European Women Writers Series

la función Delta

Translated
and with an afterword by
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the Delta function

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The Delta Function

Monday

I believe that was the day when, for the first time, Doña Maruja overcame her neighborly modesty and dared to openly propose that I help her to die a good death. "I only need someone to give me a little push so I can fall in the river, that's all," she said humbly while she observed me out of the corner of her eye. I was so crazy when I was young that old people made me squeamish, or the truth is, they left me sad and anguished. They reminded me of a future I preferred to ignore.

All in all, it was an ill-fated Monday. I should have suspected it when I lit my first cigarette of the day. I felt a peculiar faintness, a sudden flush, an uncontrollable itch that began in my lungs with the smoke and, spreading upward through my temples, rocked the room. I should have suspected it because in those days I used to

chain smoke – smoking was not yet looked down upon – and this nausea of a nicotine novice was a foreign experience to me. I should have understood then that Monday had started out on the wrong foot and with the wrong smoke. In fact, as soon as I got out of bed I felt a kind of intestinal twinge that I attributed to the spicy snails I had eaten the night before but that later, little by little, I started to blame on a state of mind, until I concluded that the discomfort was but another manifestation of my metaphysical sorrow.

The night before, however, I had gone to sleep stuffed with optimism, dazed by a thousand plans and projects. Back then I used to suffer sporadic flashes of organizational energy, especially each March around my birthday. It had been a few days since I had reached my thirties and, after some early moments of vertigo about leaving my twenties, I had managed to intoxicate myself with expectations for the future. I felt like a debutante, as fresh as my first movie, which was to premiere at the end of the week, on Easter Sunday, in the midst of the glamorous display that accompanies every such grand event. Excited by my upcoming triumph, reassured by my work, I had gone to bed the night before feeling independent, confident, and strong, so it was a surprise to wake up that Monday with anxiety stuck in my stomach in the form of a half-digested snail.

I had resolved to spend Holy Week calmly and serenely. The possibility of becoming centered again, after months of being scattered and drained by my professional responsibilities, inspired me. It was one of those rare occasions when I felt self-sufficient, and self-sufficiency is by definition the vice of the solitary. Suddenly, the Easter Monday meal with Hipólito had become a bother, an imposition on the seclusion I was beginning to cherish. Hipólito was playing bachelor that week, and so it was predictable that he be aroused by sudden fervors of affection; that, being liberated from his conjugal duties, he would try to construct a pantomime of romantic madness. Seven days, seven . . . coming and going at unforeseen hours, seven days of courting, seven nights of busy love, seven sweet mornings of waking in his arms . . . all of that which we had never had because of his married-man routines.

But that morning I had reached the surprising conclusion that I didn't love Hipólito as much as I had forced myself to believe. Once again I was suspicious of the palpitations that beset me when I received his always-late phone calls, as well as the knot that tightened in my stomach and the sudden warmth I felt in my earlobes when I saw him marching up the street to meet me, his arms swinging like those of a soldier on parade, his chin up, and that clever, mousy smile on his lips; I suspected that all those symptoms of mad, passionate love were but physical obligations that I had imposed on myself in my eagerness to be in love. And my lack of love, in the face of something I had waited for – the opportunity to see him, touch him, have him to myself for seven days – surprised me at first, then made me happy to know that I was in charge of myself, and finally made me dizzy with a feeling of intimate emptiness; because for someone like me, who didn't believe in any all-encompassing ideology or comforting answer, love seemed to be the only valid excuse in life.

With all these symptoms in mind, I should have suspected that the day had begun badly and was getting worse, but instead I took great pains to hide it from myself, pretending everything was fine. So, of course, I washed my hair, playing at convention as if the old habits of being in love were still with me. I even tried to straighten up the house to get ready for Hipólito, stimulated by some mysterious code of domestic perfection. I watered the plants, cleaned the pots of dried leaves, trimmed some stubborn geraniums, and caressed my asparagus fern. Rosa and I had bought asparagus ferns for each other one afternoon when things, as usual, were going badly between Hipólito and me and between Rosa and José-Joe. "We are going to buy these pots in memory of this afternoon," Rosa said, standing in front of a vendor's stall. "The asparagus fern is a representation of love, as beautiful and fragile as a sigh," she added in an excess of poetic and rather clichéd inspiration, poor Rosa. In spite of its congenital weakness, my asparagus fern persevered, upright and alive in its pot.

I was finishing my gardening chores when someone rang the doorbell. Really, it was more of an attempt at a ring than a true

ring. It was so short and timid that the bell barely coughed. I peeked through the peephole and saw no one. I opened the door and discovered Doña Maruja, a weightless, sighing shadow. She came in, drained and translucent, slipping like a breeze through the crack in the door. She supported her fragile weight against the corridor wall and gazed at me, shy and somewhat embarrassed, hiding behind an awkward smile. "Good morning, Doña Maruja," I said. "How's life?" She continued watching me in silence, and I began to feel uncomfortable. At that time, for me, old people were as inscrutable and unpredictable as children. "Would you like anything? Are you feeling all right?" I finally added uneasily. She was silent and smiling. "Wouldn't you prefer to come in and sit down?" I finally said, exasperated.

Doña Maruja seemed to consider my proposal for a few seconds and then miraculously unglued herself from the wall, just when I was beginning to suspect she was going to stick there forever like a piece of black molding. Continuing to smile, she went toward the living room with brief, trembling little steps. I followed her. Once in the room she hesitated a moment, deciding where to sit, and then finally placed herself noiselessly on the sofa without making an imprint on the cushion. There she sat, erect, with her minute hands folded over her bosom, with her placid and mysterious smile, her head tilted to the side like a bird's.

I lit up a cigarette. "Would you like . . . would you like some tea or some coffee, or anything else, Doña Maruja?" I asked, just to fill the silence. "No, no, dear. Thank you very much," she finally answered in a feeble little voice, and then, "I'm sorry, dear, I must be interrupting your chores." To which I responded with the expected rush of formal protest: "No, no, of course not. Don't worry about it, Doña Maruja," all the while glancing at my watch and agonizing over how late it had become.

With crooked, arthritic fingers, Doña Maruja clumsily straightened her hair and verified that her tidy gray bun was maintaining its dignified position at the top of her crown. "I will explain, dear, I . . . I know that you are a busy girl and . . ." she smiled tiredly, "but I wanted to speak with you for a moment. You must think I am a

crazy old woman" (new protests on my part, asserting that I believed no such thing, absolutely not). "Yes, yes, you do believe it. Old people are a burden to you young ones," she insisted, smiling. The truth is that Doña Maruja was an impeccably discreet neighbor, always kind, always respectful of one's privacy. She never talked more than was necessary; she never intruded in my life. It was the first time she had entered my home during the four years I had lived in that apartment. I began to feel genuinely curious as to the motives behind her visit.

"You see, child, I wanted to tell you . . ." she halted, then stuttered again, "It is something that is rather difficult to say . . . besides, I am forgetting how to speak, because I never talk to anyone." This stated, she smiled placidly. "I am seventy-six, no, seventy-seven years old . . . yes, seventy-seven. Just imagine what these eyes have seen. There has been a little of everything in my life, good and bad. Three of my sons and my husband have died. My surviving children live far away, very far." Her eyes widened as she leaned toward me and whispered, "Germany!" as though she were revealing the secret key to a magic spell. Afterward she sat up again and continued, "They live their lives, you know . . . they send me enough money, and I don't lack anything," she proudly pointed out, "and two years ago I spent the summer with them. They took me to see the laboratories of my blood."

"The what?"

"The laboratories of my blood," she repeated with a candid, satisfied air. "I do have a very important blood type, very special, you know, dear. It is a blood that no one else has, or almost no one. Because my parents were cousins, they explained to me, and everyone has blood that is kind of divided between the father's and the mother's blood, do you understand? But because my parents were cousins, I have blood that is all the same, identical. Some doctors explained it to me years ago. They investigate and cure illnesses with my blood, with something they call ge . . . ge . . . genetics, and so they keep my blood, they freeze it, and it is so important that they send it to all the laboratories in the world, and my blood is everywhere. When I went to see my children, they

took me to one of those laboratories over there in Germany." She was waving her hand as if to indicate how immeasurable the distance was. "And I only saw it on the outside, but it was very beautiful, all very new, with gardens and flowers, much more beautiful than the ones the doctors have here."

She leaned back, exhausted by the long speech, closed her eyes and sighed very softly. She remained like that for so long that I thought she had fallen asleep, so when she began to speak again, the sound of her voice startled me. "I have already done everything I had to do in life. I have even visited the laboratories that have my blood!" Pensive, she stopped for a moment. "Now, you young ones are very preoccupied with death. It wasn't like that in my days. People died more easily. They lived and they died and that was it. It was natural . . . like the trees, the birds, the rivers." She had lowered her head and was looking at her white hands that stood out against her black skirt. "I am not afraid of dying. I have lived enough. But I am afraid of dying a bad death." She raised her crooked, deformed hand. "You see, child? And it gets worse every day. Soon I won't be able to move. What will I do when I become useless? What will I do alone in my house? I am not afraid of death. I am afraid of dying badly. But I don't know how to do it. I only need a little push to fall in the river, that's all." She raised her head and sat there gazing at me with a calm smile. "A little push to fall in the river of Death." Her eyes were covered with the grayish mist of old age.

I don't remember now how I answered. Probably with some sort of incoherent and terrified babble. I think I stood up and pushed her out the door firmly, but courteously.

I think in desperation I forced myself to forget her. I concentrated on the meal. It was scandalously late, and I still had to go shopping. A little push, that was all. Suddenly I felt irritated and furious with Hipólito, with this date that had disjointed my morning. I hated to go shopping, I hated to cook, and at that moment I would have liked to lie down on the terrace in my bathing suit and sleep, sleep under the hungry early sun of March. To fall in the river, that's all. At that moment I was exasperated by both Hipólito and life.

Just as I returned from the store and was putting the key in the lock, I heard the telephone ring. In my rush to answer, I left the door open and the hallway sprinkled with the packages that had fallen from my broken bag. The bottle of wine smashed to pieces at the living room entrance, and I squashed the *pâté à la poivre* with my foot just before reaching the phone. Understandably, I grabbed the receiver with an indignant desire for revenge.

"What's the matter?"

It was Miguel, and when I recognized his voice my rage immediately dissolved. Miguel always managed, who knows by what miracle, to surround me with a warm serenity and bring harmony to my absurd moods. It was Miguel with his calm, thick voice. "What's the matter, beautiful, are you in a bad mood?" I burst out laughing and told him about the splintered glass and smashed paté. "Are you having someone over for dinner?" he asked, abandoning his customary discretion.

"Yes, Rosa is coming," I lied, somewhat distressed. "Lucky Rosa!" And he repeated, "Lucky Rosa!"

Miguel was calling to tell me he was leaving. No, it wasn't for Easter vacation; it was to work. He wanted to hole himself up in the country with two colleagues, the two who were writing the book with him, in order to proofread the manuscript and finish the appendix. "And you know what? The title is going to be *The Mathematical Game*, after all. You won."

I was surprised to feel a certain relief at hearing this. If he left, I'd be able to see Hipólito during his bachelor's week without feeling guilty or worrying if we'd run into each other. And then I immediately felt the first vague feeling of guilt pricking at my spirit.

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know. I guess Saturday, at the latest."

"Then call me when you get back, darling . . . oh, one more thing. Why would a genetics laboratory want the blood of someone who is the daughter of cousins?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I'm a mathematician, not a biologist."

"But you've studied sciences, after all . . ."

"That doesn't have anything to do with it. It might be homozygotic blood, but I don't know."

When we said good-bye I had yet to understand the significance of homozygotic blood, but such a tenderness I felt for Miguel! How I loved it when he took on that modest air of the professor trying to illuminate some scientific theory to his stumbling student.

After hanging up, I balanced for a moment on the sofa, observing with dismay the greasy package smashed on the floor. A mass in the form of goose liver pudding had begun to travel along the crease of the paper package, and now it was spreading over the hardwood floor in a greasy, thick spiral, like a trembling ochre tongue about to lick the floor. The earlier sensation of nausea and discomfort had become distinct now; there it was, crouched in my stomach, nourished by the vision of the creamy splattered liver. Just a little push, that's all. I shivered. Miguel's call had distressed me. It wasn't only the feeling of guilt at deceiving someone so loving and honest. It was, above all, a rare ennui, the anguished conviction that I loved no one. In those days I still considered myself monogamous. I was young enough that my major preoccupation was getting to know myself, and so I wasted countless hours caught in the senseless vice of introspection, consoled by the belief that I could define myself in static categories. So it was with all this that I came to consider myself monogamous. I felt monogamous. They had raised me monogamous, and having only one man seemed reasonable and just. Being monogamous of heart and polygamous in action was a sickness that only I was susceptible to. And to deepen the conflict, the more I loved one, the more I loved the other.

On the other hand, it was when I was overcome by those mysterious moments of discouragement, when reality settled in, when all desire seemed disproportionate and all feeling insignificant, it was in those moments of inner solitude – because there is no greater solitude than the solitude experienced when one loves no one – that I understood that my love for Hipólito was a deceit,

and I believe that, after that, my affection for Miguel turned pale and weak, as if both loves were condemned to dance the same tune, as if each fed off the other, as if destiny had obligated me to that fatal duality, to that schizophrenia: two loves or none. Plop! The blob of paté fell to the floor, leaving a trail of grease on the wood.

I barely had time to pick up the shattered glass, pass a dustcloth over things, and smooth down my hair, cat-style, in front of the mirror. Hipólito arrived on time for once; at five after two he was ringing the doorbell.

