the hall cracked from top to bottom! Large drawing rooms with furniture since always buried in slip covers.

She remembers how she wandered from room to room searching in vain for some corner where she would like to stay; and she would lose herself in the corridors; on the splendidly carpeted stairways, her foot would strike against the brass rim of each step.

She could not find her way, she could not adapt herself.

Invariably, as the evening was beginning to fall, Antonio would settle his wife in the back of the coupé, would draw a fur rug over her knees and lean back at her side.

But never did they reach the house of the paralyzed godmother dozing by the silver brazier. And every afternoon the old survivor of that almost extinguished family waited for them in vain beside the tea already served—and she went down to rest with her people without having known the woman who was to continue her race.

"Let's go tomorrow," the enamored husband would sigh when the coach had scarcely cleared the gate. "Today let me look at you, let me make love to you." And they would drive about at random.

Thus, newly married, she had become acquainted with that immense, silent, sad city.

At the end of its narrow streets, one could always see the steep, craggy mountains. The city was ringed in granite as if sunk in a depression of the high Cordillera, isolated even from the wind.

And she, accustomed to the eternal rustle of the wheat and of the

woods, to the clatter of the river striking the stones set up against the stream, was beginning to feel afraid of this absolute and total silence which was causing her to wake up suddenly in the middle of the night.

She was haunted by the image of the world she had seen shattered in the pool on the first day. That silence seemed to her a presage of catastrophe.

Perhaps unknown to all, a volcano was there close by, waiting, watching for the moment of explosion and destruction.

She tried then to seek refuge in something familiar to her, in some gesture, in some memory.

She could no longer recognize her body now dressed in new clothes, her hair badly done. That Zoila, why had she brought her up to be so helpless? Why hadn't she even taught her how to do her own hair?

Day by day, she postponed the desire to open her bags, to look for photographs, for personal objects, for some kind of friendly belonging. The cold, an unprecedented cold, was making her cowardly and without any initiative; her benumbed fingers were not even capable of tying a ribbon.

She would try to remember everything she had left behind, only a few months ago. She would close her eyes trying to evoke her warm room but could only see it in the disorder in which it had been left by her sudden departure; the great reception hall where the crystal drops trembled in the chandeliers and where, with her tresses gathered together for the first time, she had danced madly all one night until dawn, but she could only recall it in that gray afternoon when her father had said to her: "Child, kiss your fiancé." She had then obediently approached this man so handsome . . . and so rich; had stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

She remembered that as she drew away, she had been impressed by the serious face of her grandmother, and by her father's trembling hands. She remembered having thought of Zoila and of her cousins whom she suspected of eavesdropping at the door. She also remembered having suddenly felt the solicitude with which they had surrounded her for so many years.

And now, already, she was incapable of evoking anything but the fear which had come over her from that moment on, the an-

guish which grew with the days and with Ricardo's obstinate silence.

But how can one undo a lie? How could she say she had married out of spite?

If Antonio . . . But Antonio was neither a tyrant nor the spiritless man she would have desired for a husband. He was a man in love yet sensitive and strong, a man she could not despise.

One day, at last, as if suddenly coming out of his passionate frenzy, her husband had looked at her for a long time—an inquiring, affectionate look.

"Ana Maria, tell me, will you ever come to love me as I love you?"

Oh God, such dignified humility! It had brought tears to her eyes.

"I love you Antonio, but I feel sad."

Then he had continued in the same reasonable, mild tone.

"What can I do that you may not feel sad any more? If you don't like the house, I will change it to suit your taste. If you are bored here alone with me, from tomorrow on we shall see people. We shall give a party. I have many friends here."

But she shook her head from side to side murmuring:

"No, no . . ."

Now, Antonio's tone was odious to her; now, a silent affliction was rising in her. What was he suggesting to her? To organize her whole existence there in that place, as desolate as the bottom of the sea, away from relatives, among new friends and unknown servants?

"Perhaps you miss some kind of entertainment? I will have a pair of saddle horses sent from the hacienda and we will go out in the Park every morning. Ana Maria, speak, tell me: what is it you want?"

She had seized her husband's arm, wishing to speak, to explain, and it was then that a sudden fit of rebellious panic had overridden all argument.

"I want to leave."

He had looked at her intently. Never had she seen anyone turn pale. From that day she knew what it was: an unusual whiteness sharpening up the cheekbone, a motionless face in which only the eyes remained alive, brilliant and fixed.

And so it was that Antonio had come to send her back to her father, for a while.

Alas, one does not sleep with impunity so many nights by the side of a man, young and in love!

She remembered the depression that had come over her as soon as she resumed her former existence. It seemed as if she were repeating gestures which had been drained beforehand of all interest.

She was wandering from the woods to the house, from the house to the sawmill, perplexed to find that there no longer was any purpose in a life she had once thought so complete.

Is it possible that in a few weeks all our dreams and all our habits, everything that seemed to be so much a part of ourselves, could have become foreign to us? Beneath the tulle of the mosquito netting, her bed now appeared to her narrow and cold; and stupid and in a bad taste which humiliated her, seemed the wall paper sprinkled with forget-me-nots that decorated the room. How could she have lived there so long without loathing it?

Then one night she dreamed she loved her husband, with a love that was a strangely, desperately, sweet feeling, a heart-rending tenderness, that filled her breast with sighs and into which she surrendered herself languidly and ardently.

She awoke crying. Against the pillow, in the darkness, she then called very gently: "Antonio!"

If at that moment she had had the courage not to speak that name, her life possibly would have been different.

But she did call: "Antonio," and within her had come the strange revelation:

"One does not sleep with impunity so many nights beside a man, young and in love!" She needed his warmth, his embrace, all the encumbering love she had repudiated.

And she had remembered a wide bed, disorderly and warm.

She had longed for that moment when grasping her tresses as if to retain her, Antonio would prepare himself for sleep. A few light jolts against her hip would then tell her that her husband was detaching himself little by little from life, was slipping into unconsciousness. Whereupon, that temple abandoned by him upon her ungrateful shoulder would begin to beat fiercely as if all the feeling in his body flowed into it and was concentrated there.

A great emotion, a deep respect, was stirring in her as she re-

loving her husband

called with what limitless generosity he used to give up his sleep to her.

And she was longing to kiss that trusting temple of Antonio, which was at night the most vulnerable part of his being.

Month after month, his absence—he delayed answering the persistent summons of the family, demanded time to heal his wound—increased her repentance, her thirst for love.

It was early Fall. In her grandmother's house, the first braziers were already lighted when Antonio deigned to come.

She remembers. She arrived exhausted from the hacienda and did not even think to rearrange her tousled hair, her tired face. She went directly into the library where her husband was waiting for her, smoking.

"Antonio!"

"How are you?" answered a calm, unknown voice.

Very little she can recall of that interview which she now knows was decisive.

Now that she is in the shroud, she realizes how very often in one's memory only the inflection of a voice or the gesture of a hand remains as a sign of identification of those events which have weighed most heavily on one's destiny.

How absurd, how remote must have seemed to Antonio at that moment, the passion he had felt for that girl, disheveled and thin, now sobbing at his feet and encircling his waist with her arms.

With her face buried in the shortcoat of a man now indifferent, she was searching in vain for the scent, for the warmth of that fervent husband of yesterday.

She remembers, she can still feel, on the nape of her neck a forgiving hand which nevertheless was holding her off gently . . .

And so it was then, later on and always, always.

They lived where she wished. Antonio built for her a house on the small parcel of land her father had assigned to her as a dowry, but he retained his own hacienda, that dark forest the limits of which extend far down to the extreme South.

With her, his manner was easy, affable, but never did he make any allusion or gesture that could have given her occasion to rehabilitate herself in his eyes. Without any effort, he had released himself from a past to which she had become enslaved. And at night, his embrace was still strong, tender, yes, but distant.

And then she came to know the worst of solitudes; that which in a wide bed seizes the flesh intimately joined with another flesh adored and aloof.

Her first child did not bring back to her either Antonio's love nor his spirit.

Neither sickness nor death ever created between them the bond usually created by sorrow.

But she learned to find a refuge in family, in sorrow; she learned to overcome anxiety by surrounding herself with children, and with small duties.

And perhaps this saved her from new and disastrous passions. This? No.

It was because in spite of everything, throughout her entire youth, she never exhausted the jealousy, the love, and the sadness of the passion Antonio had inspired in her.

He, on the other hand, deceived her so many times!

His life of gallantry came upon her in a wave of anonymous letters and denunciations. For a time, although actually hurt, she remained disdainful, refusing to listen to rumors, shielded in her position as legitimate wife, sure that in it was a choice, a definite place of honor in her husband's distant heart.

Until that day . . .

It was one morning. Delayed while braiding her long hair, she was taking a look from the bathroom through the partly open door at the disorder in the bedroom, when she saw Antonio, back from an early shooting party, come in unexpectedly. Thinking himself alone, he was keeping his hat on his head, tipped over one ear and chewing a twig of boxwood. As he approached the bedside table to lay down his cartridge belt, his boot struck against one of her blue leather slippers.