Unsatisfied with myself, saddened by the idea of loving him so little, I went to let him in. The moment I saw him I knew something was wrong. He entered the room with the air of a melodramatic poet, with his windblown scarf, his wool vest and British jacket – he was always so meticulous in his dress, so elegant – and his fine brown hair curling smoothly over his ears. Pensive and withdrawn, he received my kiss with dry, evasive lips.

"I've been rather down these days," he excused his melancholic manner.

"Why?"

"Bah! Nothing in particular, just nonsense."

That meeting was difficult from the beginning. It seemed we never found the words. Hipólito was rigid and absent. Just to have something to do, we sat down at the table. I smoked in silence, cigarette after cigarette, watching him eat and picking from time to time at a piece of ham or an edge of salami while I observed his growing restlessness.

"You make me nervous. It drives me up a wall when you watch me eat!"

Finally, and maybe just to fill the silence, Hipólito chose an obvious topic of conversation: Sunday's premiere. "Are you nervous?" he asked.

"Pchissss . . ."

"Well, I sure am! Imagine how it must be: my asthma has been bothering me now for several days. To tell the truth, I don't know if it's my nerves or if spring has something to do with it. You know,

they can't decide if my asthma has an allergic or a nervous origin. Either way, I spend my days feeling asphyxiated . . . you have selected a defective lover, dear," he added in an ironic tone, his mouth full of bread. "Physically, I'm a disaster."

"It's not that big a deal . . ."

"Thank you very much!"

"What I mean is that the risk the premiere presents is not worth asphyxiating yourself over."

"After all, it is my first script."

"It is also my first movie. And, as a director, I risk much more than you do."

He looked at me with a malicious smile.

"Yes, dear, okay . . . I know the movie is yours, only yours, that I have hardly participated in it. I am no more than a modest collaborator, of course."

The fingernail I was chewing on became bitter with his comment.

"I don't know how you do it, Hipólito, but you always manage to turn the conversation around. You make me feel as if I were a vain, selfish monster when the fact is you are the one who mentioned the movie, the one who is obsessed by triumph or defeat, the one who lives only for professional success . . ."

Hipólito was quiet, but his expression of distant superiority was a sufficient response. I looked at him for a long time, choking on smoke and exasperation, telling myself I didn't like him at all, that his greedy face disgusted me, that his fears bored me, that he made me tired. At that moment I despised him so much that even today I have yet to understand why later, over coffee, I said to him, "I suppose you'll go to the premiere with your wife," in a spiteful tone that gave me away.

"Well . . . yes, of course, you knew that."

To mention his wife in our conversations approached the limits of the tacit rules we had imposed on ourselves. I knew this, but I continued to insist:

"Uh-huh. When does she return?"

"Saturday morning."

"And when did she leave?"

"The day before yesterday. Well, the night before last. I took everyone to the airport. The kids, the suitcases . . . Horrible!"

"Poor boy," I commented acidly. "You're going to make me cry."

"I didn't say it with that intention, you can be sure of that," he answered dryly.

Tsk, tsk. I was behaving badly, and, nevertheless, it didn't bother me in the least. I found myself beyond all barriers of modesty and rationale, capable of carelessly and painlessly committing the wildest outrage, the most atrocious depravity. I felt cold and distant, as if I were observing the whole scene from the outside.

"When I said horrible," continued Hipólito, "I was referring exclusively to myself. I already know that you accuse me of whining too much. Maybe you're right. I have the bad habit of wanting to pamper myself. Is that such an unforgivable need? I have to pamper myself because I feel the rest of you pamper me so little . . . ," he smiled. "The problem, my dear, is that I don't recognize myself in any of the roles I have to act out. I don't recognize myself as father, as husband, not even as lover. I am a disaster. I play too many characters, and I hate all of them."

He spoke well, Hipólito. In reality, I thought, he was all words, just an accumulation of words, finely laced together. Listening to him speak, I began to feel a certain uneasiness, a strange itch, an irrepressible and nasty desire to trespass laws, to provoke a catastrophe, to break once and for all with that eternal and damned discretion. So I leaned toward him, ran my hand along the inside of his thigh, looked deep into his eyes, and pronounced the most deceiving "I love you" of my life.

Hipólito barely blinked and tried to maintain his composure, but every pore of his body signaled a physical withdrawal. He was glued to his chair, all muscles flexed with fear. Hipólito's forte had always been the delicate monologue, centered on himself whenever possible. Loving gestures both distressed and terrified him.

"You have erred in your choice of lovers, dear," he said, feigning indifference. "I feel like a dried-out nut, with its shell still new and intact but shrunken and black inside . . ."

"I love you," I repeated stubbornly while my hand, as if disconnected, went climbing up his leg on its own until it reached the warm folds of corduroy at his crotch and then arrived at his button fly. As I reached the second button, Hipólito couldn't ignore it any longer and had to accept the physical tumult that was giving him away from the waist down. He took his anti-asthmatic spray out of his pocket, deeply inhaled two shots, and finally said:

"That is the problem."

"What?"

"The problem of you loving me."

"Why?"

He fell silent for a moment, grabbed my daring hand under the pretext of a caress, and moved it away from the endangered area.

"I am only six years older than you, and still, at times, you seem so young to me . . ."

"You, in contrast, are so adult, so mature," I responded, enraged.

"So old. Don't laugh . . . I feel endlessly old. Maybe it's because I've led an overly conventional life. My oldest son is already ten. Ten years old, do you see? I am truly middle-aged, dear, the head of a household. Don't you understand? I am an older man, and I am tired."

"And in spite of it all I see you as surprisingly immature."

"You see? You are still young and alive, even capable of being aggressive. I am not even that. So, dear . . ." – Hipólito never called me by my name, he always used this "dear," with all of its false echoes, surely for fear of calling his wife by the wrong name and giving himself away – " . . . the truth is that I feel especially dull today. It would be better if I were quiet and said no more."

"Why? Because you might lose control, you might be loving, you might reveal yourself as too weak, you might leave the page?"

"What page?"

"The page of the novel you make of yourself."

He reflected for a moment while his eyes lit up with pleasure before the possibility of being able to sink his teeth into a metaphor.

"The problem with this novel, dear, is not leaving the page but, instead, getting through the prologue. And I can't get through because I'm out of things to say. You, though, belong to that group of people who still believe one can write thousand-page novels . . . you see? That's why I say you're very young."

"So you see me as a chapter in some unfinished novel."

"Very ingenious, but you know that is not what I was saying. Look, the problem with you and me is that I suffer an irrational weakness for talented people."

"Thanks a lot."

"And if you add to that another embarrassing weakness for people who like me, well . . . no doubt this impression must be unfair, but the truth is that I'm convinced, as I told you before, that I have been and still am loved very little."

"And here you brag about old age. What you just said is characteristic of an adolescent."

"Do you think so? And nevertheless you are in love with me, and excuse my boldness if I say, that I . . ."

"That you are not in love with me."

"That I am not in love with anyone, understand? What I mean to say is that I am already too old for that. I love you very much." Upon saying this, which cost him visible effort, Hipólito lowered his eyes and concentrated on the plateful of crumbs. "I love you very much, and I think you are an extraordinary woman. But I don't have the strength to live, and, in contrast to you, I don't believe in anything anymore. I don't believe in myself as a man, as a father, as a husband, as a lover, not even as a writer . . ."

"Not even," I mocked, but he didn't seem to notice.

"The truth is, dear, I feel disillusioned and apathetic."

"Look, Hipólito, what is happening to you is what happens to the fourteen-year-old who falls in love for the first time with his older sister's friend, and after a few months of frustrated love and suffering, feels very old at approaching fifteen. He feels worldly, disillusioned with life, full of knowledge and experience, when in reality he is no more than a kid with a runny nose."

"How smart you are . . . That is the worst of it, that you are so smart . . ."

At this point I decided to free my hand from the casual prison his hands had created and reinitiate, without modesty, the attack against his buttoned fortress, already sensing what was going to happen and wishing, nevertheless, to provoke the outcome.

Hipólito straightened up completely. He even tensed his ears with a shudder of discomfort. He threw his typical excuse-glance toward his wristwatch: "I'm going to have to go," he muttered in a barely audible voice. And that phrase for me was like the trumpet of the bugle that announces the battle charge:

"You mean you're going?" I said, feigning a surprise that I didn't feel in the least. "Didn't we agree that this week we wouldn't be in such a hurry, like we always are?"

Hipólito mumbled some senseless words that sounded like an excuse, plunged his gaze into the folds of the tablecloth, blushed to the roots of his hair, and began to visibly crumble. "I have to go. I'm sorry," he finally repeated when he had gathered sufficient courage to do so, standing himself up with a forced hop. I continued spouting all the inadequate phrases I had always suppressed: "I love you very much," I insisted passionately, "I love you very much." And next, locking my arms around his neck, I even came to beg him, "Don't go, please don't go," in the ultimate, unpardonable trespass and supreme betrayal of the rules of the game.

There, glued to him, with my face close to his, I was able to observe with lingering detachment how the foreseen process was taking place step by step, how he was turning pale, how his cheeks were acquiring a greenish tint, how fear was condensing into little drops of sweat across his forehead, how his eyes were brimming with discomfort, how he shifted his weight from foot to foot, probably wondering which one to use to begin his sprint for a quick exit.

"Don't go, please don't go," I repeated relentlessly while Hipólito struggled inside my arms, looking for a crack to escape through, blinded by my lack of modesty, strangled by the inconvenience of the moment, besieged by my affection. Finally he unhooked himself from my arms and, in four terrified leaps, ap-

proached the door, grunting unfinished phrases and incoherent apologies. At the doorstep, I cruelly drove in the last nail: "We'll see each other this week, won't we?" And he assented three or four times with effusive head nodding: "Yes, yes, I'll call you, I'll call you, I'll call you." This said, he literally fled down the stairs, his eyes bulging with fear, his fists clenched tight, and his elbows stuck to his sides. A trail of anti-asthmatic spray clouded the space behind him.

I cleared the table and emptied the ashtrays, only to refill them immediately with my chain of endless cigarettes. I wandered around the house a little, pretending to straighten up objects and furniture that didn't need rearranging. Finally, in a sudden frenzy, I decided to make the most of the afternoon and stop by the agency. I would pick up the sketches for the commercials, and, with a bit of luck, I might even find the boss and discuss them with him. I would work a little and hopefully recover some strand of purpose to that senseless day.

It was a warm Monday that smelled like spring, so I walked to the agency. When I arrived, it was already late. Everyone had gone, as was to be expected, and only Tadeo remained, with his round, moonlike face and his flat feet, as servile and miserable as always.

"How nice to see you, señorita! Congratulations!"

Tadeo, the agency's good-for-everything boy, the designer's assistant, paste-up person, bellboy and doorboy, had the disquieting habit of incessantly congratulating everyone.

"Congratulations for what?"

"For the Easter holiday, señorita. And for your movie, señorita . . ."

And while he talked he smoothed his temples with a nervous, nonchalant gesture to make sure that everything was in order and that the dirty adhesive tape was still in its place. Tadeo must have been around forty then, but he had a flabbiness about him that gave him a viscous texture that made him appear pickled. He was short, with a rickety appearance and a timid little belly peeping over his plastic imitation leather belt. His baldness amplified the

considerable dimensions of his head and outlined the perfect sphere of his face, like a round loaf of bread, empty of features. He had let the sparse hairs at his temples grow, and they stuck out like side bangs so that they would hide his secret: immense fleshy ears that were stuck to his cranium with adhesive tape in candid certainty that no one would discover such a scheme. And, so, between the landmarks of those bulky sideburns, his face spread out like a white stain. Because his paleness was so overpowering, it was easy to believe that in the shadows it could glow in the dark, that it could give off dead lunar beams.

I circled the modern, neutral office, so aseptic in its emptiness. On the secretary's table there was a small cactus that livened up the nickeled coldness of the environment, and on the walls were the best ads from past campaigns, ostentatious, colorful, clashing, provocative, in the middle of the stark whiteness. Ever solicitous, Tadeo followed me, turning on the fluorescent lights, giving pigeon-toed hops with those impossible feet, scuttling along under my elbows, and balancing his heavy head of ghostly brilliance.

"Señorita, the director left this envelope under your name."

"Oh yes, thank you, Tadeo. This is what I was looking for."

I opened the envelope and took out the scripts. There were six, two for one commercial and four for the other – to choose from, to debate over. Two of them had slashes of red marking pen in the margin, domineering and nervous letters, my boss's handwriting.

"Modern and aggressive," said one. And the other: "Direct yet elegant, delicate topic." I sighed, sickened once again by that corrupt, cheap trade that pretended to be artistic, free, and creative. Obviously Fariño had already decided which scripts were to be used. They would be bad, no doubt, but it mattered very little; the rejected ones were usually just as despicable.

I decided to skip the habitual pantomime of team work, the morose and useless discussion the following day about the worthiness of this or that idea, the farce of the selection.

I put the two scripts that were underlined with red in my purse and returned the four remaining ones to their envelope and added a note:

"Your wish is my desire, dear director, and I have preferred to prefer the two scripts that you prefer. I'm not going to go on vacation. I'll call you tomorrow."

And later, after a moment of doubt, I sweetened the sarcasm with the final addition of an ambiguous "XXOO."

"Here, Tadeo, would you be so kind as to give this to Fariño tomorrow?"

"Of course, señorita."

Frankly, I had nothing more to do there, but suddenly I was overburdened by the idea of going out on the street, of returning to the city streets at that dirty, late afternoon hour, a useless hour of useless steps taken, a futile hour. And so I settled onto a table, sheltered by the timeless fluorescent surroundings at the agency, to wait until nightfall, when the city would be reduced to a profile of its contours. To use up time, I took out the scripts again and read them. One was the ad about tampons. The setting: a party. A group of kids dancing furiously to rock and roll, a handsomeyoungmodernandelegant boy, who moves across the living room, approaches a cuteyoungmodernandinnocent girl who is seated in a corner. He tries to get her to dance. She refuses and lowers her head, blushing. Close-up of two other girls who comment on the incident, "How strange, Marisa doesn't want to dance with Juan. I thought she was crazy about him," and the other adds with a smile, "Wait, I think I know what's wrong."

Next scene, the two girls – the blushing one and her astute friend – coming out of the bathroom with cheerful vigor. The camera follows them as they enter the group. Marisa approaches Juan, offers him her arm (expression of happy surprise from him), and they begin to dance to something fast. Last scene: a rear view of the girl, packed into her tight pants, contorting herself frenetically – superimposition of the final slogan: "Secure Tampons. For those who don't want to lose opportunities." In one word, abominable. I raised my eyes from the paper and discovered Tadeo: he was two feet away from me, standing, observing me fixedly with his wilted, disquieting eyes.

"Do you want something, Tadeo?"

"No, no, señorita, excuse me."

He emphasized the negative, moving his dense head heavily from side to side.

"Maybe I am keeping you. You were probably ready to leave, and you can't because of me."

"No, no, señorita, of course not, I have to stay here until eight..."

And he continued watching me, smiling blandly. Gathering forces, I decided to ignore him and launched myself into the dialogue of the second script, a "spot" on washing machines.

The boss pleaded with me to take the "feminine" commercials in order to give them a modern touch, so that they wouldn't seem old-fashioned in the face of feminist demands. "For the woman of the future," he was accustomed to saying. "You must create some commercials that are convincing to yourself," he bellowed at team meetings. At times I stood up to him and on other occasions I agreed to everything, all depending on my strength and state of mind.

The second commercial dealt with an antiquated washing machine. Rear view: a washing machine in the middle of a vacant white environment. Muffled, insistent knocks. Camera zooms in little by little on the washing machine and starts to circle it while the pitch of the knocks rises. Front view of the machine: through the porthole a woman is seen locked inside the apparatus, a woman knocking frantically at the glass, yelling inaudibly. "Stop being imprisoned by your wash," a voice mandates. Zoom to the porthole of the machine, transition to the buzzing, bustling new model of the advertising company, the clothes tumbling happily inside. The camera retreats to include a general shot, and next to the shining machine we see the same woman, who was imprisoned before, aggressively dressed – tight pants, boots, and all that – planted defiantly with her legs apart. And imprinted on the last scene, the title: "Fasser, the free woman's washing machine."

And so, that horror was my career, my occupation, my real job, while waiting for my movie. The movie, at last, would liberate me from steel wool pads, lemon dishwashing liquids, marvelously automatic washing machines, and sanitary pads.

Tadeo was still at my side, watching me, smiling bashfully.

"Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"No, señorita, only that . . ."

And he was silent, lowering his head, his hands behind his back, blushing.

"Tell me, Tadeo."

"It's just that . . . well, señorita, I don't want to bother you."

"Tell me, tell me."

Finally he let go, lowering his head to the floor, hiding his discolored gaze in the corners of the room.

"It's just that, well, señorita, could I please take some pictures of you?"

"Some pictures?"

As if my question had been sorcery, a tattered instamatic camera suddenly and magically appeared in his hands, and Tadeo began to pretend that he was shooting: "Click! and that's it! Only ten minutes, señorita," he repeated, partially covering his watery smile with the camera.

"It's that . . . you see, señorita . . . I . . . with your permission, without wanting to bother you . . . it's that my mother, señorita, and with you becoming so famous, my mother said to me, 'Take some pictures of her,' but only ten minutes, señorita, and if it bothers you, then forget it. And since today I saw you alone and unrushed, I said to myself, what better occasion? With your permission, because the other day my mother saw the interview you did on TV, on that TV program about movies, you know which one I'm talking about, señorita? By the way, you should have seen how pretty you looked, and as my mother is always so well informed, in spite of everything, she said to me: 'Take some pictures of her.' It'll be ten minutes, no more, 'Click!' and that's it, with your permission."

"Your mother?"

"Yes, I don't know if you were aware, but since the poor woman is paralyzed, well, she cannot move at all, and it is very difficult because my mother is beautiful. I shouldn't say that, but the poor woman hasn't been able to move for eleven, no, twelve years, and that's why."

"And that's why, what?"

"And that's why I take the pictures," he explained impatiently. "Just think, señorita. We live alone, the two of us, my mother and I, and the poor woman gets really bored in the house all day sitting in her wheelchair that I put near the window so she can see the bustle of the street, but she spends so many hours like that, so many hours alone, too many. My mother, along with you, señorita, is a true lady. We used to have money, you know, and some status, but things happen as they do . . ."

The always-silent Tadeo had burst out with an unending shower of words, and the camera rested sadly in his hands, forgotten. He remained motionless, his eyes fixed on me, barely blinking, and his voice, a small, sharp, and disguised voice, seemed to absorb all his energy, his vital power, making him look like a ventriloquist's doll.

"And the poor woman was used to coming and going. She was a woman who moved around a lot, you understand? Before all those misfortunes . . . she was an active woman, my mother was, and now, of course, well, she gets bored, and we live downtown next to the Plaza de la Estrella – you know where I'm talking about, señorita? A small street that is behind it . . . there is always a lot happening there. But the poor woman gets bored of always looking out at the street because she can't even move her head, and I have to leave her in the mornings leaning up against the window pane, that is how she watches, and when she gets tired she closes her eyes for a little bit."

"A little push, only a little push to enter the river of Death." I felt a shiver. "That's fine, Tadeo, take all the pictures you want, but please hurry because it's already getting late." The truth is that I still did not understand the meaning of these absurd pictures, but I consented to his wishes in order to stop his chattering, to get away from his bland, suffocating confidences that were beginning to hem me in.

"Thank you very much, señorita. I knew you would understand. You don't know how happy my mother is going to be when I show her the pictures tonight, because at night we have a great time.

When I get home, I put a little stand that I made myself in front of her chair, pile her magazines there, and the two of us read them together, just like when I was little, but now it is I who turns the pages for her. Because my mother, you know, was always very fond of movies and plays and musicals and all that, and she is up on everything that's going on in the world. Paralyzed and all, she still knows about everything, and she keeps her spirits up. She is a very courageous woman, my mother; well, at times she gets a little mad, and her natural disposition comes out, because my mom has always been a strong-willed woman. And so beautiful, so beautiful, señorita, pardon me for saying this, considering she is my mother, but, so beautiful! When I comb her hair in the mornings, that silver hair that she has . . . and before it was . . . look, look here she is thirty years old . . ."

He took a yellowish card out of his pocket and showed it to me with a trembling hand. It was a picture of a slightly plump woman with fiery dark eyes, a snub nose, too much lipstick, and a very round face. A vulgar and defiant woman. "Very beautiful, yes," I commented vaguely, uncomfortable, feeling a bit nauseated. It was hot; I felt suffocated. The blood was pounding in my ears, and my stomach hurt. "But, Tadeo, if you could just hurry up a little!"

"Yes, yes, of course, señorita, with your permission."

He began hopping around me, shooting nonstop, barely looking to focus, wrapped in mechanical buzzing and clicks. "You see? Since she can't move from the house now, I take the artists home to her. That is why I go to the openings and wait at hotel doors, and people are very nice, they let me take their pictures, well . . . some don't, like that wicked lady, La Corralita, who didn't even let me go into the dressing room after I had spent so much time waiting. And I'll warn you, señorita, La Corralita is already getting on. I know because I've been right by her side, as close to her as I am to you now, and believe me, señorita, when I tell you she is as ugly and bony as an alley cat, and her voice isn't worth mentioning. As my mother says, she squawks instead of singing, so I don't know why she puts on those airs, because I have been with *the* Doña Concha. Think about that, Doña Concha, no less, and she

was most charming. It is just as I say, those who are ladies are ladies forever, you understand what I mean."

He continued shooting incessantly, dumping pictures everywhere, and in five minutes he had filled the surrounding tables with prints in various phases of development. There I was, emerging from the cloudy photos with a ghostly air: I could just begin to perceive the contours of my body in the rectangular print next to me, and in the following one I appeared perfectly clear, with a famished, sad color, a false color, a dead color. I started to feel truly sick. I had, no doubt, acquired the same ash tone that was emerging from the instant photos. I stood up and began my flight after mumbling some barely polite excuse. I dodged his body and threw myself into the hallway. Tadeo followed, still shooting pictures and leaving a trail of flash cubes behind him: "You don't know how much I appreciate this, señorita, how much the both of us appreciate this. Later we paste the pictures to the wall. I already have hundreds of pictures of famous people; if you would like, you could come see them someday, señorita, if it wouldn't be a bother . . ." I reached the door on the run and struggled clumsily with the lock. "And since our house is very big, we feel less alone with all of you. Señorita, one more and I'll be finished, how kind you are, señorita, thank you, thank you very much . . ." I was already gone, flying down the stairs, answering "you're welcomes" into space in my rush to escape, and I could still hear his last cry two flights above me: "Good-bye, señorita. Congratulations again, thank you very much!"

I didn't get farther than the street corner. There, leaning against the cement, I deposited all the contents of my stomach into the night. So, I said to myself as I gingerly blew my nose, it turns out that the snails really did make me sick.

September 12

I don't know if it is age or sickness, but I get tired. I know very well that there comes a time when both things get to be the same. But I am not at that point yet, or at least I hope not, although this extended stay here is proof that my system is beginning to fail. What I mean is that I get tired, that any extra effort, as insignificant as it may be, exhausts me. Even writing tires me; my back bothers me from being erect for so long. I remember my mother telling me that beds always cripple a person. And the hours are long in the midst of so much whiteness and silence. Friends, or those who called themselves friends, seem to have abandoned me to my boredom. I don't consider myself spiteful, but I don't know if I will know how to forgive them for it. After the first week of polite visits they have all deserted me one by one. Their flowers

have wilted, I have eaten up all their bonbons, and I feel alone and forgotten. It seems that the only one who perseveres is Ricardo, at least for now, and one can't say that he is exactly the best company. Well, I don't want to complain about him; after all, he comes and visits me. But the years have made him even more picky and priggish, and at times I find him impossible. So, in order to fill the void and relieve the tedium, I decided to start a type of diary. How strange, I who always hated diaries, who was never, ever capable of writing one, not even as an adolescent. I feel myself swept away by the mechanical pleasure of writing and seeing my letters run splendidly over the satin paper that my friend María de Día supplies me with.

The truth is that now that I've started to write, I don't know what to write about. My life is so routine and vacant here. My only distractions are my chats with María de Día. María de Día is at times very young, absent-minded, and happy, and at other times very young, absent-minded, and sad. That is what I like the most about her, her variety. When she is happy she shoves me out of bed, makes me get dressed, and walks me through the hospital, telling me that I am perfectly fine and that it is good for me to move around. Her last euphoric frenzy cost me a frightful cold. One has to recognize that she is a disaster as a nurse. When she is sad she comes to sit at the foot of my bed and talks to me about herself, about her projects, about her ideas and opinions, about the world, and, above all, about her boyfriends, who are innumerable. All this while she is nibbling with concentrated eagerness at a lock of hair that, against the rules, she slips out of her cap. I have a bet with myself on one of her boyfriends, a cardiologist, the mere mention of whom results in an accelerated rhythm of María de Día's jaws that clip off her poor tortured hair. This morning she was in one of her dispirited moods, and when she came to pick up my breakfast she sat for a moment and said to me: "Oh, Lucía!" – because she always uses my first name – "Do you think I'm crazy?" I hurried to answer her that no, what nonsense, that she is a very sane and serene girl. "It's just that at times I feel I love too many people, and at other times it seems I don't love anyone." The

coincidence amused me, and the thought escaped me in a loud voice: "It must be the Delta Function," I said. "The what?" she asked wide-eyed. "The Delta Function," I repeated, and I calmed her curiosity by promising to explain it all to her someday.

María de Noche, no, María de Noche I don't like. She is an older woman, almost my age, and she has the eyes of someone who has seen too much. She is an efficient, dry, strict nurse who never wastes energy. When she stops by my room every day after dinner to ask with a hollow, professional voice, "Would you like anything, Doña Lucía?" she scares me. I don't know what it is, but something funereal and ominous follows at her heels. She brings with her darkness and restlessness, insomnia and nightmares. Her eyes bother me more than anything; her small, brown, wrinkled eyes have the glaze one gets from contemplating death. In her gaze I see the reflection of a hundred anonymous hospital deaths, and that scares me. María de Noche is a shadow.

Ricardo, with his usual rudeness, says the problem is that I am a little hysterical, that I uselessly dramatize everything.

"To me, your María de Noche seems to be a very attentive and helpful woman."

Ricardo wants to have the last word on everything. He thinks he knows all the secrets. And that ridiculous manner of speaking he has, that affected baroque language he uses, that exasperating habit of displacing adjectives, and then pronouncing them with a suave and dramatic tone.

"For September," he says, for example, without blinking, "it is a morning quite lim-pid and te-pid, don't you think?" Ricardo has made a mistake in choosing a career: he should have been an actor. I don't think he has ever stepped onto a stage during his lifetime, despite having tried every other imaginable and unimaginable trade. It is a shame; the world has missed a genius. I haven't met anyone who is more of a buffoon than he is. He enjoys being the center of attention and having someone to listen to him. I am that someone now, converted as I am into a perfect audience because of this sickness that ties me down to the bed. It irritates me a little to see the contrast in our conditions, which forces me to

long for his visits and to put up with annoyances that I normally would not allow.