Then, oh then—she saw and she never could forget it—brutally, almost with fury, he flung it away with a kick.

And in a second, in that brief second, she was rudely awakened to a truth, a truth which might have been concealed in her mind for a long time but that she had avoided facing squarely until now: she realized she was, she had always been, only one of Antonio's many passions, a passion circumstances had shackled to his life. He tolerated her, that was all; he accepted her, champing at the bit, as a consequence of an act without recall.

She remembers. She drew back very gently, trying hard to re-

Her husband is now with them in comparison to a few months before when she ~~was~~ was sent back to her father, so changed that wanting her she into not wanting her

leather slippers

tolerated his wife

main unnoticed. She heard a sigh, then the creaking of the bed under the weight of Antonio's body.

It was a sunny morning and the day gave promise of being radiantly beautiful. Against the stained glass of the windowpanes dragonflies beat in great numbers. From the garden rose the cries of the children running after each other with the sprinkling hose.

A long sultry day ahead. To have to fix her hair, to speak, to give orders and to smile. "Is the Señora sad on such a beautiful day?" . . . "Mama, come and play with us." . . . "What's the matter with you? Why are you always in a bad mood, Ana Maria?"

To have to do her hair, to speak, to give orders, to smile. To have to go through the horror of a long Summer, bearing that kick in the middle of her heart!

She leaned against the wall, feeling all at once very tired.

Her eyes filled with tears which she dried immediately, but already silently others were flowing, then others . . . She does not remember ever having cried so much.

Years passed, years in which she withdrew within herself and became, day by day, more narrow and petty.

Why, oh why must a woman's nature be such that a man has always to be the pivot of her life?

Men succeed in directing their passion to other things. But the fate of so many women seems to be to turn over and over in their heart some love sorrow while sitting in a neatly ordered house, facing an unfinished tapestry . . .

In vain did she exhaust all the instinctive ways of passion to conquer Antonio: tenderness, violence, reproaches, silence, amorous pursuit. He either avoided her affectionately and dreadingly, or pretended to ignore her gloomy attitudes.

But sometimes when worn out emotionally, it would happen that a momentary indifference made her act naturally, her husband's sympathy and confidence would be drawn back to her spontaneously. He would then invite her to the city, escort her to the theater and to the stores and chat with her about herself, about himself, about the children, about life "which is so sad after all." "You are the most charming woman I have ever known, it's too bad you are my wife, Ana Maria," he used to say to her then.

His very white teeth gleamed in his splendid mouth which seemed so frank, his prodigiously brown eyes enveloped her caress-

ingly. And in order not to stay the course of that distant caress, she would suppress that ardent desire in her to throw her arms around his neck and to kiss his handsome forehead.

It is strange that she always had had to behave that way with all those whom she loved: with Ricardo, with her husband, with her sons.

"One must be wise in matters of love," she would say to herself.

And she had indeed succeeded quite often in being wise. She had quite often found herself able to adjust her own passionate feeling to the moderate and restricted love of others. Trembling with tenderness and truth, she had so many times been able to smile frivolously in order not to frighten away the small measure of love coming toward her . . .

For it would seem that not to love too much might be the best proof of love which can be given to certain people.

Are all those born to love compelled to live as she did, compelled to drift toward self-destruction, to smother minute after minute within themselves all that is most vital in their own being?

"Because of you I suffer, I suffer as from a wound continually reopening."

For years, in an undertone, she had repeated that sentence which had the mysterious power to make her burst into tears. Only in that way did she manage to stop for a few moments the action of that ardent needle lacerating her heart without respite. For many years, to the point of exhaustion, to the point of weariness.

"I suffer, I suffer, because of you . . ." she was beginning to sigh one day when suddenly tightening her lips she remained silent, ashamed. Why should she continue to hide from herself the fact that, for a long time, she had had to force herself to cry?

It was true she was suffering but she no longer felt hurt by her husband's lack of love. The thought of her own misfortune no longer made her feel sorry for herself. A certain antagonism, a mute rancor, was withering and perverting her suffering.

Then the passing years lashed up this antagonism into wrath, converted her timid rancor into a fixed determination for revenge.

And hatred came to prolong the tie that bound her to Antonio.

Hatred, yes, a silent hatred which instead of consuming her, fortified her. A hatred that made her conceive grandiose schemes, almost always ending in petty retaliation.

She still remembers that absurd nightmare of a trip and sees her-

self pacing up and down the aisles on that train racing through the night less rapidly than her thoughts, toward the city where she expected to catch Antonio by surprise.

Anything, she was ready to do anything, to show no pity or indulgence of any kind. Waves of fury rushed in on her at times with such violence that her throat contracted in a spasm of pain.

She sees herself arriving at dawn at a lonely railroad station. Then comes that humiliating waiting room at the private house of the lawyer whom she had been bold enough to cause to be awakened.

She remembers as if it were yesterday his reproving silence as he listened to her, and the care, the deliberateness with which he measured his conventional reply.

"That is not possible, Ana Maria. Consider that Antonio is the father of your children; that there are steps a lady cannot take without lowering herself. Perhaps your own children would criticize you later. Besides, what difference can this unfortunate woman make to you, this woman who is surely going to regret very soon the indiscretion she is committing . . . Just a moment," he said suddenly. "Wait for me a moment," and he left the room.

No, even though for the rest of her life she never wanted to see him again, no, deep in her heart she has no feeling of bitterness toward the poor man who having known her since childhood had betrayed her plans as kindheartedly and clumsily as her own father would have done.

The fact is that when the door opened again it was Antonio who entered the room, severe and pale.

Accustomed as he always was to win his battles over a woman afraid of the wound that with a single word he had the power to inflict on her, he had already begun to assume a haughty attitude when, trembling with rage, she started to insult him for the first time in their long married life. The abuses poured out of her mouth, first intelligent and sagacious, then so infamous and unfair that suddenly she stopped talking, ashamed and ready to submit to the reprisals of the violent Antonio.

But no, all through a long period of silence he had been watching her attentively.

"How you love me!" he said finally, in an affectionate and aggrieved voice.

And then she had fallen into his arms weeping and calling out his name. Yes, how much, how very much she loved him! . . .

That semblance of a reconciliation was to last only a short time. Quite soon he relapsed into his former indifference and she went back to her hatred as strong as the love which once again she had given him for the space of a few weeks.

Hatred, yes, hatred, and beneath its somber wing she breathed, she slept, she laughed; hatred, now her main purpose, her primary concern. A hatred that victories did not lessen but made fiercer, as if the fact of meeting so little resistance could only increase its fury.

NINETEEN

And that hatred grips her even now as she hears her husband approaching and sees him kneeling down close to her bed.

He has not looked at her. Almost immediately, he buries his face in his hands, half-collapses on the bed.

A long time thus motionless, he seems far away from his dead wife, to be thinking of some painful yesterday, of an infinite world of things.

She feels with repugnance his abhorred head weighing on her hip, weighing there where her children grew and weighed so sweetly. Angrily, she begins to examine for the last time that carefully groomed chestnut hair, that neck, those shoulders.

And suddenly, an unexpected detail strikes her. Very close to his ear she notices a wrinkle, only one, very fine, as fine as a cobweb thread, but a wrinkle, a real wrinkle, the first one.

My God, is it possible? Antonio not immune!

No, Antonio is not immune. That single, imperceptible wrinkle will not be long in sliding down his cheek, where it will very soon divide in two, in four, and finally mark his whole face. Slowly it will begin to corrode that beauty nothing succeeded in altering, and together with it will go crumbling the arrogance, the charm, the opportunities of that cruel, fortunate man.

Like a spring that snaps, like a force that has lost its aim, the impulse which had kept her implacable and venomous, ever ready to lash out, all of a sudden has died in her. She now feels her hatred as something passive, almost indulgent.

15 months
15 crying

As he lifts his head, she notices with amazement that he is crying. His tears, the first she has ever seen him shed, slip down his cheeks without his giving thought to wiping them, taken unaware by the sudden burst of his own crying.

He is crying, crying at last! Or perhaps is he only crying for his youth he feels gone with this dead woman; perhaps is he only crying for those failures the memory of which he was able until now to escape and which are now rising, unavoidable, before this first assault. But she knows that the first tear stands as an open channel for all the others; she knows that sorrow and perhaps also remorse have at last made a breach in that stony heart, a breach through which in time they will infiltrate with the regularity of a tide that mysterious laws impel to strike, to corrode, to destroy.

From today on, at least, he will know what it means to carry a death in one's own past. Nevermore, nevermore will he enjoy anything completely. In each joy, even the simplest—a Winter moon, a festive night—will come a certain emptiness, a certain strange sensation of loneliness.

And as his tears appear, slip and fall, she feels her hatred abating, evaporating. No, she no longer hates. How could she hate a poor being, destined as she herself had been to old age and sadness.