If one takes a good look at it, my situation is rather miserable because, at times, I feel truly indignant when Ricardo comes to see me after having skipped a few days. He swaggers into the room, aware that he is needed and proud of it. He even dares to spout, "You have missed me, haven't you?" in that intolerable tone. And because of my loneliness, I stay quiet and try to smile, in spite of it all.

He arrived today excited and smiling, carrying his sweater and commenting on the magnificence of the morning, the sunny fall that still feels like August.

"It must be magnificent for you," I told him, "but I can't enjoy it being locked up in this damned room."

"Please, Lucía, don't start with your endless complaints and your proverbial bad moods, or I won't come back, okay?"

He was wearing a loose, linen shirt with no cuffs or collar, one of those Sicilian blouses in fashion now. Of course, the material was frayed at the edges, threadbare at the seams and discolored near the armpits. Ricardo is still as disastrous as ever.

"What a beautiful shirt you have on! I mean, it must have been beautiful at one time."

"Do you like it?" he strutted. "It's just that it is very old. Nowadays all the tasteless youngsters who want to be in style wear these, but I bought it an infinity ago when I was in the Islands of Lipari."

"Of course, Ricardo, I never assumed that you had bought it to be in style. You would never do anything so vulgar," I teased him.

"Have I ever told you about my trip to the Islands of Lipari?"

This was, without a doubt, a rhetorical question, because without waiting for an answer he sprawled on the sofa and launched into one of his interminable monologues.

"In Lipari there are as many volcanoes as islands. During the day the ocean is as clear as crystal, and at night it acquires a formidable phosphorescence, a kind of showy-egotistical fire, the brilliance of plankton. I used to take a rowboat and go out to sea alone in the dark night. There was a great silence, and the prow

cut through the luminous waters, leaving a dark wake behind it. All around you could see the silhouette of incandescent volcanoes spurting lava periodically. It was beautiful, the contrast between the red volcanoes and the cold brilliance of the water."

"I can't imagine, of course, that every shirt should have such an exotic history."

"I was discouraged and depressed back then . . . I had just arrived from China, remember? It was when I wanted to start that business importing tiger balm."

"Contraband tiger balm, you mean."

"Lucía, Lucía," he chided me. "It wasn't truly contraband, in reality . . ."

"In reality it was a terrible failure."

"True, it failed, but it failed because they betrayed me, because I betrayed myself . . ." He paused, losing his gaze to faraway dreams. "It was that Turkish girl who was my contact and who unfortunately fell in love with me. It was a tragic story, I must add. Finally, her husband realized everything. You can't imagine how the Turks are when it comes to family matters. What happened was that he turned me in to the police. And she, when we were already in Lipari navigating through the islands, she threw herself into the luminous ocean. She jumped from the boat before I could restrain her. It was a magnificent scenario for a suicide, I assure you! It was a grandiose decision to choose to die in that glacial fire."

"But, didn't you tell me that you always used to go out alone in the boat?"

"That was after I lost her. I used to row alone in the night and reminisce."

"I don't believe any of it, Ricardo, absolutely nothing."

"Okay, fine . . ." he huffed playfully. "But wouldn't it have been beautiful?"

I have reread what I just finished writing, and I have to confess I feel somewhat guilty. Guilty for being so merciless with Ricardo. Guilty for speaking so badly of him. When it comes down to it, we have known each other for thirty years. When it comes down to it, we have lived and grown old together. Poor Ricardo, we are always

arguing, but I think I appreciate him. It touches me to see him wrinkled and consumed, to watch how his shirts hang on the pointed perch of his shoulders, across his sunken chest.

"How old are you now, Ricardo?" I asked him this morning.

"Three more than you, as always."

"Sixty-two."

"Sixty-three, dear, you are about to turn sixty."

I don't want to think about it. I still have five months left. Old age begins officially with decade number six, or at least it seems so to me. I know that it is a silly, naive thought, but while I am still living my fifty-ninth year I feel much younger than Ricardo, a man in his sixties. What a horrible expression: "in his sixties." I regret having used it so many times during my life. I'd rather erase it from the dictionary. Ricardo, in spite of everything, is not in bad shape, and he still has all of his hair, now transformed into an impossible wooly mop of dirty gray. I also had achieved a physical maturity that was dignified until the dizziness and headaches began. I know that this ear infection is nothing, but nevertheless I have become so emaciated during these past three weeks! Ricardo says it is my hypochondria, my nerves, my "damned" pessimism. María de Día says that it's a lie, that I look very beautiful. María de Noche tells me not to tire myself by writing so much . . . María de Noche doesn't waste her time with compliments. She is a precision machine with no room for the superfluous.

"The truth is, you are pale, and as a whole you look pitiful," Ricardo was commenting this morning, confusing, as he always did, sincerity with rudeness. "But that comes from being locked in here all day. I am sure that when you get out, you will recover your vigor."

It scares me, however. There are some people who age in leaps, who are shoved toward death, and I am afraid of belonging to that category. I feel as if I have fallen downhill a step, as if now I will never be able to wash away this gray tint that paints my face today.

But it is about time to give this diary a rest; night is falling, and the evening is becoming as gray as my mood.

September 17

It seems that the radiation sessions have been worthwhile because my dizziness is receding, and the world is beginning to slow down after having spun around me for days on end. I'm feeling much better now. Instead of waiting for María de Día to roll me out of bed every morning, I get myself up, eager to take advantage of the good weather and enjoy the fresh air in the garden. I suppose that if I keep up at this rate, they will dismiss me from the hospital soon, and I will be able to return home to my own world and way of life. This time it will be a different life. I have done a lot of thinking these days.

Maybe I shouldn't criticize my friends so harshly for deserting me. I have distanced myself too much from their world. When Miguel left me I made the mistake of harboring my bitterness and

locking myself in, and I haven't been able to break out of my solitary routine since. When I look back on the past years the only memories I have are of long hours of work and solitude. Friendships are to be pampered; one has to watch over them carefully and water them as though they were delicate plants.

In spite of my upcoming sixtieth birthday this March, I am still young. This illness has not only helped me to recover my strength and optimism; it has also helped me to discover the pleasure of writing.

Today I took the plunge. At first I was very hesitant. Sharing my memoirs with Ricardo meant facing his biting, pungent sarcasm. But I know what I have written is good, and that has forced me to rely on him, as he is my only available reader at the moment.

"Look, Ricardo," I said in my most cordial voice, "I have started a kind of memoirs, an account of my life during the period when my movie premiered thirty years ago."

"Am I in it?"

"Not for now."

"Then it must be awfully boring."

"But you will be, Ricardo. Don't be narcissistic."

"All right, all right. In that case I'll take a look at the script. Give it to me."

"It's nothing special. In fact, it is really bad, just a pastime. It's very poorly written."

He read through all the folios quickly and then again once more, almost without breathing. I rushed to put on my glasses so that I wouldn't miss his most minimal gesture, but his face remained expressionless. All I perceived was my own nervousness reflected in it. Finally he gathered up the sheets, smoothed their edges, fussed with the pages until they were perfectly aligned, and, in short, drove me to the edge of desperation.

"So, tell me, what do you think? Remember, of course, that it is only a whim."

Ricardo remained silent for yet a few more seconds, gazing at me fixedly with his cool violet eyes.

"It's not bad, Lucía," he said at last. "I would even dare to

suggest that it is quite good. You should have dedicated yourself to writing instead of stubbornly persisting in making movies. One has to admit that as a movie director you were a failure. Perhaps literature would have provided you with a more promising and fulfilling future."

I was grateful to Ricardo. I know that stabbing style of handing out praise is his peculiar way of being nice. Furthermore, I suppose that behind his words there was a certain residue of envy that made me value the quality of what I had written even more.

"Of course," he added quickly, "as a novel it's fine, but as a memoir it is a fraud. Everything you say is a lie. It is a clear distortion of reality."

"What do you know? Were you, by chance, with me on that specific day?"

"Obviously, I wasn't there, but I am familiar enough with the story. For example, I know all about your relationship with Hipólito, and I know both Hipólito and Miguel. I know enough to realize that the story is simply untrue."

And Ricardo spent the next half-hour trying to convince me that he knows more about my life than I do.

Ricardo does not realize how ridiculously pretentious he can be at times. He does not realize he cannot be the star of every show; he isn't writing my memoirs, I am.

"And what's more," I confronted him, "it seems awfully odd to me that you should worry about whether my story is true or not, when you have always lied about your life. No one can believe anything you say."

He smiled with obvious satisfaction. My attack had provided him with his favorite topic of conversation, himself.

"You're right, you're right," he admitted magnanimously. "However, you are missing a subtle but fundamental difference. The lie is a vital option for me. Let's just say that it is part of my philosophical stance. Dear Lucía, one must never reveal everything one knows because . . ."

"Because one loses power, I know. You've said so over and over."

"Precisely! One must never reveal everything one knows be-

cause one loses power. Don't give me that look of annoyance, Lucía. It would be more useful for you to absorb what I have to say. I have selected the lies. Lies protect me, and, what's more, you have to admit that my lies help me improve reality. Thus, they are an alternative I choose. But in your case it is quite different; you want to believe and make believe that you are telling the truth. I would even venture to say that your case is truly immoral – on its way to becoming pa-the-tic."

I don't know why, but Ricardo's arrogance struck me as amusing today. It could be because I am feeling strong, content, and full of purpose. I've decided I'm going to fix up my apartment. It deserves it after all these years. I'll paint the walls and buy that bookcase I've needed so badly. I like my apartment. When I rented it thirty years ago it was the first home I'd had, a place that was truly my own. The walls were impeccable then. The same walls are imprinted now with wear and tear, the sweat of these long years. Now the corners are filled with dried dirt and other unidentifiable substances, and the blackish smoke has climbed the walls above the radiators and darkened the chipped plaster. The living room carpet has been permanently marked with the pee of a friend's dogs and the vomit of some forgotten visitor. The pillow edges are frayed, their colors faded. The chairs grumble and creak under the slightest load, as though all the years of bearing weight have made them weary.

My apartment has grown old with me. It is a reflection of my own decay: these joints of mine that also grumble and this sunken, wrinkled face that I glimpse in the mirror on rare occasions. I say rare because my thirty-year-old face lives on, its features still imprinted on the back of my mind. That worn-out mask that creeps into the mirror today seems foreign and even picturesque to me. I watch it without really seeing, distantly observing its puzzled eyes, the chapped lines around the mouth, and the somewhat fuzzy chin.

Miguel told me many years ago that underneath my chin there were the remnants of a little girl's skin, a fragment of soft, pubescent epidermis covered by peach fuzz, that sweet baby fuzz all

mortals lose in adolescence, all except peculiar and beautiful me, who had preserved it as my utmost adornment.

Saying this, Miguel used to kiss my neck and comb the delicate, almost invisible fuzz with the tip of his tongue. Then he would climb up my chin slowly, tenderly, to meet my already slightly opened lips.

I have been missing Miguel's tenderness for quite some time now, and that peach fuzz of mine has turned into indecent whiskers, dark and senile hairs that I pluck from time to time.

Sometimes I wish I could repaint myself with the same ease with which I will whitewash my walls; but now that this is not possible, I will at least redo my apartment and wash away the melancholy of remembrance.

Tuesday

The telephone rang. It wasn't Hipólito. It was the secretary from the agency: "Fariño got your note, and he wants to know if you can come to see him around one." I said yes in a moment of weakness, numbed as I was by the long sleep.

I checked the clock: nine-thirty. Fariño, the executive, always with his early morning emergencies. I was already in bad spirits, so in order to give the day another chance to start off on the right foot, I decided to go back to sleep.

I had just dozed off for a while – wavering in that misty, soundless zone between sleep and conciousness – when the phone rang again. It wasn't Hipólito. It was my parents calling to say good-bye before they left on vacation. I allowed myself to be quite rude, protected as I was by my drowsiness and their affection.

Somewhat soothed by my outburst, I took the phone off the hook, smothered the dial tone with a pillow, and tried to fall asleep again, basking in my somber shadow of abandonment and self-pity. The doorbell rang and I dragged myself up to answer it. It wasn't Hipólito; it was Rosa, a fresh bag of sweet rolls in hand.

"Did I wake you?"

"Hmmm . . ."

"I'm sorry, but I'm about to leave for Isla Blanca and wanted to say good-bye. I called from the corner to see if I could come up. But the line was busy the whole time, so I thought you were awake."

I savored my anger for a few seconds. It tasted of stale cigarettes from the night before. Finally I decided to keep quiet and make coffee. We ate breakfast together in silence, and by the time we finished I felt less at odds with the world.

"Your coffee is going to get cold, Rosa," was my first civilized comment of the day.

"That's okay, I'm not going to drink it. You know I hate coffee," she answered timidly.

"I didn't remember! You dummy . . . Why didn't you remind me? Do you want some tea?"

"No, don't bother. It's just that you looked so grumpy that I was afraid to say anything."

In all honesty I should admit the general consensus is that I have a foul temper. Since that is how most people see it, it must be true; but I tend to consider myself tolerable and easy to live with. Rosa, on the other hand, always demonstrated a notorious lack of spark.

"Even so, you should have reminded me, you idiot," I insisted, rather offended.

"Don't, Lucía, it's not worth worrying about. It's worse when . . . You know what happened to me the other day? I went to a little print shop on my street, they have a photocopier, and I wanted to make some extra sets of a script for José-Joe . . ."