No. She does not hate him. But neither does she love him. And as she no longer loves him and no longer hates him, she feels the last vital bond of her physical structure being released. Now nothing matters to her any more. It is as though neither she nor her past have any longer a reason for being. A great weariness encompasses her, she feels herself stumbling backwards.

Oh, that sudden rebelliousness! That desire which now goads her to rise up sobbing: "I want to live! Give me back, oh give me back my hatred!"



TWENTY

"Arise! Come!"

From far down a road, burning under the sun, huge whirlwinds of dust come to meet her. There she is, wrapped in impalpable sheets of fire.

"Come, come."

"Where?"

"Farther on."

Resigned, she lays her cheek against the hollow shoulder of death.

And someone, something, pushes her down a watery channel to a region of damp woods. That little light in the distance, what is it? That tranquil little light? It is Maria Griselda getting ready for dinner. At the approach of twilight, she has called for a lamp and has had the table set outside on the terrace. At the approach of twilight, the peons have opened the sluiceways for the watering of the lawn and of the three beds of wild carnations. And from the sunken garden a wave of fragrance rises up to the lonely woman.

The night butterflies flutter against the lighted lampshade, brush half-singed the white tablecloth.

Oh, Maria Griselda! Do not be afraid, as on the stone steps the dogs are standing with hair bristling, it is I.

Sequestered, melancholy, thus I see you, my sweet daughter-in-law. I see that admirable, wondrous, graceful body of yours and those long slender legs. I see your jet-black hair, your pale skin, your proud profile. And I see your eyes, those narrow eyes of the same somber green as the moss floating on the surface of forestal waters.

Oh, Maria Griselda! I am the only one who really understood how to love you. For I, and no one else, it seems, was able to forgive you for so great, so unbelievable a beauty.

Now I am about to blow out the lamp. Don't be afraid. I only want to caress your shoulder as I go by.

Why did you jump out of your seat? Do not tremble so, I am going, Maria Griselda, I am going . . .

And a current pushes her once more down the watery channel . . . as far as a gray beach on which she alights and where for an indeterminate length of time she moves about blinded, lost in a heavy fog. Two by two, the high cypress trees of a long avenue then begin to appear and to take shape in front of her as she edges forward . . .

That endless avenue of dark cypresses and those spacious lawns and ponds where the lotus flowers spread their heavy wax petals on the still waters, it seemed to her she has seen them before! It seemed

to her that some time in her life, a very long time ago, in that same smooth, golden twilight she had walked by those same bushes of giant azaleas and under this arbor with its pink marble colonnades around which the red vine entwines itself . . .

Sofia! Sofia! Yes, this silent and royal park must be the park where Sofia so often told her she came in her dreams.

" . . . Last night again, I had the same dream I told you about, do you remember? that dream of the beautiful park . . . and there I was walking again around the lawns until that silly shower in the early morning woke me up . . . Ana Maria, tell me, does it ever happen to you to have the same dream, over and over again?" it seems to her she is still hearing Sofia pensively asking her on the terrace one of those beautiful moonlit evenings of that Summer already so long past.

Sofia, Ricardo's wife! that elegant, foreign-born girl whom Ricardo preferred to her and eventually married; that girl who in turn treated him with contempt and left him, graciously conceding to him at the time the guardianship of their son, as if everything that came from him meant absolutely nothing to her.

A strange thing, the human heart! She recalls how, though already married herself, the news of Ricardo's wedding in Europe where Aunt Isabel had sent him so as to get him away from her, had distressed her . . . and how one year later though already deeply in love and miserably unhappy with Antonio, the news of their separation had filled her with an unseemly joy. She remembers vividly how nevertheless that morbid curiosity she felt about Ricardo's wife, that kind of painful attraction, had remained with her, making her still linger dreamily before those numerous pictures of her displayed so prominently in their house by Ricardo's sisters.

For what a strange thing indeed the human heart! Those girls who with Aunt Isabel had once-worked underhandedly to prevent their brother from marrying her, their childhood friend who adored him, now seemed to be mad about that elegant, frivolous foreigner whom they had never seen and who had brazenly humiliated and forsaken him. They had felt that she, Ana Maria, would not have brought enough money to him, in fact only that small piece of land from her father's hacienda; yet they did not hesitate to sell part of their own lands every time they had to send Sofia the large sums she insisted she must have to resist the temptation to

No se casó
con Ana Maria
por causa
de Ricardo
na hora
decho para
mury

take her son back to Europe with her. Ricardo's son, that big blue-eyed child they called Ricky, whom they entertained and petted in the most ridiculous manner! "Isn't he adorable, it seems he has his mother's eyes, although Ricardo says her eyes are even prettier. He says Sofia's eyes are the color of forget-me-nots . . ."

Poor girls, foolishly they had for years prepared the house every Summer for the visit that brilliant and so much admired sister-in-law promised each year to make. And anxiously, year after year, they had waited for her in vain . . . until that Summer.

Sofia! her friendship with Sofia had lasted only that one Summer! And yet before slipping forever into infinity, it is her sleep, not that of any of the many friends, companions of almost all moments of her life, that in her light shadow this night she is coming to haunt.

Sofia, here she is, here she is! coming toward her out of the depth of that park in which she is walking in her dream! Here she is, coming to her in that same dress and with that same airy step with which she came, at the hacienda, down the avenue of cherry trees that afternoon so long ago . . .

"Here comes Mummy," little Ricky, perched high up in a cherry tree, had called out.

"I hope she's not coming for you so soon!" Fred sitting astride a few branches lower down had protested.

"We only have half this tree to finish," Alberto added, throwing down a handful of cherries into the oilcloth in which Anita and herself were catching on the wing that tempting, perfumed harvest the three little boys were sending down to them from above.

"You see, Mummy, I was right, it was her carriage I heard a little while ago," her daughter was explaining to her, as she stood motionless, under the stress of the strangest emotion, watching that woman moving gracefully toward them along the avenue.

This young woman, so blond, tall and slender, dressed all in white and holding over her shoulder the prettiest little mauve umbrella of gauze in the world; surely, it was the last person she would have expected to see calling for her child as would any other country neighbor.

"Ricardo says Sofia's eyes are the color of forget-me-nots." She had always thought that description stupid and in bad taste and yet now that Sofia herself was there at last, standing before her and

holding out her hand smilingly, she had to admit the comparison made by Ricardo was altogether exact and charming.

Yes, Sofia, your eyes encased in those long, blond eyelashes seemed to me of the same timid, tender blue as the celestial forget-me-nots!

I admired your hair of a very pale, almost white gold and your complexion of that delicate rose color that can be seen only in roses. Then I heard your voice so mysteriously soft, the voice of a bee.

"How do you do, Ana Maria. Excuse me for having come in that way and also for calling you Ana Maria but it seems to me I have known you always. Ricardo spoke so often about you in the old days and then Ricky also did continuously in his letters. It seems there is nothing he enjoys as much as coming here . . ."

I could not believe my eyes, my ears. You, Sofia, the elegant one, the bewitching one, the triumphant one, the distant one, you knew of my existence, of my dull little self, and . . .

"I hope you would not mind becoming my friend?" you were asking me now, almost timidly.

That was indeed the last stroke. Would I mind? I literally threw myself in your arms, realizing suddenly that behind the curiosity I had always felt for you was concealed a feeling of real admiration, and in that painful attraction which for so many years had made me linger in front of your pictures was hidden an unconscious desire to know you and to make myself be known to you and be loved by you. Of course, of course, I was your friend; I had always been your friend!

"She looks like the Angel! She looks like the Angel!" Alberto, Anita, and Fred were now yelling, as they surrounded and jostled us in great excitement.

"The Angel! . . . What Angel? . . . they are nice, those children . . ." you laughingly observed, made dizzy in the turmoil.

"The Angel in the picture Mummy has on her bedside table . . ."

"But it's true, it's true!" I myself had in turn cried out to you. "Come, come and see . . ."

And suddenly, as childish as my own children, with them I led you on a run down the avenue of cherry trees toward the house as far as my own room and the bedside table on which stood the naive Annunciation Zoila had given me on the day of my First Communion. Unbelievable, extraordinary as it seemed, that tall Angel,

blondishly pale, standing there very straight with its wings to its sides before a small, frightened Virgin was indeed your very image, Sofia!

And I remember how surprised I was I had never noticed it from your pictures before, and I remember how I told you then the fascination your pictures had always had for me and the curiosity I had about you for so many years and many, many other things . . . Yes, I see ourselves once more in the garden talking, while arm in arm we walked exactly as we are doing now, down the cypress avenue of this beautiful park of your dream.