"And why couldn't he do that himself?"

"Well, anyway," continued Rosa appeasingly, "it was I who went,

and the boy who waited on me was deaf and dumb, one of those who kind of babbles and no one understands. Get the picture? Anyway, I needed twenty-five sets, and this kid was slow. He was really intent and meticulous; every once in a while he would stop to ask me something. It was horrible because I couldn't understand anything he said. First he asked if I wanted more than one copy of each page, and he had to repeat the question three times for me. When he asked me if I wanted the original and the copies separated, the same thing happened. You have no idea how awful it was. And then, after all that, he asked me if I would like a cup of coffee. That I understood right away, but I was sure I must have heard wrong again because it seemed so strange that he would invite me. So I made him repeat the offer about four times until he finally pointed to a coffee maker on a counter with little paper cups scattered all around it. I was so embarrassed, and he seemed like such a nice kid, that I gestured approvingly and said yes with a smile to show him how pleased I was with the invitation. So, of course, when we reached the counter I had no other choice than to pour myself a cup, and since he was right there, I had to fill it to the brim. To top it off, the coffee was horrible, and there wasn't any cream, so I had to drink it black. God, Lucía, I swear I drank the entire cup and almost vomited. And the whole time I was trying to appear appreciative. It was terrible."

"Rosa, you really are an idiot."

"Wait, that isn't the worst of it. The worst part is that when I went to throw the cup in the bin I opened the lid and . . . guess what I saw? An endless pile of paper cups full of coffee! Full, understand? The same thing must have happened to everyone there. They all realized the coffee was horrible, but they were smarter and didn't drink it . . . And the worst, the very worst, Lucía, is that after my heroic effort in finishing off the entire cup, when the deaf-mute went to throw his cup away, he could have thought that any of those full cups was mine!"

At this point we sat back and had a good laugh. When Rosa laughed her freckles always bunched up on her nose. She dried

her eyes – Rosa cried easily, whether it was from pain or happiness – and lit a cigarette.

"Well, they've offered me two concerts on Isla Blanca in some church or other. The concerts fall on Thursday and Good Friday, so I decided to make the most of it and stay the whole week. They only pay my travel and lodging, but that doesn't seem like too bad of a deal, does it?"

"What about José-Joe?"

"He's impossible right now. You know how he gets – he's so edgy."

"And Clara?"

"I'm leaving her with my mother."

"Don't tell me you're going alone, Rosa, totally alone?"

"Yes, I am."

"You're sure you're not going to take along one of your girlfriends?"

"I'm positive, Lucía. As you can see, I'm becoming an adult." And upon saying this, Rosa gave me a mischievous wink.

I don't know whether I was sorry Rosa was leaving or if it was the over-abundant breakfast after getting sick the night before that was provoking a digestive melancholy; but I do know that once alone, I was discouraged and again weighed down by my foul mood. Reluctantly, I picked up around the apartment and began to make my bed. It was half-made when I fell into it again: there have been very few times in my life when I have resisted the double temptation of an open bed and a lagging spirit.

Rosa was gone. My parents were gone. Hipólito had fled, not to return, I assumed, for the rest of the week. And Miguel wasn't at my side either. Miguel was always ready to offer me his protective shoulder, that warm, fuzzy refuge with its woody, resinous smell. I remained spread-eagle on the bed, surrendering myself to a strange paralysis and, at the same time, observing how the flickering reflections of the cars down below traveled across my shadowed ceiling.

I had become so used to the uproar of traffic that the gunning of engines and the squeaking of brakes now reached me as only a

dim and oppressive silence. How I missed having Miguel's ample mass spread out next to me! It is strange how I missed having sex with Hipólito but longed for Miguel's physical embrace. Miguel had a huge embrace that could surround me completely. Miguel was also easy to undress, since he was always missing a few buttons lost long ago in some flurry and never replaced. More than once he had taught an entire hour of class at the university with his fly half-open, all the while facing the understanding smiles of his students.

Miguel was the epitome of the absent-minded professor. Time after time I played the same game with him, burrowing my hands under his huge sweater, finding his shirt, buttonless as usual, and easily reaching his warm belly – which was just abundant enough to be soft and comfortable but not flabby. I would mark a trail through his fuzz with my fingertips and, pretending to be lost, wander along his stomach. When I reached the dip of his belly button, I hunted and captured the little bundles of gray thread inside. Miguel's belly button was always full of leftovers from his wool or flannel pants, which were so cheap and worn that they unraveled a little each day and deposited thread remnants there. When I reached the "treasure," as I liked to call those remnants, I would exhibit it triumphantly between my thumb and forefinger. Miguel would then pretend to marvel at himself. "Did you really find that in my belly button? Could there be more? Have you really looked hard?" Or else, "Darn! That's all you found? What happened to the box of bonbons that I hid there this morning so you would find it? Isn't it there? Did it fall out?"

And so on and on we continued with our foolish jabber, repeating sweet nothings over and over as if we had never heard them before. "Well, I must say, they were some delicious bonbons." Miguel would then give me a strong squeeze, and I would raise my head from his warm belly, bury my nose in his soft, curly whiskers, and drink in the fragrance of sawmills and recently cut pine.

It was almost time for my appointment with Fariño, and I was still buried in my unmade bed as though paralyzed by some spasm. I was furious with myself for wasting away the whole

morning. I firmly resolved to enjoy my solitude that afternoon. I wanted to inaugurate my long-awaited retreat – stay at home and read, listen to music. I wanted to carry out, one and a half days late, the schedule I had planned for myself for that week.

Nevertheless, a feeling of anxiety and sadness, a sense of abandonment pursued me. I reflected with disdain on my defects: I was disgusted by my inability to be alone with myself, by that perpetual need for something external, something undefined. I liked to picture myself as self-sufficient, profound, and satisfied, spending the week in a delicious encounter with solitude. Back then I tended to, and still do, step back and observe myself as if I were starring in my own mental film. How I envied all those worldly men, especially men who seemed to lead their own intense interior adventures – the philosophers, the writers, the scientists! I envied all those capable of intoxicating themselves with their own inner dialogue, of losing themselves joyfully in their own pondering.

Miguel was still absorbed in his mathematical games, and Hipólito was satisfied with his literary incursions. I also had my own world – my movies, my ambitions, my intellectual pleasures and tastes, my own numerous worries. But, nevertheless, I, who objectively possessed everything that "they" possessed, was incapable of being contented with my own space. I suffocated myself, I felt hemmed in by my wants and needs, weighed down by inexplicable urgencies. It was as though I had been assaulted by centuries of education, a feminine education that had cheated me of my integrity, my inner peace, my wholeness. It was the curse of the couple-woman, the lacking woman, the supporting and supported woman.

Maybe that is why Rosa suffered so much from fears and uncertainties. She suffered from the weakness of not being able to be alone. It was this fear that compelled her to maintain absurd relationships with absurd men and that caused her to surround herself with a group of girlfriends, a tight cluster that I regarded as pathetic. The "girls," as she called them, or the "harem," as I liked to say, accompanied her in an unruly procession everywhere

she went. They were always together, a minimum of three or four to a group, forming a network whose delights I never came to understand because I can't stand groups or cliques.

Since I prefer relating to people on a one-to-one basis, I was a bit repulsed by her feminine circle. It reminded me of one of those infamous gatherings of spinsters, whining over the absence of a male. Rosa tended to challenge this image of mine with a vehemence that was unusual for her.

"You're wrong, Lucía, no one cries over any male when we are together. In fact, what happens with us is exactly the opposite. What happens is that I am generally happier and more at home with them than I am with a man at my side. We understand each other better, which is to be expected, isn't it? We have similar experiences, similar problems . . . I would venture to say most men feel the same way I do."

I always insisted that this wasn't the case, that I had more men friends than women friends. One time our dispute became so heated that Rosa began to hurl senseless accusations at me: "You know what your problem is, Lucía? You really just want to be a little man. You think you're so modern and liberated, and yet you are ashamed of being a woman. Don't you see the trap you've fallen into?"

I had never heard Rosa be so vehement. I assume she was limiting herself to repeating clichés that she had heard from some of her more radical women friends. "You boast so much of your independence," she continued. "But nevertheless, when there is an available man nearby you are transformed into a person who flirts like an idiot and competes just like the others."

As I remembered her words my rage was renewed and my depression deepened even more. With one thing and the other I had made myself scandalously late, and so I arrived at the agency breathless and ready to kill somebody.

"Good afternoon, señorita. Congratulations."

I read a hint of intimacy in Tadeo's bland expression today, as though we had shared a secret, and it irritated me. I gave him a distracted smile, greeted my colleagues, and repeated the usual

chitchat about my movie. "No, I'm not that nervous; it's still hard for me to believe that the movie is finally going to premiere. Yes, it's probably just that I'm a little sick of it; the whole thing has been a long and complicated process . . . What did you say? Yes, yes, it has been two years since I got the contract with the producers, who went broke two days before we were to start filming . . . You don't know how sorry I am, but it looks like I won't be able to get any more tickets for the opening. The producer takes care of all that, not me . . . Very nice, that commercial you made for the movie, Andrés, 'sober and direct,' as the boss would say . . ."

At that very moment the old fox appeared at his office door, gesturing grandly and smiling exaggeratedly. "Ah! Lucía, the up-and-coming director! Come in, come in!" Damn! I said to myself, he has time to be sociable today. I was right. Instead of arranging himself behind his desk, he ushered me to the two small sofas at the corner of his office. "Not so formal, more intimate." He sat down and crossed his short legs, revealing the gold *T*'s on the buckles of his expensive shoes which matched the same gold insignias stamped on the ankle of his socks.

I had to repeat the same string of comments about the movie. "No, I'm not nervous, probably because I still can't believe the premiere is next Sunday. No, thank you, I don't want any whiskey. Yes, I'm more or less happy with the outcome, considering all the problems I had with the filming and the fact that it is my first film. Yes, Andrés's commercial turned out well, you were right. I just told him so, direct but elegant. No, don't thank me, it was the producer who sent you the tickets."

I was ashamed to discuss the tickets, because the guest list I gave the producer included this imbecile Fariño instead of my friends from work. Such are the mandates of power. And so, when Fariño finally brought up the advertisements, I attacked them with a bitterness that was spurred on by my guilty conscience.

"Dreadful? . . . but, my dear, how can you say that?" Fariño had a special talent for expressing himself with a sticky-sweet, paternalistic tone.

"Because that is what they are, Fariño. They are a sexist, ridicu-

lous distorton of the truth, and what's more, aesthetically they are a failure."

"Listen, darling, advertising consists of creating art out of distortion."

Satisfied with his phrase, Fariño sat back and smiled stupidly. His hair was gray and, according to the grapevine, transplanted. Bordering fifty, he was still under the illusion that he possessed a stunning physical presence. I quickly found myself too dejected to argue with him.

"Okay, Fariño, it's not worth worrying about, and you know I'll do them in the end. I'll try to make them appear as normal as possible, and I'll pray to God no one in the business finds out that I filmed them."

"Lucía, Lucía," he said, smiling sweetly. Fariño had the habit of smiling constantly, perhaps trying to make the most out of the dentures he got in the United States – the latest in dental engineering. So he smiled to thank you, smiled to insult you, smiled to reprimand you, and even smiled like an idiot when he walked down the street alone.

"Like all young people, Lucía, you're stubborn and headstrong."

"Not so young, I am thirty now."

"A child. But don't let my words bother you. I'm glad you are that way. It reminds me of myself when I was your age. I had the same stubbornness, the same enthusiasm about things."

As I listened on, downcast and slumped over in my seat, I could not imagine for the life of me how Fariño came up with this enthusiasm that he had ascribed to me.

"I admire you very much," he continued, chattering on. The women of today, I mean. I admire you and envy you. Ah! If I were your age right now . . . I've never been a chauvinist; women to me have always been the most sacred, the most important. As you know, the new woman, the woman of the future, is one of my obsessions. You young ones nowadays are much freer than in my time. Because I, I who am already a tired old man . . ." He paused for a moment with the hope that I would staunchly reclaim his

youth, and when the long silence made him too tense he cleared his throat and continued with his monologue.

"Maybe not old yet, but at least I left my youth behind a while ago . . . I mean, I know very well how things have changed and the advantages you all have now. Ah! Lucía, if I were your age now . . . !"

He leaned forward and rested his hands on the arms of my chair, widening his eyes excessively, and baring his magnificent new dentures at me.

"If I were you right now, I would have the world in the palm of my hand."

Having said this and, inspired by one of his sudden urgencies – he loved to give the impression that he was an extremely busy man – Fariño quickly stood up and ushered me to the door, all the while alternating his porcelain American smiles with pats on the shoulder and fervent congratulations for my upcoming triumph.

There in the doorway he issued his orders last minute, as was his custom. "You'll have the spots done within a month, won't you? The washing machine one is the most pressing of all. Call Larrea. I've already spoken with him, and he has the budget. You'll be pleased because it's a lot of money . . . Get together with him and figure out the details, the equipment, and all that, you know . . ."

He saw me off with his peculiar handshake (because he was so short, he tended to extend his palm down, lowering it so much that his opponent practically had to crouch to the floor in order to grasp his subterranean greeting). Then, upon seeing Tadeo, who had approached him servilely like a weary street dog, he brandished his perfect teeth once again, raised an accusing finger, and, before turning toward his office, added with cruel, coarse humor: "Watch it, man. One of your ears has come unstuck!"