"Oh, Ana Maria, blessed be my dream, blessed be my dream, if because of it I see you again and can now tell you everything I was not able to tell you that afternoon so many years ago when we were walking together in the garden at the hacienda! . . . No, I was not able to confess to you then the passionate curiosity I too had felt about you ever since that day when two or three months after we were married, Ricardo had begun to speak to me about his childhood and about you. I remember how he was describing to me in a half-nostalgic, half-amused manner, your games and those gay sunny holidays you spent together. I realized with amazement how dull and solitary my own childhood had been in that sumptuous, cold apartment, in that gray building in the middle of a misty city, with no brothers or sisters to quarrel with and parents so very distant from me and so terribly polite to each other . . . And as he told me of your love and of your fault, of your kisses intermingled with laughter and fear even at your first ball, where you had the courage to disappear between two dances and kiss him behind the ferns in the winter garden, I understood that my adolescence in fashionable schools had been without color, without warmth and that, if it had not been for the looks of admiration I had awakened all around me while dancing and for Ricardo's thundering marriage proposal, my first ball would have had no place in my memory . . . And when at last lowering his voice and turning pensive, Ricardo related to me how he had forsaken you, told me of your grief, of your anger and of your recent marriage with someone else whom, according to his sisters, you loved as passionately as you had loved him! the most overwhelming revelation flashed through my mind: I did not love Ricardo! What I had thought to be love was nothing more than the thrill of the success I had achieved over him, mixed with an ardent

Both ♀ were curious about - a other

Sofia - never told her how bold was as she didn't have much of a childhood w/ memories

235 Sofia - did not love Ricardo

Sofia search for something that will not reveal

desire to escape as quickly as possible from the tyrannical indifference of my mother. And all at once I felt in amazement that some day not far distant, I would leave him to go seeking with someone else the same disordered, unselfish love you had lived with him . . . unless perhaps, the son I was already expecting . . .

"Alas, poor Ricky! He did not succeed in waking up my heart! But neither did anyone else ever succeed in awakening it. Yes, Ana Maria, I left Ricardo, I had lovers, I lived dangerously, but nothing came of it, nothing was changed in me. I seemed only to be going through the motions that usually accompany the passionate feelings I was trying to experience. 'How then and why that Ana Maria,' I would ask myself, after each one of my failures, 'could she . . .' Ricardo's description of a very young girl, a little too thin, with chestnut braids carelessly undone, with a childish mouth and somber sulky eyes, coming back to my memory.

"However, Ana Maria, on that day of our first meeting, I did not confess to you the curiosity mixed with envy I too had felt for you or the admiration you inspired in me at that very moment.

"But now, I must tell you . . . that afternoon, I would willingly have given up my jewels, my smart life, my travels, to be able to feel the coming of a storm or enjoy the blossoming of a creeping rosebush, as I could see you do. Or to be able to love and hate with that same intensity which brought tears to your eyes, while you were talking to me! or to be capable of feeling jealousy for a woman to the point of going to some village sorceress to render ineffective through witchcraft the dark beauty of the notorious Marta, Antonio's latest passion."

Antonio! I recall, Sofia, how at the end of the afternoon he had just appeared at the bottom of the outer staircase when, after taking leave of me, you were going down the stairs. In a gay voice from the top of the stairs, I introduced you to each other and watched you exchanging formal greetings while the horses impatiently stamped their feet and little Ricky pulled you by the hand saying it was getting late. Antonio! I can still see him helping you into your carriage with that same pleasant manner he always had with women, even with those who did not interest him. I can still see him, as soon as the carriage had pulled away, coming up to me with a shrug of the shoulder.

Sofia wanted to have the feelings that Anna Maria had.

no of things of fulfillment

"Really! that much talked about Sofia is quite a disappointment after all!"

"Now, you're going to tell me you think she's not pretty!" I protested indignantly.

"Well, just because that princess has deigned to call on you to escape for a few hours from her boring sisters-in-law, you're not going to tell me she's an angel of beauty!"

"An angel! Oh Daddy, of course, she's an angel!" the children at that moment exclaimed, greeting their father. "She's just like the Angel on Mummy's bedside table."

"Not really!" Antonio laughed.

"Why, certainly," I affirmed defiantly, "if you'll only take the trouble to go to our room and . . ."

He interrupted me with a broad carefree gesture which seemed to throw me as well as you, Sofia, far outside the circle of interest that bound his life.

"Well, anyhow, angels with or without wings are not at all my style!"

"Indeed! We all know too well angels are not your style!" I retorted perversely, the image of the dark Marta having suddenly flashed across my mind.

He pretended not to hear and turning to the children:

"Now, hurry up, children! We're going to clear up that grove over there, so we can put in our bowling alley. And we're going to have lots of fun this Summer, you can be sure of that!"

"And they did, Ana Maria, they certainly did! They amused themselves royally that Summer, your children and Ricky too bowling with Antonio in a great uproar of catcalls and laughter . . . while you and I would remain lazily stretched out in the hammocks in the shade of the casuarina trees.

"Those casuarina trees, I remember. You made me notice that the constant murmuring in their high branches was like a far distant echo of the incessant whispering of the waves in the ocean . . . So many things you made me notice that Summer, so many enchanting little things you made me discover.

"For instance, the joy of getting up early in the morning and going to your hacienda across the countryside still covered with dew, steaming under the morning sun, the fun of putting up at a mo-

Antonio had said - So here I was saying that as if you do think she's pretty.

ment's notice a long table under the linden trees to take our lunch there with the children, the excitement of helping them to get their kites going, and basking in the sunshine on the big lawn looking for four-leaf clovers. But above all, above all—you made me discover the thrilling, sorrowful delight it could be to have a husband one might adore, detest, be jealous of . . . a husband with whom one could spend the entire day, go riding with to the mills or wait for him until at last he would come home late, carrying some unexpected present and bringing some of his most odious friends to dinner.

“Well, I'm sorry but this evening you won't be able to have your little whispering conferences on the terrace after dinner' . . . I still can hear Antonio declaring to us in a menacing tone . . .”

And yet, Sofia, I can see us again that same evening as on every other evening leaning over the balustrade of the terrace, bathed in the blue light of the summer moon.

We, leaning over into the murmuring night overshadowing the garden behind us in the library, the men smoking and talking politics and from time to time breaking into heavy laughter. And you, whispering in my ear the soft verses of the French poet:—“*Mon enfant, ma soeur, songe à la douceur . . .*” or listening to me, endlessly relating the story of my heart and of my small life!

And there by my side on the terrace in the moonlight night, you so blond, so slender and light, more than ever reminded me at that moment of the Angel of Zoila's Annunciation . . .

For you actually were an angel, the angel sent by God to reveal to me that sentiment called friendship. Friendship, a sentiment in which one never knows solitude as one does in love. Friendship, the sweetness of being able to love without passion, the joy of being able to give without fear!

“Well, well, when will you two be through telling secrets to each other? You're worse than schoolgirls, you know?” Antonio toward the end of the evening, suddenly bursting in on the terrace would invariably complain. And we would make fun of him, do you remember, Ana Maria? And he would object because all evening I paid no attention to him even though almost every night he was to see me home at the most impossible hours.

“For you will recall that my sisters-in-law, so jealous of our

friendship, would take back their carriage early in the afternoon, trying in that way to discourage me from staying with you so very late.

“But you would arrange to send me back in your own carriage, insisting that Antonio see me home every evening, seemingly because Juan de Dios, the coachman, was afraid of a hold-up though actually more on account of all the things I managed to get out of Antonio concerning his relations with the seductive, dangerous Marta.

“How childish the most wicked of men are, after all! Imagine, Antonio not having the slightest suspicion that anything he might say to you would be repeated to me the moment you got up next morning, you would say to me, half-amused, half-disdainful.

“And I can still see you, Ana Maria, on the terrace waving goodbye to me while the carriage was taking me away with your husband on the dusty road white in the moonlight . . . in that moonlight, one of those moonlit nights that were to separate us forever!”

Forever, yes, Sofia, oh what sadness! How can I explain what it did to me when I happened to learn . . . It was the beginning of Winter, you had just gone back to Europe. Zoila awakened me one morning with the news that Juan de Dios' wife, although she had stubbornly and passionately prepared baby clothes all Summer for a boy, had just had a little girl. “If you would be the child's god-mother, perhaps it would make her feel better.”

“Surely, surely, Zoila, and besides I can look after the poor little baby. Tell Juan de Dios for me and also tell him I would like him to name her Sofia.”

“That, I feel sure, he will never do!”

“And why not?”

“Because he doesn't like that woman!”

“That woman! Zoila, would you mind not talking that way of my best friend!”

“Your best friend, don't make me laugh, Señora, and besides that comedy has been going on long enough! It makes me mad to see you make a fool of yourself on account of that Sofia. All the time saying she's an angel . . . an angel! the worst friend you've ever had, that's what she is!”

“But Zoila, really, have you gone out of your mind? What's . . .”

Sofia & Ana Maria are good friends. They provided each other with the sentiments of love & friendship that were really very strong for both have experienced over; read her but still

to best friend
hearts with
er husband
deceiving

“What’s making me say that? Well, ask Juan de Dios, he’ll tell you. He’ll tell you how, seemingly, because the tremor in the old bridge made her afraid, your best friend would step out of the carriage every night with your husband and would go across the river on foot where the big stones lay. He will also no doubt tell you of the good long hour he had to spend jumping up and down on his seat, waiting for them on the other side of the river. Yes, more than one hour they would stay at the bottom of the ravine, cooing and kissing in the shadow of the weeping willows. And he is not the only one who saw them. I must tell you doña Carmelita, the washerwoman, coming back to pick up some linen she had left to soak near that point, saw them quite often too and . . .”