A sudden heavy silence filled the room, and from his drawing table in the corner Andrés murmured, "What a bastard!" Tadeo remained where he was, lost, confused . . . given away by his own hand, which had instinctively raised itself toward his ear, only to affirm that no, the masking tape was still there, that everything had been a joke . . . a joke that proved his secret was not a secret,

that he had been discovered. He made such a desolate picture with his milky cheeks blushing furiously, and I felt so ashamed for him that I went over to comment about any old thing and try to escape the whole crisis.

"How goes it with the photos, Tadeo? Have you managed to take any more?"

"No, señorita," he stammered. "I haven't had time, thanks. Tonight I'm going to wait at Lolita Morán's concert at the Azul Theater to see if I can get anything."

Tadeo smiled with a grimace and stared at his feet. He wore shoes with scandalously sharp toes – battered, patent leather shoes with the outline of his toes etched on the worn leather. The cracks in the shoes had whitened, as though the crevices that ran through the patent leather had stubbornly retained the residue of many past polishings. I could picture the sequence easily: a large kitchen, dark and rundown, with a window facing an inner communal patio shared by all the apartments. Tadeo would be sitting next to the stove with a rag in one hand and a shoe lovingly propped in the other, scrupulously rubbing the worn leather in an attempt to revive its previous gleam. The kitchen would reek of humidity and burnt milk, and Tadeo might be wearing an apron over his own clothes. Yes, he definitely would wear his mother's apron, the one she used to wear when she still walked through the house and was master of her kitchen and her legs. I was suddenly filled with a profound anguish for Tadeo's apron, for Tadeo's paralytic mother, for the smell of milk spilled over the gas burner, for the lack of light in the kitchen, for Tadeo's decrepit leather shoes that were really meant for a bridegroom, for Tadeo's peculiar ears and his shameful masking tape. But above all, I felt a profound anguish for myself, as these mystical crises tend to end with the sad sensation that one is unloved and the world doesn't pamper one as much as one really deserves.

I left the agency at two-thirty, siesta time, an idiotic hour, even more so if you find yourself in the street with nothing to do. I wandered off to the right, and when I reached the first street

corner I changed my mind – or really my direction, since I had nothing in particular in mind – and retraced my steps.

I stopped again at the opposite corner, perplexed and bored. I thought about going to One on One, a new chain of restaurants for single people that had just opened. But the image of that string of individual tables, all stocked with videos, books, and magazines so that customers could entertain themselves until the food arrived, left me depressed and gloomy.

Later, as years have passed, I have become used to and even learned to appreciate the advantages of the Ones. Because what is even worse than eating alone is having to wait for your food with nothing to do but stare at the ceiling – those endless minutes when you arrange and rearrange the spoons and knives, when you memorize the rose-patterned wallpaper, when you avoid the curious, pitying gazes of the other customers who do have companions.

The Ones kill off empty space and loneliness with the anonymity of many shared solitudes. Nevertheless, how terrifying they can be, those enormous rooms where the only thing one can hear is the mechanical hum of the videos, the lifeless murmur of machines. And so I decided to save myself the whole spectacle and hurried back to the refuge of my apartment.

I was just hanging up my jacket when the phone rang. It wasn't Hipólito, it was José-Joe.

"Is Rosa over there?"

"Rosa?" I asked, surprised. "No, she's gone. You didn't know?" And immediately I was afraid I had already said too much.

"Yes, I know she was going to Isla Blanca, but she told me she was going to stop by and see you before she left."

"We did have breakfast together, but she left at least three hours ago."

"Ahhhh! What a drag!" he murmured, more with exaggerated disappointment.

"Did you want something?"

"No, . . . nothing . . ."

And suddenly switching to a new tone, he added cheerfully:

"Did you know they've offered me a contract for a great movie?" And without waiting for my response, he proceeded to fill me in on all the details of his "truly wonderful" starring role ("They offered it to me thanks to you, Lucía, because you're the one who discovered me") in a movie done by a well-known director who was not, like me, a newcomer to the industry. José-Joe didn't mention that last part, of course, but what he was thinking was obvious. José-Joe's "wonderful" role was to be Dracula in a vampire story.

"But this stuff is really well done. It's a very intellectual version of Count Dracula, very much in line with those movies, that German film . . . you know which one I'm talking about? What's it called? I don't remember now . . . That's it! *Nosferatu*. So the movie is along that line, very dignified, that is."

If one took a good look at him, José-Joe did look a little like a downcast vampire, with his long, languid eyelashes and his fine red lips that seemed perfectly suited for vampire duties.

"So you're finally headed toward stardom, José-Joe," I commented, somewhat admiringly, in spite of myself.

"Come on, don't call me José-Joe, please!"

He was quiet for a moment, and finally, stuttering, he got up the courage to expose the real reason behind his phone call.

"Listen, by the way, Lucía . . . I believe . . . your agency is going to take on the advertising campaign for Vampire jeans, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are."

"Weeeell . . . Maybe you could recommend me to your agency. I mean, since I am going to be in that movie, the one about Dracula, you know, and there will be lots of things about it in the press. We could do ourselves a mutual favor, don't you think? What I mean is, if I advertised the jeans, well . . . it would be good for all of us, right?"

"Right," I cut him off. "I'll suggest it." And purposely lying, I added, "I'll talk to Rosa on the phone this evening. Do you want me to give her your message?"

"What message?" José-Joe asked, innocently betraying himself.

"Didn't you want to tell her anything?"

"Who, me? No, no . . . nothing. And when did you say you'll make the suggestion at the agency?"

I hung up, trying once again to discover what secret attraction José-Joe possessed that had made Rosa fall in love with him. I concentrated on the mystery for about ten minutes, but my effort turned out to be as fruitless as usual.

José-Joe was born out in the middle of nowhere in a small village. He was baptized José García Roda, but when he reached the glorious stage, he cut out the García and became simply José Roda. Then things became even more complicated because when I met José-Joe he was calling himself Joe Rody for the stage and José García for his regular clients.

In those days José-Joe used to hang around acting agencies, waiting in line for insignificant roles so he could scrape a living together. Meanwhile, he combined his acting ambitions with a job he had inherited from his father, an honorable lace and button sales representative.

The first time I saw him he was clutching a small suitcase that contained his treasures of a door-to-door salesman: buttons made of mother-of-pearl, brass, bone, plastic, clay, jet, crystal, wood, leather . . . buttons that were carved, polished, painted, dyed, or decorated. He had every model imaginable glittering from the green lining of his suitcase, not to mention the satin, cotton, and silk ribbons, the gold and silver braids, the tassels, fringes, and lace. All an endless string of paraphernalia that he spread out on the counters of dingy small-town specialty shops, where he stoically recited his dispassionate sales pitch.

"Business is getting worse each day," he used to comment. "People don't buy anymore, and the factories and workshops are about to go bankrupt."

We had met by chance at the greasy reception desk of a dreadful hotel . . . a hotel with the soul of a boardinghouse, a filthy, ill-reputed inn near the harbor. It was the only shelter I had been able to find on that occasion, years ago, when I missed the last ship to Morocco.

It was bad timing since it was in the midst of the holidays and

the city was swarming with people. With self-concerned generosity, the inn-keeper offered me a sinking object in the middle of the hallway that resembled a bed. It was at that moment that Joe Rody–José Garcia appeared, surrendered room and bed to me, and resigned himself to occupy my place in the hallway. The truth is, José-Joe wasn't really a bad guy, or at least he wasn't totally bad. He was a strange mixture of childish selfishness and obliging simplicity. At any rate, that night I was thankful for his kind gesture, tired and distressed as I was by the thought of spending the night in an open hallway in a strange land.

We had dinner together and he showed me his two sample collections, one of his button and lace trade and the other of his acting portfolio – photos of Joe Rody straight on, Joe Rody showing his profile, Joe Rody looking at the sky with dreamy eyes, then with a disgusted expression; Joe Rody with his Adam's apple and four bristly hairs bared, Joe Rody smoking, then dressed as a Roman, then winking an eye – I still remember how struck I was by his air of a silent movie gallant.

By dessert I was so touched by all his efforts, and I knew him to be so harmless, that I overruled his puritanical protests and insisted he move the flimsy bed inside and share the room with me.

"Okay," he finally said. "We'll be together but not *together*," and he blushed at his own nonsense. So we ended up dragging the mattress in and struggling to arrange it at the base of the bed underneath the sink. Afterward, when I thought I would be able to go to sleep and finally get some rest, José-Joe took a carpenter's brace, a screwdriver, and a lock from his suitcase and proceeded to install the latter on the door.

"You never know in hotels," he said apologetically. "They have master keys, you know; they can open every room, so I don't trust them anywhere."

He performed the carpenter's job with the ease he had acquired during many years of practice. "I always carry this lock with me when I travel. I set it up at night and take it back in the mornings." Year after year José-Joe had left behind a trail of perforated doors in countless hotels, inns, and boardinghouses.

His peculiar behavior reminded me of a unique, frightened termite. "See? This way *no one* can come in." José-Joe always seemed a little demented to me.

The doorbell interrupted my thoughts. The lightbulb in the hall was out, so I couldn't make out the figure standing in the doorway. While I scrutinized the darkness I suddenly, inexplicably realized that I was famished. I hadn't had anything to eat since my breakfast with Rosa.

Finally, after my eyes got used to the dim light, I saw that it was Doña Maruja, leaning against her apartment door. She smiled at me calmly and my heart jumped in my chest.

"Hello, dear, I am sorry to bother you again but . . . could we talk for a little while?"

I swallowed several times nervously and tried to think of a sufficiently valid and courteous excuse, but in the end I just had to consent, having no energy to oppose her tyrannical debility. "It's just for a little while, dear. Thank you very much. I'd be so grateful . . ."

As she apologized, her pale, cottony hands ushered me along the hallway toward her apartment door. I had never been in her home before, and I was struck by the tidy decay of her apartment, which was identical to mine yet at the same time very different.

The rooms were overloaded with dark, heavy furniture that was piled in every corner, as if it had been shoved aside there during a move from a much more spacious house.

We walked across what was the living room in my apartment and what in hers was a sort of mummified, ghostly dining room, with shrouded chairs. The kitchen was also overflowing with extra furniture, but it, at least, gave the impression of being put to daily use.

"Sit down, child, please sit down," she said pointing at the only chair in sight.

"And you?"

"Oh, no, I prefer not to sit. My legs, you know, these legs are not what they used to be . . . But you sit down, dear. Make yourself comfortable."

I obeyed. When I sat down, my face was level with hers. Doña Maruja rubbed her hands against the bulky gray apron she wore over her clothes and gave me a disconcerted, awkward smile. I thought her features were curiously similar to those of a small beast, maybe a fragile, pale lizard. I felt a sudden, absurd impulse to cry.

Doña Maruja put a small plate in front of me with three little pastries, one with a maraschino cherry on top and two half-covered with chocolate. Then she served me a tiny glass of sweet wine, half of which she spilled on the table with her trembling hands.

"Look, child. I don't really know about these matters, and that's why I wanted you to tell me if this is all right."

She took a sheet of paper from a blue cardboard folder on the table and handed it to me. "Go ahead, read it." I read out loud: "I, María Torres Torres, in full use of my faculties, am leaving my blood to the Institute of Genetic Investigation . . ."

"That's the name of the laboratory where they keep my blood," she interrupted me to explain.

" . . . to the Institute of Genetic Investigation, so that they may study whatever they want with it. Signed, María Torres Torres."

"Do you think it's all right the way it is?"

I cleared my throat uncertainly, not knowing what to say.

"Er . . . I'm not sure, Doña Maruja. If . . . if you'd like, I can telephone a friend of mine who is a lawyer and ask him . . ."

"I would be very grateful, dear. It would be a big help. It's just that if my blood is so valuable, it would be a crime to waste it, considering all the illnesses there are in the world, don't you think? And since my blood is the most precious thing I have . . ."

I pretended to go over the text once more in order to hide my confusion. Her handwriting was large and irregular. The vowels slipped downward and spilled over the lines of the paper. Doña Maruja limped toward the sink and came back carrying a small reddish package in her hands. Beside the sink there was a black wood cupboard with a chipped china set inside, and each time Doña Maruja passed by it the cups tinkled with the sound of crystal.

She placed the parcel on the table and timidly pushed it toward me with a silent smile. I picked it up and saw it contained a bottle of insecticide for cockroaches. I looked up at her questioningly, uncertain of what she expected of me, when suddenly I understood. The back of my neck broke out into a cold sweat.

"You didn't . . . ?" I mumbled, horrified. "You didn't take this, did you?"

Doña Maruja smiled and shook her head from side to side.

"Don't even think about it, for God's sake, Doña Maruja, don't you even think of it . . . It could be very painful, not even effective and . . ."

I stopped, too exhausted to continue.

"Oh, child!" Doña Maruja sighed. "It's just that I'm not sure . . . Thank you very much for telling me. I thought maybe this . . . Since it says 'poison' here on the lid . . . I just don't know. You don't think so, then, hmmm . . . ?"

"Nooo!" I shrieked, choked with fear.

"I just don't know," Doña Maruja repeated placidly. "If I knew . . . But I just don't know, and nobody helps me, nobody tells me anything. And this hurts, child, this hurts . . ."

She raised a deformed hand, showing me her gnarled fingers, and then she softly touched her legs, her knees, her bony hips. I jumped up from my chair, unable to sit beside her any longer. Doña Maruja patted me on the shoulder.

"Yes, go on dear. I don't want to keep you any longer. I know you are always very busy."

She picked up the glass I had hardly touched and gazed at the plate with a worried expression.

"But you didn't eat your pastries, child. Wait."

Before I could say a word she had wrapped the pastries in newspaper and shoved them at me.

"This is for later. You young ones never feed yourselves enough."

And in spite of my protests she managed to make me keep the pastries, so when I finally found myself leaning against the closed

door of my apartment, I still had the small bundle in my hands. I went to the kitchen and threw it in the garbage.

The sun was setting too slowly. The living room was opaque, silent, darkened by shadows. I collapsed onto the couch, feeling anxious and suffocated by sadness. I forced myself to think about Hipólito and tried hard to long for his phone call. But the old trick of being in love didn't quite work this time. Everything started to seem absurd, useless, unreal.

I suspected that my love for Hipólito was merely an invention and that what I felt for Miguel was really only transient tenderness. I felt stricken by the solitude of a moment without any escape, a moment of truth and disbelief, as reality seemed to crumble. Even the objects around me were shorn of their sturdiness. The table looked ghostlike in the evening shadows, and the outline of the couch was blurred. It was then I felt the vertigo, the void of a senseless life, or its equivalent, a life without reason for living, a tedious life in which nothing but death was real.

I thought of Doña Maruja and her insecticide, of cockroaches and homozygotic blood. I felt nauseated. My hunger had turned into a painful hole in my stomach, and I knew I would find it impossible to eat anything, so I got up and began to pace in the shadows of my dark apartment. From the living room to the bedroom, from the bedroom to the study, from there on to the kitchen and back to the living room. I felt stifled, rootless, and I held my hand out in the dark to feel the walls of my home. I don't know why, but the feeling of those rough white plaster walls comforted me. It was as though I were finally touching the limits of my own space.

I don't know how long I indulged myself with this comforting discovery, but finally the night came, and I had to turn on the living room lamp. The light was so white and cold that I resorted to the comfort of the telephone and dialed Ricardo's number.

"Well, well, Lucía, what a surprise."

Ricardo was living in a little village nestled in the side of the mountains, about forty kilometers from the city. He was busy working on one of his extraordinary enterprises, this time a trout

farm. Ricardo possessed an astounding imagination, which, coupled with his basic inability to live like the rest of the world (a character trait typical of his aristocratic background), plunged him into the pursuit of unbelievable ventures, impossible jobs, and risky speculations.

Four months earlier Ricardo had bought an abandoned, rundown fishery and moved in with all of his belongings. In the middle of the harsh winter in the sierras he had scraped, repainted, replastered, and, in short, redone the whole mansion and the fishery.

"This is going to be a great business," he used to say. "The key is to build an artificial pond where clients can catch the trout themselves and eat them fresh right here, alfresco, in a picnic area I will set up for that purpose. It will have its own special grill for barbecuing the fish, along with a hired cook. Get the idea? Since the city is so close, people will come out here in swarms, charmed by the novelty of catching their own meal."

"How is the trout business going, Ricardo?"

"It's marvelous! I've almost finished building the pond, and I have about fifty thousand baby trout that I'll put in the tank soon. The fishery will be working at full potential by this summer."

"Say . . . Don't you feel lonely up there?"

"Of course not. You know how much I enjoy solitude."

"Yes, I know," I answered, irritated, suddenly envious of his hermitism. "I also like it. Well . . . used to like it, anyway. I don't know, Ricardo, but I feel kind of strange lately. I've started to think about the future, you know? That is something I have never done before. And I'm beginning to get scared, scared of . . . I don't know . . . of being sixty and alone."

"That is called the crisis of the thirties, my dear. Let me put it this way – what's happening is that you're getting old. Is that why you look for boyfriends in pairs now, as a kind of investment for the future?"

"Don't laugh. Besides, the two of them combined would be just perfect."

"What two?"

"My boyfriends, as you call them. Because Hipólito represents adventure, crazy, passionate, teenage love. Every time I see him my heart beats faster, my stomach starts to hurt, and I feel giddy."

"Quite an exciting prospect."

"Miguel, however, represents tenderness, serenity. Whenever I see him a warm glow fills my stomach, a feeling of well-being. Miguel is my companion, and Hipólito my lover."

"Don't get me wrong, dear Lucía, but the account of your love life resembles a manual on medical pathology."

"Which would you prefer?"

"Me?"

"Yes," I insisted impatiently. "Would you rather be loved as a companion or as a lover?"

He barely hesitated.

"As a lover, I suppose. But, of course, according to your description, a lover turns into something like the cholera bacillus, which is a quite unflattering state of being."

"Oh God, you're so dumb!" I answered him in rage, unloading all the tedium I had accumulated during the afternoon. "So you prefer passionate love, huh? It seems more romantic to you, of course, more poetic, more . . ." – I tried to find another adjective to spit on him, but I couldn't think of any – "More . . . everything. Well, it just so happens you are wrong. Passionate love only exists in Harlequin romances. We invent it, that's all. We make it up. The only love that really exists is day to day love, supportive love, love based on tenderness . . ."

"My little one, that supportive love you are so fond of also means routine. I don't know if you realize it, but you just invented conventional marriage. You're not just getting old, you already are old."

His bluntness cut me off completely. The truth is, my taciturn mood that day made me prone to all sorts of tantrums and feelings of animosity.

"You're a radical!" I told him as a ferocious insult. "And I don't speak to radicals."

But before I hung up, Ricardo, in an attempt to reach a truce,

made me promise I would go up to see him some day during the week. I promised, swearing all the time to myself that I would do no such thing, and hung up feeling even more restless and depressed than before. I felt weak and poisoned by all the cigarettes I had smoked on an empty stomach, and though I wasn't hungry, I felt a desperate need to eat something. I went to the kitchen and explored every nook and cranny in a fruitless search for nourishment. The refrigerator was a desolate sight, totally empty with the exception of a bottle of water, two beers, and one and a half cartons of cigarettes that I stored there, hoping they would stay fresh. Inside the cookie box I discovered some stale pastry crumbs. I nibbled at them disenchantedly, and finally I couldn't resist the temptation. I poked through the garbage and rescued the package Doña Maruja had given me. The pastries were good, but as I swallowed I thought I detected the vague aftertaste of insecticide.

September 23

It's raining. The room has been dark and gray all day, like the weather. The rain saddens me, the change in seasons makes me nervous, and being in this useless hospital for so long makes me desperate. The doctors say I'm fine but that I should stay under observation a while longer. They say these hearing problems tend to last a long time. The truth is that the dizzy spells have returned, though they aren't as intense as before.

"You wouldn't want us to let you leave the hospital only to have you fall down in the middle of the street, now would you, Doña Lucía? In these cases, the fall tends to be more dangerous than the dizzy spells themselves."

I hate the substitute doctor. He is one of those young ones who is obviously proud of his precociousness and boasts about his age,

as if his youth were the result of his own special efforts, some personal merit that only he possesses. From his mouth, the ugly term "Doña Lucía" sounds more insulting than ever. And I can't stand it when he uses that patient-father tone, that manner of speaking to me as if he were guiding an imbecile. It is obvious that he considers me old, and he seems to think old age is synonymous with stupidity.

I tremble when I see him enter with that plastic smile stretched across his fleshy cheeks. I say fleshy because, although he is young, he is as fat as a pig. And his idiotic habit of using the plural bothers me: "The treatment we've given you . . . Do you like our food? . . . If we let you go . . . ," as if the entire hospital were his. Today he even looked out the window and said, "We're having an ugly day today, aren't we?" in an apologetic tone, as if the storms were also dependent on his guidance or direction. Each time I see him I get worse, and the problem is I see him quite often. I like the head doctor. She gives me confidence, though it may be no more than the confidence born from the need all sick people have to put total faith in their doctors, our need to believe that they are gods or wizards.

It's raining. The days slip by me here, leaving no room for recollection; it's this mechanical hospital routine, void of memories. Life is reduced to trite details; the book I finished yesterday, the videos I've seen today, the thick, syrupy pear sauce I had for lunch, the sun or rain that appears on the other side of the window pane.

María de Día was euphoric today, so euphoric that seeing her was almost painful. "It's just that I love the rain, you know? I love it, I love it," she said, clapping her hands like a little girl, seated there at the foot of my bed. "And what's more, fall always makes me optimistic [I think she said 'gives me a rush,' practicing, as usual, her latest modern gibberish] because fall is like the beginning of winter, and in winter the most important things happen. Anything could happen this winter, I can feel it."

I, however, have not only the feeling but the conviction that a slow, tedious, depressingly predictable winter of convalescence

awaits me. But María de Día is so young. At times her youth delights and reassures me. At times I am able to observe her from a comfortable maturity that I have learned to accept. I smile with adult tenderness at her foolishness and even allow myself to grieve a bit for her, for the long road she has yet to travel, for the surprises and anguish she is likely to face before she reaches maturity and some sense of stability in her life.

But today I feel incapable of thinking about this person in front of me in terms of age and experience. Faced with her youth, I feel betrayed by time, cheated by the years, years that have slipped by me with dizzying brevity. I am left here with very little future, and yet I was youthful like María de Día until just yesterday. I haven't yet come to understand how this has happened to me, how it is possible that today I am suddenly old. I ask myself, who has robbed me of my years? Who put this mask of wrinkles on my face that seems so alien to me?

María de Día was making herself up in my room. Sometimes she comes by when her shift is over to shower me with her birdlike chatter before changing clothes and taking flight for the evening. From a small, colorful bag she extracted all the utensils of her makeup collection and held up a tiny colored pencil. "C'mon, work a little, hold the mirror for me."

At times María de Día paints little flowers in various colors of eyeliner on her cheeks. Other times she paints stars on her chin, or maybe a small moon in silver-blue. She has a special knack for skin-applied artwork, and, what's more, she enjoys calling attention to herself in those innocent ways. María de Día is one of those anxious, unsatisfied young people who still believe that having a strong personality means doing offbeat things all day. And so, to assert herself and feel different, she tends to make small transgressions from the norm. She takes a deep delight in strange behavior, drawing skies on her cheekbones, for example, or knitting between stations on the trolley that takes her to the hospital, or declaring that she wants to paint her whole house black, the walls, the floors, and the ceilings, all in an elegant black.

Her transgressions, of course, are always similar – trite and

insignificant. These young people today surprise me. I have a hard time making the connection between their lives and my own youth. It seems pathetic that María de Día wants to be original and paint her entire house black, her type X, Y, or Z house, identical up to the last detail to all the X, Y, and Z's that make up the latest housing developments, so beautiful, so spacious, so green, in one of those absolutely perfect cities that are tirelessly duplicated throughout the world. María de Día and her poor attempts at uniqueness. She's still very much a little girl, and her youth pains me today.

To tell the truth, almost everything pains me today. I'm discouraged and dejected, haunted by some premonition of disaster. I never did like the rain, and Ricardo didn't want to read my recently completed chapter: "It's long, Lucía, and I have very little time at my disposal today. Tomorrow I'll come early and I'll read the whole thing." His various excuses have been so kind in contrast to his normal rudeness, that I've come to the conclusion that what I have written doesn't interest him at all, that his appraisal the other day was only motivated by sympathy. "You don't need to justify yourself," I told him, hurt. "If you don't feel like reading it, fine; no one is forcing you."

To be honest, it's not fine, it's awful. Life goes on outside the walls of this sterilized cell, and I feel trapped inside a parenthesis of disinfectant. Coming to the realization that reality is something remote – that it has its own vitality, that the world goes on existing out there without you – produces a certain anxiety. I can almost hear it on the other side of my window, the hum emanating from the neighborhood, the rumor of other people's lives; but I have nothing, nothing more than the artificial serenity of this routine. Nothing more than the memories of those active years, and nothing more than these pages I am rescuing from my mind, pages in which I'm pretending to live. But if Ricardo doesn't want to read them, then who is left?

"Don't be so sensitive, Lucía. I do want to read your memoirs; I would even say I'm eager to read them. They inspire a morbid curiosity in me."

I looked at him skeptically. I don't believe him now, and I didn't believe him when he said it. It was early, but the rain had already darkened the afternoon. The room was shadowy and suffocating. Tuesday they had decided to give winter its official welcome and turn on the central heating. Ricardo fell silent, his face hidden by the evening shadows, and only his eyes, those beautiful, peculiar, cold eyes he has, gave off sparks of crystal from time to time.

It has been a strange afternoon. Ricardo has been quiet, thoughtful, and I also have remained silent, muted by my own desire to speak. I would have liked to have received some gesture of tenderness, to have asked him to hold my hand. I was so overwhelmed by growing uncertainties that were carrying me away from the here and now. But I was ashamed, afraid that he would snub me. The minutes passed slowly, and the sheets that encircled me, infected by the gray afternoon, were turning into an ominous barricade that separated me from the rest of the world.

The murmur of raindrops filled the silence, and I tried to ward off the advances of this premature evening, of this ovenlike summer heat. Finally, Ricardo broke out of his motionless position and turned his head, etching his silhouette against the scarce light of the window for a moment before changing his tone: "Well, Lucía, I should go. It's still pouring outside. How annoying!" And I felt guilty about his weariness; I even felt as though I were the cause of the rain and the torture of the afternoon. Ricardo gets bored when he visits me. I'm afraid that one day he won't ever return, but I don't know what to do or say to entertain him.

At that very moment, María de Día burst into the room like a whirlwind, "What are you doing with the lights off?" She touched the switch and flooded the room with a frigid brilliance. Ricardo looked at her with a sudden grin.

"Do you always rush through life at such high speeds, kitten?" And she was laughing, displaying her young kitten teeth.

"Uff, yes, I'm a disaster!"

Ricardo winked an eye at me. "I'll read your work of art tomorrow, Lucía . . . ," and he motioned toward the window mockingly, " . . . although it may be I who is in bed tomorrow suffering from a

serious case of pneumonia." He earned a sympathetic gesture from María de Día. "I'm just not built for these rains anymore." And he left with a dynamic air, rejuvenated by his infantile male flirting ritual, energized after his encounter with beautiful María de Día.