“Oh, enough, Zoila, shut up!” . . . I murmured, with throat tight, throwing myself back on the pillows. And I closed my eyes, for the first time in my life, feeling sick, physically sick, from disgust, humiliation, deception . . .

“And yet, yet, Ana Maria, however strange, however absurd and impossible it may seem to you, I swear I never betrayed you!

“Everything Zoila had related to you was actually true: my stepping out of the carriage every evening with Antonio, our long conversations under the willows and our kisses . . . yet, I swear to you, I never betrayed you.

“I can even now see myself leaving the carriage, nervously, as it was about to enter the bridge that first night.

“Antonio, this time it’s going to crumble down. I feel sure!”

“Nonsense, for years it has been threatening us with falling down!” I hear Antonio protesting laughingly, ‘but, if you’re afraid, we’ll find down below some large stone stretching across the stream! . . .’ saying which he was drawing me by the hand down the embankment.

“That little stream you all so pretentiously called a river was shining in the moonlight like liquid silver murmuring mysteriously as it went by, and a sort of phosphorescent moondust seemed to float under the willows.

“What a lovely night!” I recall having exclaimed as we reached the water’s edge. At that moment, Antonio dropped my hand and took hold of my waist. One second later, he had pulled me up to the first of the big stones which formed across the peaceful stream that sort of natural bridge children and young rams sometimes used

in their escapades, do you remember? And, in the meantime, we found ourselves stepping across the river, jumping carelessly from stone to stone as would have done the children and the young rams.

“Each stone was different; some were large and ragged and on them it was easy to set down and grip the foot; others were flat and there the water splashed mercilessly; some were round and too smooth, putting one in danger of slipping headlong into the stream. Antonio kept jumping ahead of me on each stone and with much care and good advice helping me to join him afterwards.

“What an adventure!’ I lamented, suddenly discouraged, between two stones, as he was stretching out his hand to help me jump to him.

“A fine adventure!’ was his answer. And before I had a chance to realize what was happening, he had made me fall to his breast and was pressing his lips hard against mine.

“I uttered a cry and freeing myself from his hold, raised my hand. But all of a sudden, seesawing on the extreme edge of the rock, I had to throw my arms around his neck instead of slapping his face. He held me close to him for a moment then when into a burst of laughter. And his laugh was so friendly and free from malice, that I couldn’t help starting to laugh too.

“I think the comradeship between him and me started from that moment. At any rate, it was that evening he began to tell me about that part of his life he kept hidden from you.

“Poor Antonio, he never suspected that I was the one responsible for the amazing knowledge of his sayings and doings you unexpectedly disclosed.

“Those sisters-in-law of yours do a lot of dirty work every time they poke their noses in my house! It seems that Ana Maria now knows I meet Marta “accidentally” at the pastry shop in the village every Saturday’ . . . he complained bitterly one evening under the willows.

“But Antonio,’ I answered, trying hard to hide my embarrassment, ‘you are very foolish to let yourself be seen in the village with a woman who could never pass unnoticed . . .’

“Right you are about that! With that figure and those eyes! I often ask her if they were slit with a gypsy dagger at the time she was born . . .’

“Bah!’ I pouted disdainfully, ‘I much prefer Ana Maria’s eyes!’

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63
57
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04

Antonio hate
the ♀, but
still sees
her.

"Yes, I do too, I do too . . . only, you see, when Marta looks at me with those terrific slanting eyes of hers, I am seized with a frantic desire to beat her up. As a matter of fact, I'm keeping up this affair with her only with the hope that she will give me some day an excuse to beat her up. Yes, frankly, if Ana Maria only knew how much I hate this woman, she would stop worrying about her."

"I pretended to laugh and allowed him to take my arm and hold me close while he went on talking.

"Yes, angel, it seems you're the only one who understands that it's possible to be in love with one's own wife and yet at the same time be crazy about a lot of other women. Really, there are too many beautiful women running around in the world!"

"But then it must be you're still in love with your wife?" I inquired ingenuously, having in mind the instructions you had given me that afternoon.

"Antonio remained silent. A light breeze laden with the scent of heliotrope out of some distant garden drifted under the willows. He inhaled it deeply and it sounded like a sigh.

"Answer me!" I insisted sternly.

"For another few second he kept silent, then:

"I believe Ana Maria is the only woman I've ever loved," he at last confessed pensively.

"But are you still in love with her?"

"Well! You seem pretty inquisitive, for an angel . . .' he grumbled abruptly, now himself once again. 'And what's more, you're going to pay for this!' he concluded, bending down to my lips . . . which I let him take for an instant before drawing away and jumping over to the first of the large stones.

"Now come, Antonio, we've got to get across. Poor old Juan de Dios by this time must be about ready to become petrified in his seat."

"Here, angel, take hold of my hand, of my shoulder . . . be careful, that second stone is the most difficult of all on account of the moss growing on it . . . and by the way, angel, while we're attempting to get across this river, couldn't you make use of your wings? . . . I've never seen anything quite as clumsy as you are, never . . ."

"And so, Ana Maria, that was all that happened during those moonlight nights which were to separate us forever!"

"No, not even the shadow of a guilty desire was in me as I stepped out of the carriage every night with Antonio when came

the time to cross the river . . . only the pleasure of feeling inexpressibly young and foolish and proud to be able to draw out of a man such as Antonio his most intimate secrets.—

"And I must also tell you an absurd thing: I never felt as close to you as when that tall handsome young man who was your husband held me in his arms making fun of me, as I had seen him do with you . . . And those kisses he gave me and forced me to return under threat of leaving me standing between two stones in the middle of the river or of not telling me his latest prank, those kisses as of a college boy on a holiday which in my youth I had never known, seemed to me to belong to the moonlight night, to that unforgettable Summer and to our own friendship. Yes, Ana Maria, however absurd it may seem to you, those escapades with Antonio were to me like an extension of my day with you, like some kind of a game, almost as innocent as the ones we played with the children . . ."

'Don't be afraid,' Antonio would say whenever I lost my temper, as he became more pressing than usual: 'As a matter of fact, you're not my type. I don't like blondes.' And he would draw away somewhat vexed but not in the least spiteful. All women liked him. To be finally spurned by one must have been for him too like some kind of a new game . . ."

"Oh, Ana Maria, so many times a desire to tell you everything came over me as I felt sure it would amuse you as much as it did me . . . but the words would choke in my throat whenever I made up my mind to speak to you about it and I could not make myself do it or yet know how to do it. Once, much later on, it seems to me I almost did . . . but it was in a letter, in one of those letters you implacably sent back to me unopened until I had to understand that I must stop writing you, that our friendship had become to you nothing more than a memory, forever sullied . . ."

"Oh, perhaps I was reckless, selfish, foolish, Ana Maria! But you made me pay bitterly for it. No, not the slightest opportunity did you ever give me to vindicate myself. Without a word of explanation, you even returned to me the little diamond brooch I had offered you as a gift just before leaving . . ."

Yes, Sofia, I returned to you that lovely little diamond star which had brought me so much joy in the midst of my tears the day you went away. I returned to you also the poems of Baudelaire bound in red leather you had autographed for me and finally all those letters

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you wrote without getting discouraged for an entire year! I found a way to remove discreetly from my bedside table the little image of the Annunciation for every time my eyes fell upon it, the sight of the Angel would throw me in the same state of uneasiness as had Zoila's revelation of your betrayal.

I tried bravely, as you see, to erase your passage across my life as one erases a bad dream from memory. And circumstances seemed to favor me. Very soon the children stopped talking about you and Antonio no longer "casually" asked for news of you. Ricky whom you had finally taken to Europe for the Winter never came back to your sisters-in-law and they in revolt against what they termed your disloyalty banished your memory forever from their house. And so the years went by . . .

Yes, all seemed to be definitely at an end between you and my heart when, one afternoon in search of a paper which he had misplaced, Antonio got it into his head to go through the drawers of the old writing desk, at the other end of the bedroom.

"Well! here is Sofia!" he exclaimed, suddenly straightening up the little Annunciation which had finally drifted there behind a pile of books. Then: "By the way, do you ever hear from her any more?" he added in the most casual manner, as he pulled up a chair seating himself down in front of the desk.

"No," was my tart reply from the other end of the room.

"Strange," he murmured, opening one of the drawers, "strange how life always ends up by separating us from our friends."

"Friends!" I almost screamed, indignation having made me break in an instant the silence full of bitter dignity I had maintained for so many years in regard to your despicable betrayal. "Friends! I don't believe Sofia was my friend when she left the carriage 'to chat' with you under the willows, every evening you took her home that Summer" . . . My voice broke suddenly, foolishly. A silence followed during which Antonio shook his head sadly, looking through a lot of old papers without seeing them.

"Zoila . . . doña Carmelita, everyone at the hacienda saw you there kissing . . . They told me everything!" I added, angry with myself once I had succeeded in swallowing my tears.

"Yes . . . of course . . . that was to be expected" . . . Antonio muttered, putting aside the papers he held in his hand in order to open another drawer . . . "poor Sofia!"

"Poor Sofia?" I could not help protesting while I moved up to him, "did you say poor Sofia?"

"Why, yes! I said poor Sofia!" he grumbled, looking very much annoyed. "For a few kisses I took from her, she is now treated like nothing at all and you even ignore the great affection she had for you."

"Affection! You don't even know the meaning of the word!"

"All right, all right! you're the only one who knows what affection is" . . . he sneered, pulling out a pile of papers made yellow by time.

"Yes, you're right, I'm the only one!" I asserted defiantly.

"In that case, why don't you get rid of all this!" he almost shouted, throwing violently at my feet the papers he held in his hand. Dazed, I leaned over and before I could even pick them up, I recognized the love notes Ricardo had written me long ago during the brief, stormy idyl of our youth.

". . . and this, and this . . ." Antonio went on, still throwing on the floor with the most complete lack of self-control I had ever seen in him in all my life, papers and more papers . . . letters of Ricardo's and photographs of Ricardo and those drawings of Ricardo's he used to make on the slightest pretext: a horse, a rodeo, our old well, Alicia and me disguised as butterflies, Aunt Isabel with her knitting, the windmill, their first motor car . . .

"But Antonio, I don't understand why those . . ."

"No, you don't understand, you the woman who knows what affection is, you never have understood how much having that individual all the time around me, in my house, in my life, could . . ."

"But I never see Ricardo, never, never . . ." I interrupted vehemently, "and he has never set foot in our house, never! . . ."

"Maybe, but you spend your life hanging around his sisters, around his house. All your life you have done nothing but run around everything that belongs to him, his wife, his child! . . . And there is not a move, not a word from that man you haven't brought in here to poison my life through all these years . . ."

"Oh, Antonio, Antonio . . ." I moaned, completely overwhelmed . . . "you're crazy, absolutely crazy!"

"All right, I'm crazy. You're the only one who can be hurt, be offended by other people's tactless behavior, you're the only one who has the right to be . . ."

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At that point he stopped abruptly, as if afraid of a word that could burn him. Then lowering his head over another set of papers, he pushed them away almost immediately with exasperation:

"Besides, I'm getting tired of all this, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack . . ." he concluded, and, pushing back the drawers of the writing desk, he quickly left the room slamming the door rudely behind him.

You're the only one who can be hurt, you're the only one who has the right to be . . . jealous. Yes, jealousy, that was the word pride had prevented Antonio from speaking.

Overcome, dumfounded, suddenly in a flash of intuition I saw how notwithstanding my great love for him, I had never ceased doing many things that could hurt him. "Oh God, oh God! how difficult, how difficult everything is!" I wailed, kneeling down on the carpet. And while I was picking up and destroying one by one all those papers Antonio's anger had thrown in my face like a mighty reproach from the depth of his past and of his soul, the disturbing thought was taking shape in my mind that love is a virtue hard to practice, that one does not love as one wants to, but only as one is able to . . .

Just then, my eyes fell upon the little Annunciation. For the first time in all those years, my glance did not draw away from the Angel. I even dared to look at it face to face, carefully. And while I was looking at your image, Sofia, I could feel my former uneasiness dissipating, vanishing, and some kind of sweetness, of very timid hope, awakening in its place in my heart . . . "Sofia! the great affection she had for you," Antonio had said . . . Yes, after all, why not, even after your betrayal. Had he not proved to me that I had offended him for so many years, he, whom I adored.

It was from that Spring on, Sofia, that little by little I began to allow myself to think of you again as I was taking my walk in the avenue of cherry trees or after dinner on the terrace while relating to Fernando those other conversations I used to have there with you so many years ago . . . "Oh, Fernando, I don't know, I'm not sure, but it seems to me that perhaps I should not have sent back all those letters or broken with her without giving her an opportunity to explain! Perhaps Antonio is right . . . perhaps, for the sake of the great affection she had for me I should have forgiven her silly, insignificant betrayal . . . Don't you think so, Fernando?"

"No, really, Ana Maria, I cannot follow the way you women

talk; you use the big word 'betrayal' and then choose to qualify it with the words 'silly,' 'insignificant.'"

"But Fernando, why not? You can betray, and yet . . . well, anyhow, it is so difficult to love as one should, so difficult . . ."

"Not to betray those we love! you were going to say?"

"That's it, that's it, Fernando . . . If you only knew, the other day I was thinking that perhaps, after all one does not love as one wants to but only as one is able to! . . ."

"Not really!"

"Stop your sarcasm, won't you. What I've just said, I can prove to you. Look at me, for instance, with Antonio. . . ."

"Now listen, Ana Maria, let's not talk about Antonio again this evening! The night is so peaceful, so warm, it is years since we have had a Summer with such a glorious moonlight night!"

"Yes, not since the year Sofia was here . . . listen, Fernando, suppose I write to her now. What would you think of that?"

"I think you should leave the whole episode buried where it is. Why return to what is past," Fernando answered, at the same time trying to suppress a yawn . . . "Besides, I don't want to make you feel badly but . . . I don't believe those kisses or a friendship of six weeks could possibly mean anything in the life of a woman like Sofia. Possibly, by now, she might even have forgotten your name . . ."

"No, not that, not that!" I protested, outraged.

Yet, Sofia, that ironical, impatient statement poisoned my soul with a doubt that paralyzed my heart's outburst toward you . . .

Because, actually, it was on account of that statement that I delayed for years the moment of sending you that letter I wrote in my heart over and over again, right up to the moment of my death . . .

Death! Death! Death! The word she never should have spoken in that fragile world of a dream!

For there is Sofia's beautiful park vacillating, breaking up . . . its avenues falling apart . . . the cypresses going back one by one into nothing.

"Ana Maria, Ana Maria!" Sofia still has time to shout while standing in the midst of the disaster and battling to delay coming up again to the surface of consciousness.

"I must go now, Sofia, farewell!"

And someone, something, is drawing her again into that watery channel down which she had found the way to come to a living

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woman in order to tell her the things she could not say to her before she died.

Feeling light, she starts once again to slide down into infinity, knowing now that the dead cannot entirely depart until altogether free from terrestrial anxieties and that is why so often they return, giving out signs and messages through things, sounds, or magnetic fluids . . . poor signs, desperate messages, that the living most of the time do not see.

But Sofia, when someone will say to her: "Ana Maria is dead," she will turn pale and ask on what day, at which hour? Then she will remain pensive, realizing that her dream was true, that an almost forgotten friend had come to her in death to tell her she was forgiven . . . And from that day on, with a shiver, she will vaguely begin to believe in God, and in the existence of an invisible, disturbing world stirring there, very close to her own pleasant, frivolous world.

"Let's go! Let's go!"

Down the watery channel, the current pushes and pushes her through a tropical region where the vegetation fades in color as the earth parts into thousands and thousands of serried islands. Beneath the pale transparent foliage nothing but fields of begonias. Oh, the begonias, with their watery pulp! All nature absorbs water, subsists here on nothing but water. And the stream still pushes her slowly on, and with her it drags along enormous tangles of plants on the roots of which travel entwined gentle water snakes.

And over this entire world through which she is gliding in death, lingers and hovers persistently a livid streak of lightning.

The sky, however, is dense with stars. Every star she looks upon, as if responding to her call, whirls swiftly and falls.

TWENTY-ONE

"Don't go, don't, don't . . ."

What cry is this? What lips are searching and feeling for her hands, her throat, her forehead?

The living ought to be forbidden to touch the mysterious flesh of the dead.

For the lips of her daughter caressing her body have interrupted within it that light tingling in its deepest cells, making her again as lucid, and attached to all around her, as if she had never been dead.

My poor child, I have known you having fits of anger, capricious tears, but never would I have imagined such a wild outpouring of grief as now compels you to sob, clinging to me with hysterical strength. "She is cold, hard, even with her mother," everyone used to say. Yet, you were not cold, you were young, only young. Your tenderness toward me was like a seed borne within you which my death has forced, has compelled to mature in a single night.

No gesture of mine ever brought out what my death achieves at last. You see, you see how death can also be an act of life.

But don't cry, don't cry! If you only knew! I shall continue to breathe within you and to evolve in you and to change as if I were alive; you will love me, you will reject me and you will love me again. And perhaps you will yourself die before I become exhausted and die in you. Don't cry . . .

TWENTY-TWO

Now they come, and with infinite solicitude they lift her out of the bed and place her carefully in a large wooden coffin. A spray of white roses falls down on the carpet. They pick it up and lay it at her feet. Then they heap the rest of the flowers on her as one spreads a sheet.

How well does the body mold itself to the casket!

She does not feel the least desire to rise again. She never knew she could have felt so tired . . .

And now, one by one, silent and light, they lean down to her forehead and rest their lips on it, briefly, in a last farewell. Farewell Antonio! Alberto, Alicia, Luis, farewell! Farewell Zoila, and you my father, suffering to see me go before you do! . . . And farewell to you, Fred, who I know would like to kiss me longer. I love you! All is well, farewell!

And now she sees the ceiling sway, slide; her eyes partly open almost immediately perceive another ceiling whitened not long ago; it is that of her dressing room.

An enormous crack caused by the last earthquake makes her

aware later on that she is in the guest room. And thus long rows of rooms go by, showing her familiar angles, moldings, beams. Before each door with mathematical regularity comes a brief pause, and she realizes that it is the extreme narrowness of each threshold that is hindering the progress of those who are carrying her.

Now, sacrilege, they are treading on the blue carpet. Who dared bring it into the hall? And what for? The polished floors suit the style of the house a thousand times better.

There, exposed to the sun and to constant wear, will fade that which not so long ago was her refuge on winter days. For it was only by keeping it spread out in some far-off room, almost always closed, that she had been able to keep the blue carpet intact and blue.

When the storm wind raged outside, her children used to extend to her a strange invitation, one that always aroused the curiosity of strangers.

They would say: "Let's go to the beach." The beach was that square of spongy carpet. There as children they would run to lie down with their toys and later on with their books.

And it really seemed as though cold and bad weather stopped at the edge of that square piece of wool, the violent and joyful color of which brightened the eyes and the mood, so that the hours flew by warmer, more intimate, in the closed room.

Never would she have allowed the blue rug to be taken into the hall. Who dared to take advantage of her illness?

Oh Lord, the waters have not yet closed over her head and things are already changing; life is pursuing its course in spite of her, without her.

All at once, she sees the sky above her.

She realizes at that moment that she is on the landing of the stone staircase leading down to the garden. Here the pause is more prolonged. Perhaps they are gathering strength to go on.

The sky! A leaden sky and the birds are flying low. Within a few hours it will rain again.

What a beautiful end of day, so restless and wet! She had never liked it like that and yet for once she appreciates its harsh beauty; she even delights in the light gust of air that seems to reach out and touch her through the joints of the coffin.

And now she feels herself shaken, lowered, now she is resting on the last step.

Here, it was here, that she used to huddle up to get some sun. For a long time she would remain reclining with her cheek upon the last step, as if to rob it of a little warmth. When her children were little, they also used to press their ear to it insisting that they heard something moving inside, that the stone was ticking like a clock, or beating like a heart. And when it was watered it gave off the peculiar smell that slate blackboards emit when the lessons written on them have been rubbed off.

Once again the sky moves overhead.

Farewell, farewell, my stone! I did not know that objects could occupy such a place in our affection.

The procession has started to move over the lawn. She feels herself jolted in an unexpected sway; it seems as though the coffin is being rocked gently. And suddenly she senses, she recognizes, the strong arms of her two sons supporting it from behind and she guesses that at her feet the left side sags slightly because it is held by her father. Endeavoring to compensate for this weakness, Ricardo zealously lends his support to the right; she knows it.

And she is quite sure that there are many around her and that many others are following her. And it is infinitely sweet to her to feel herself carried thus, with her hands upon her breast like something very fragile, very dear.

For the first time, she feels herself entering majestically into the broad avenue of trees. No longer is she exasperated by the haughty bearing of the poplars; for the first time she notices their foliage undulates and glistens like moving water.

Then come to meet her the massive eucalyptus trees. Along their trunks, narrow slices of bark hang loosely, uncovering stripes of milky, sky-blue nakedness.

With emotion, she thinks: It is curious. I had never noticed this before either. They shed their bark just like snakes their skin in springtime . . .

The wind raises up whirls of dry leaves that hit the coffin as violently as would pebbles. For a moment the sky clears and they can faintly see the still, pale disk of the crescent moon.

Now the procession enters the wood.

And she is beset by a desire to trample down, to crackle beneath her feet, the heavy layer of pine needles that carpets it in a rust iron color, by a desire to lean over, to gaze down for the last time on

that great silvery web, nocturnal track knitted patiently on the pine needles by the snails.

Now she is enveloped as in a third shroud by the vapors that rise from the ground, by all the acrid perfume of the plants that live in the shadows.

They have passed the limits of the park. Now they are carrying her across open country.

Over beyond the field of stubble extends the marshy land. A heavy fog floats almost level with the ground, clustering among the rushes.

The pace of the procession becomes slow, difficult, and finally assumes the cadence of a funeral march.

Someone sinks in the mire up to his knees; then the casket lurches violently and one of its sides touches the ground.

Unknown longings stir within her. Oh! if they would only deposit her here, out in the open! She yearns to be left in the heart of the swamp so she could listen until daybreak to the song the frogs make in their throats out of water and moonlight; so she could hear the velvety bursting of the thousand bubbles of the slime. And straining her ears, detect even the sinister humming on the distant road of the electric wires' wail, and perceive the first flapping of wings of the flamingoes among the reeds before sunrise. Oh, if that were possible!

But no, it is not possible. They have already righted her, they are already moving on again.

All of a sudden a wall limiting the horizon reminds her of the village cemetery and of the wide, clear family vault.

And toward it their march is directed.

☉ A great calmness pervades her.

There are unfortunate women buried, lost in cemeteries as big as cities—and horror—even with asphalt streets. And in the beds of certain rivers with black waters there are suicides whom the current incessantly beats over, gnaws, disfigures and beats over again. And there are girls, recently buried, whose relatives impatient to find for themselves free space in the narrow family crypt will reduce and reduce as if willing to erase them completely even from the world of bones. And there are also young adulteresses whom incautious appointments had attracted to lonely places where they were discov-

ered and shot down on their lover's breast and whose bodies were profaned by autopsies, and abandoned for days and days to the infamy of the morgue.

Oh God, there are insensate people who say that once we are dead, we should no longer have any concern for our bodies! She feels an infinite happiness in being able to rest among orderly cypresses, in the same chapel where her mother and several brothers are sleeping side by side; happy that her body should disintegrate there, serenely, honorably, under a gravestone with her name,

TERESA-ANA MARIA-CECILIA . . .

Her name, all her names, even those she discarded in life. And beneath, two dates separated by a hyphen.

As the procession finally reaches its destination, a last gust of wind suddenly breaks off the warble of a fountain. Within the vault, night is about to dim the gems in the stained-glass windows. Facing the altar, Father Carlos, robed in alb and stole, moves his lips, sprinkles unctuously with the aspergill.



TWENTY-THREE

Father Carlos!

A flood of memories overcomes him, as he faces her for the last time.

Peace be with you, peace be with you, Ana Maria; you, mad, capricious, good child! And may God have mercy on you! That same God, apart from Whom you so stubbornly tried to live!

"I have no soul, Padre, I have no soul!" I can still hear you repeating, with a smile, striving not to listen when I said I well knew you had a soul, a tender, pure soul which you did not want to see or acknowledge for fear of having to give up, because of it, all the passions and sadness of this life.

I can still see you a playful, boisterous little girl, ever absent-minded at church, always first in Bible Class. I can still hear you describing vividly the stairway of angels God sent down to Jacob during his sleep, the fiery bush in which he revealed His Presence to Moses, the Red Sea compelled to rise and part in twain in order to

open the way for the Chosen People, and the mysterious hand appearing at Balthasar's banquet, tracing on the wall the three words through which the ruin and destruction of Babylon were predicted.

"Oh she's well versed in Bible History because Bible History amuses her," was the complaint made to me then, "but she doesn't know the first thing about her catechism. And in her religious practice she only takes an interest in what she can turn into a game: helping to tidy up the sacristy, blowing out or lighting the candles in the chapel, or collecting images and rosaries . . ."

"Let her be, let her be," I would answer, "all roads lead to God."

I remember the day when at your father's request, I went to the convent, "You will understand better than I do what happened, Father, it appears that Ana Maria said something that . . ."

"I said, when we came out of the sewing class where Sister Carmela had explained to us what heaven is like, I said I did not care to go there because it sounds like such a boring place."

I could not help smiling, as I looked upon the candid, distracted face of very young Sister Carmela, almost a child herself, and putting off telling her not to touch upon such delicate subjects in the sewing class, I leaned over to you:

"Now then, tell me, how would you like heaven to be?"

For a moment, you gave thought, then:

"I would like it to be exactly as it is down here. I would like it to be like the hacienda in summertime when the rosebushes are in blossom, when it is green everywhere, and there are all sorts of birds around and raspberries in the woods . . . I would like also little gazelles in heaven coming to eat out of my hand and also my cousin Ricardo always with me, and we be allowed sometimes to sleep on the moss in the evening, near the spring . . ."

"But, don't you know, it's the Garden of Eden you're talking about, child!" I exclaimed, suddenly pensive.

"Yes, the Garden of Eden, lost by Adam and Eve because of their disobedience!" the Mother Superior who presided at the inquiry, quickly interposed. "And I owe it to myself to tell you that in addition to everything else this child is the acme of disobedience. She is the worst example to others we have had since the two little Rodriguez girls were dismissed a few years ago, as you will recall . . ."

The Garden of Eden! Poor Ana Maria! Your whole life was nothing but a passionate search for that Garden of Eden, lost irretrievably, however, by man! I can still see you as a very young girl,

violent and rebellious, giving yourself over to the demons of the flesh and of anger. I can still remember the start you gave that day I drew close to you in the darkness of our little country church where your soul sometimes guided your steps in spite of yourself whenever you felt too unhappy . . . "No, Father, I don't want to go to confession. Don't talk to me about novenas or prayers. I'm here only because it's nice to be here, that's all. And nobody stares at me as they do at home, trying to find out what's happening to me and what I'm thinking about or not thinking . . . No, Father, no, I have no intention of doing my Easter duty this year. Why not? Because I'm angry with God, that's why!"

"And why, may one inquire, are you angry with God?" I asked, edging you in the direction of the parish house, greatly relieved to find that after all you had not yet reached the point of no longer believing in Him.

"He never gives me any of the things I want."

"Perhaps it's because you want things that are not good for you."

"Good for me, good for me! . . ." you grumbled.

Oh, the mean, sad eyes you had that entire year! You had them still that morning before the altar, under your beautiful veil of white tulle, when you were married by me, those eyes! . . . But your soul, that poor soul you always denied, it found a way, somehow, to make you run to the cloister looking for me before leaving in your carriage. "Goodbye, Father, pray for me," you whispered in my ear, kissing me nervously.

And I did pray for you. All my life, I prayed for you, calling to God to inspire me with the words that would bring you back to Him.

"Ana Maria, I'm gravely concerned, greatly disappointed, with your attitude."

"But, Father, what attitude? I go to Mass every Sunday. I take the children to Holy Communion myself every Friday. And if I did not attend Anita's Confirmation last Thursday, it was because I was ill, I assure you . . ."

"Those are not the things I happen to be concerned about and you know it very well. You gave me your solemn promise to go on a retreat this Summer . . ."

"But Father, it's not possible. I have entirely too much to do. You don't realize all the work that has to be done in this house with

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Alicia and Luis, with Luz-Margarita and the children, all visiting me and now Zoila who's got it into her head to take a vacation, and Antonio who . . . If you only knew how much he is making me suffer at this moment. Oh Father, really, I'm suffering too much, I can't pray, I can't concentrate, I . . ."

"You can concentrate and you can take trouble only for the things of this world. Your heart is brimming with love but only for this sad world."

"After all, wasn't it God who created it? You're not going to tell me now that I should not love His works!"

"Ana Maria, Ana Maria . . ." I bewailed, suddenly overcome. "I don't know really what to do with you!"

"Oh, but I know!" you quickly answered, moving up to sit on the arm of my chair and leaning over me with a teasing smile on your lips. "All you've got to do is to ask God to perform a great miracle; that is, send me His Grace."

"Indeed! what vanity! what colossal vanity! You want God to come to you but you will not take a single step to go out to Him . . ."

"Exactly!"

"Well, frankly, your lack of consideration is most distressing; and besides what do you mean leaning so casually on the arm of a chair in which is seated a vicar of the Church!" I added smilingly when little Anita appeared outside the French windows.

"Daddy sends word to you that we are ready for the bowling match and waiting for you, Father Carlos. Fred and I are going to play on his side. Alberto will be on yours . . ."

"And so will I!" I can still hear you impetuously interpose, "but this time, I warn you, my dear Anita, neither you nor your father will be allowed to cheat as you did so brazenly last time . . ."

"Oh Mummy! when she doesn't win, she thinks it's because she's being cheated . . ." the child quietly explained to me as we went out on the terrace.

How different from that turbulent young woman who could not accept being a loser at games, this woman whom I visited a few days ago on her sickbed!

"Wouldn't you like me to bring here to you the Holy Eucharist, some morning soon? It will help you get well . . ." I insinuated discreetly.

"Yes, why not?" you answered, much to my surprise. "Why not, if it can make you happy!"

"In that case, wouldn't you like to go to confession now?" I added quickly, pretending not to have heard your last remark.

"I would prefer tomorrow . . . the doctor is going to be here in half an hour . . ."

"Half an hour would be plenty of time."

"I don't think so, Father. I must warn you, you have never dealt with a sinner with such a long and important list of sins as I have."

"I see already that bringing vanity even into sin might well be your most important sin," I snapped back.

You attempted to laugh but instead uttered a groan of pain, and dropped back very pale on your pillows. And suddenly I saw you so exhausted, so undone, so unlike yourself that I recall remaining a moment transfixed at the foot of the bed, overcome by an overwhelming sense of doom.

"Don't look at me with eyes like that, Father!" From the depth of your crisis, you still found courage to banter with me while they were rushing to give you an injection and some medicine. "I'm still far from being dead you know . . . so do come back tomorrow will you please, Father, do come back tomorrow . . ."

"She is in pain but the doctor says there is nothing to fear at the moment; he even says she is showing improvement . . ." Alicia was telling me as she escorted me to the front door . . . "But you must come to hear her confession tomorrow, won't you, Father? It's so wonderful she's agreed to do it . . . If you only knew how much I've prayed this day might come! . . . Did you notice the lovely smile with which she said to you: come back tomorrow?"

Yes, indeed, my poor child, indeed I had noticed the lovely smile with which you were at last saying: "Come!" to God, through His humble servant!

The last smile I was ever to see from you!

For your doctor was mistaken and the sinister feeling which had come over me as I looked upon your tired face was in fact a warning from heaven. The carriage from the hacienda was sent for me the following day much earlier than had been anticipated. You had just had a stroke; it was even feared you might not recover consciousness . . . Juan de Dios all out of breath had explained to me.

Yes, indeed, Ana Maria, you were already far out on the great journey when I bent forward over your absent eyes that seemed to be staring at something within yourself! . . . I gave you absolution.

"She had already made her act of contrition yesterday, don't you

think, Father, when she agreed to go to confession today . . ." Alicia with a smile full of bliss in the midst of her tears, was saying.

I administered Extreme Unction.

I remained there praying by your side all those long weary hours your struggle lasted, the struggle of your soul. For in that sustained, sinister rattle of death tearing the throat of those in agony, I always can see the determined march of the soul on its hard journey through the body, in its struggle to reach the door behind which You are ever to be found, dear God, waiting in Your Mercy, with Life everlasting . . .

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost! Peace be with you, Ana Maria, my child, farewell . . .

And to you, my Father, my friend, I say farewell too and also thank you . . . thank you once more, and if I should ever know another death beyond this one, so sweet, so earthly, I'm going through now, I pray that your blessing remain with me to sustain me before God's infinite Justice, Light and Love.

And now she finds herself submerged in utter darkness.

And she feels herself precipitated downwards, precipitated dizzily downwards for what seems to her endless time, as if they had dug out the bottom of the crypt and tried to bury her in the very bowels of the earth.

TWENTY-FOUR

And someone, something, was attracting the shrouded woman into the autumnal ground. And so it was she began to descend down in the mire among the tangled roots of trees, beneath the burrows where little timid animals breathe huddled up; falling at times into deep wells filled with dense silvery dew.

Slowly, slowly, she was falling, avoiding flowers of bone and strange beings with viscous bodies that looked through two narrow clefts; knocking against human skeletons marvelously intact and clean with knees bent up as if once again in their mothers' womb.

She sets foot on the bed of an ancient sea and rests there a long time among nuggets of gold and millenarian shells.

Subterranean waterfalls drag her in their course beneath huge domes of petrified forests.

Certain emanations attract her to a specific center, others repel her violently toward zones of climate more in harmony with her own substance.

Ah, if men only knew what stretches out beneath them, they would not find it so simple to drink the waters of springs! For everything sleeps in the earth and everything rises out of the earth.

TWENTY-FIVE

Once more the shrouded woman flows back to the surface of life.

In the darkness of the crypt, she had the feeling that she could move at last. And she could actually have pushed up the lid of the coffin, arisen and returned, erect and cold, over the paths to the threshold of her house.

But, born of her body, she was feeling an infinity of roots sink and spread into the earth like an expanding cobweb through which was rising, trembling up to her, the constant throbbing of the universe.

And now she desires nothing more than to remain there crucified to the earth, suffering and enjoying in her flesh the ebb and flow of distant, far distant tides; feeling the grass grow, new islands emerge, and on some other continent, the unknown flower bursting open that blooms only on a day of eclipse. And she even feels huge suns boiling and exploding and gigantic mountains of sand tumbling down, no one knows where.

TWENTY-SIX

I swear it. The woman in the shroud did not feel the slightest desire to rise again. Alone, she would at last be able to rest, to die.

For she had suffered the death of the living. And now she longed for total immersion, for the second death, the death of the dead.