The window was a complete shadow by then, a silent black painting on the wall.

"The sun sets so early now," I sighed.

"It does, doesn't it? It's fantastic!" answered María de Día with absurd enthusiasm. "C'mon, work a little, hold the mirror for me."

And across the silver square – her face close to mine, glowing with the anticipation of a promising night full of adventures – I watched how María de Día adorned her face, and I envied her flowered cheeks.

September 25

What irritates me most about Ricardo is his conviction that he is infallible and completely self-sufficient. He, who has been a failure all his life, who has never done anything worthwhile, he dares to judge the rest of us. It could be that he takes refuge in the mediocrity of others in order not to see his own. Ricardo is one of those people who always says "be careful" after you've already tripped. He is no more than a spoiled brat, a snob. I knew beforehand, by the expression on his face yesterday, that he was going to make me pay for his earlier compliments. And I wasn't mistaken. When he finished reading, he put the pages aside and gave me a depreciating look.

"I find it inferior to the first one, Lucía. And what's more, it's full of fabrications."

"Don't start that again . . ."

"It's just that the elasticity of your memory astounds me. For example, the part about José-Joe. When José-Joe made your movie he had already starred in that vampire affair, that horror that made him famous."

"What crap, that's not true."

"Yes it is, dear, yes it is. Try to revive your failing neurons and remember that we saw *Dracula* together. You were preparing your script then, if I haven't forgotten, and *I* don't forget. You even thought of offering him a contract! At that moment José-Joe was at the peak of his short career. *Dracula* had put him in the limelight, and he never recovered after your movie disgraced him. Rather than giving him a start and promoting him, as you wrote, you finished him off completely."

"Don't be absurd, Ricardo. How can you argue about this with me? I met José-Joe in that boardinghouse, and back then he didn't . . ."

"You're confused again, Lucía. It was Rosa who found him in that boardinghouse, one of those ancient hotels that she stayed in when she gave her peculiar concerts. It was she who became fond of José-Joe, dear; you aren't capable of becoming fond of anyone."

"Now this is the last straw. I know perfectly well how they met each other. Whose friend was Rosa anyway, mine or yours?"

"Let's say yours, although we could also argue about that. The truth is you didn't really deserve her friendship. You paid so little attention to her."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Simply, dear, that you are an obstinate little woman who is rather difficult to deal with."

"That isn't exactly what everybody thinks."

"But, Lucía, please look around you. Who do you have left?"

"And you, who do *you* have?"

I shot my answer back with angry pride but immediately after I felt remorse and frustration. My eyes filled with tears in spite of my efforts to stay calm. Ever since I've been in the hospital the

most stupid things make me want to cry. I tried to come up with a dignified phrase – "I would have Miguel if it weren't for . . ." – but my voice broke, and I was quiet. Ricardo shifted his position in the armchair and cleared his throat. Then he added with unusual gentleness.

"It's okay, Lucía, it's okay. I don't have anyone left either . . . Life is like that. Better said, I have you and you have me, right? Lucía, you really have become hypersensitive with this sickness. What happened to the solid, savage arguments we used to have? I can't say anything now because you immediately get all emotional . . . I think it's all a scheme to get the best of me, and if it is, I have to admit you are succeeding."

I was stupid enough to smile at him, to pardon his brutality with my gesture, and so Ricardo assumed the incident was resolved and continued spouting his impertinences.

"But don't think I retract one word of what I've said. The part about José-Joe is totally false. The problem is you've always liked playing a decisive role in men's lives, including José-Joe's. After all, it is a very feminine desire."

"You don't know me at all, Ricardo; you're the most insensitive man I have met in my life."

"And what do you have to say about our telephone conversation? Truly sad, Lucía, that's the nicest comment that occurs to me on the subject. It's crammed in at the end of the chapter, under pressure and without reason, simply because you forgot that you promised to mention me. Pitiful. It's a pit-i-ful last-minute patch."

"I don't look at it that way."

"Well I do, dear. And the image you present of me . . . A bumbling young man who doesn't know how to do anything right. I'm telling you, the trout business was a magnificent idea."

"Which failed horribly."

"It wasn't my fault."

"That's what you always say."

"I didn't send my boats out to fight the elements."

"Don't make me laugh, Ricardo, you were afflicted by your delusions of grandeur from the beginning. The idea of building

this enormous lake occurred to you, and without consulting anyone or doing any research, you filled a hole with water and threw in your thousands and thousands of trout. But when June came around you realized the area turned into a desert in the summer, that the river dried out completely. For the rest of my life I'll remember the spectacle of the water receding every day and fifty thousand trout crowded together belly up, floundering and agonizing in the mud. It was an apocalyptic scene."

"A painful scene."

"I think the whole town was eating free trout for a week."

"Not everything can turn out right, you know."

"For you, nothing turns out right. Was the fish business before or after your mother ate the check?" Animated by his silent, contemptuous gaze, I continued. "It was before that, wasn't it? Yes, I believe the check incident happened at the same time you got involved with importing live bait for fishing, didn't it? Thousands of worms bubbling and writhing in their cans . . . You wrote a rubber check, and they wanted to throw you into jail."

"Don't remind me. I know it all too well."

"And so Doña Sagrario arrives at the scene, and, trembling at the possibility of her dear son, the descendant of an illustrious family, ending up in jail, she decides to take over. She adorns herself with the only furs she has left, makes herself up, and pays a visit to the people you had swindled."

"I didn't swindle them. If they hadn't gotten so nervous I would have paid them. In fact, I ended up paying them off completely."

"Your mother asks to see the manager of the company, waves her visiting card full of your noble family names, and is invited into his office. Somehow she gets him to show her the check, the evidence of the crime, she lifts up the veil of her hat as though to see it better, and, blip, she swallows it without another word, paper clip and all. Didn't she ever tell you how she convinced the manager to show her the check?"

He didn't answer me. Either he wasn't listening or he was pretending not to listen, hoping to dilute my wickedness with his indifference. We were silent for a while, and finally, as though

coming out of a dream, Ricardo commented thoughtfully, "And with respect to what you say about my love for solitude . . ."

"You say so yourself!" I hurried to argue. "I've often heard it from you."

"Yes, yes," he admitted. "Yes, I like it, or I should say . . . you really have to get used to it, don't you think?" He was quiet again, patting his pockets, searching for cigarettes.

"When María de Noche smells that someone has been smoking she flies into a fury," I warned him. But Ricardo shrugged his shoulders, carefully smoothed out a cigarette and lit up.

"Bah! It won't hurt her. I'm too old to believe in health programs anyway . . . What about María de Día?"

"María de Día, what?"

"Does she say anything when she smells smoke?"

"Oh, no. You might say she's more good-natured . . . why? Do you like her?"

"Like what?"

"María de Día, of course."

"She's charming and amusing . . . an amusing, tender little creature."

"Well, if you want to impress her, it would be better if you didn't smoke. María doesn't really understand why people smoke. To her it's an old person's vice, smoking tobacco I mean. To her it's a quaint obstinacy of lunatic old folks, and she's got a point there."

Ricardo sat back and observed me with a teasing smile. "Are you jealous?"

I was so indignant I almost lost my breath. A sixty-year-old like him pretending to be able to attract young María de Día, and then imagining he could make me jealous. "I don't think you realize, Ricardo, how ridiculous you can be at times."

He threw his head back and laughed loudly – Ricardo has definitely preserved a nice set of teeth, white, young, and strong – and shook his gray hair. "It isn't possible," he sputtered between outbursts. "You're exaggerating, Lucía, you're exaggerating." Then he suddenly stopped laughing and sat calmly for a few seconds, puffing contentedly on his cigarette.

"Humm . . . and as for the winter you refer to in your incipient masterwork, that winter in the mountains at the fish factory . . . Did I ever show you my mannequins?"

"Your mannequins?"

"Ah, they were magnificent. I acquired them at a department store liquidation sale. They were life-size, male and female dolls made of cellulose." He was quiet again, finishing off the cigarette.

"And? What about them?" I asked, intrigued.

"The mannequins? As I said, they were magnificent, more human than most people . . . I used to arrange them around the house, sitting in the armchair, standing by the door . . . There were five, two women and three men. I would cover their heads with scarves because it bothered me to have them watch me all day. Mannequins suffer recurring curiosity attacks, you know."

"That's a lie. I was at your house in the mountains, and I didn't see them. You're making all of this up."

"Oh, no, it's true. You probably just didn't notice them."

"Besides, I think the whole idea is awful."

"Why? They were good company, much more interesting company than most of the warm-blooded simpletons I've known during my lifetime."

"What you just said is even worse."

"Imagine. I haven't thought about them since I left the fish factory. I hope they've missed me."

"Sometimes I feel sorry for you, Ricardo."

He leaned forward, propped his elbows on his knees, and rewarded me with one of his little smiles of self-satisfaction, a smile designed to dissolve the universe.

"But, Lucía, you know you don't feel sorry for me, you really feel sorry for yourself."

Thinking he had probably uttered his most memorable remark of the afternoon and hoping to leave it lingering in the air behind him as a reminder of his presence, Ricardo stood dramatically, took one of my hands, passed the back of it across his mouth as if he were wiping the spit off his smile of superiority, and sailed out the door wearing his halo of triumph.

Sometimes I think that Ricardo is so pretentious and immature because of his family background. I see in him the same lack of determination, the same spoiled upbringing that children of overprotective mothers tend to suffer.

Doña Sagrario was really an extraordinary woman, a tiny wisp of overflowing energy with a cameo face and elegant gray hair that barely softened the portrayal of her tough spirit. I still remember, as if it were today, the weekend I spent with Ricardo in the old Southern olive-groved village.

Ricardo belongs to an ancient noble family that has been ruined by generations of money-squandering Ricardos. There is even a count, if I remember correctly. The Count of Good Honor, or something like that, an obnoxious title earned by one of Ricardo's ancestors thousands of years ago, an obscure second lieutenant who sacrificed his life for the troop flag in some medieval war. Apparently he lost his leg in the midst of a battle, but continued defending the one buttress he had left. Later, an enemy hatchet trimmed off one of his arms, but he recovered the banner with his other hand and continued fighting. He lost his other leg later on in the battle, and yet he guarded the banner with his body until a soldier cut off his last hand. Left as he was, he slithered along with the handle of the flag between his teeth until he could place it safely behind his company line. At least, this was the story Doña Sagrario used to tell while she garnished it with admiring remarks about the heroic nature of her forefathers. "That's true spirit," she would say over and over. "That's our family spirit."

The only members of this noble family left back then – and this is about thirty years ago – were Ricardo, Doña Sagrario, and her youngest sister, Maravillas, a rather pudgy, awkward woman who had reached her fifties in a virginal state and still retained the high, shrill voice she must have felt befit her maidenliness. Maravillas was a simple-minded woman who had continued to preserve other tics she considered youthful, such as clapping her pudgy palms together in the face of any event, feigning a playful gaiety, or exclaiming "how wonderful!" with such raving incoherence that she even displayed this sign of joy when they had to

sell the old family dwelling to survive and were left without the very walls that had represented their history.

Doña Sagrario had found herself forced to give up almost all of her home – an ancient mansion with dusty corners and creaky floorboards – to a real estate agency that broke up the building into small compartments and rented them out one by one as offices. They had kept three rooms and a kitchen on the third floor and were left cornered inside their own ancient property.

When we went to visit them it was a Sunday, and the front entrance was locked. I remember we rang the doorbell, and the bolt was released by the yank of a rope that ran upstairs to the third floor. They had left the door into the next section open, thinking, as I found out later, that it was Carmela, the old servant who still came to attend to them more from habit than for pay. That is how we happened to enter unexpectedly to find Doña Sagrario and Maravillas with their coats on, seated around the electric heater they had placed under the living room table.

"Oh! It's you, Ricardo. What a surprise!" they exclaimed. "Come in, come in." They had gotten up immediately and began taking off their coats.

"We just got home. Look, you caught us with our coats still on." Maravillas was trying to unbutton her coat with her thick, trembling hands.

"You'll have to excuse the mess; we've had trouble with the help. You know how it is," Doña Sagrario said in resignation. "The help is unbearable nowadays. They're nothing but trouble."

The house was freezing and dusty, its vacant walls stained by the shadows of absent paintings. The only one left was a dark, blurry portrait of the late count, the banner-rescuing hero: a mass of dark-red shades and a face with an agonized expression, clasping a banner between its teeth.

"Pastries! How wonderful!" shrilled Maravillas when she saw the package oozing with whipped cream and meringue that Ricardo had brought. "How thoughtful, son. You shouldn't have bothered," cooed Doña Sagrario.

At that moment Carmela arrived, dragging her feet and pant-

ing from the trip upstairs, and Doña Sagrario told her to prepare hot chocolate to go with the pastries, obviously pleased to still have someone to order around. Grumbling, Carmela entered the kitchen. I could hear the rattle of pans and dishes as Ricardo's mother, poised in front of the portrait, repeated the story of the Count of Good Honor with rapturous intensity.

Then came the unexpected crash, the sound of crockery breaking into a million pieces. Maravillas rushed into the kitchen and returned a moment later, her dull face flushed with excitement, a vacant grin on her lips. "How wonderful! Carmela dropped the tray with all the cups!" And Doña Sagrario, looking at her sister with a reproachful, yet tender maternal expression, said to me, "That girl, that girl . . . When will she ever grow up?"

Given his unbelievable quixotic family lineage, Ricardo didn't turn out so badly after all. He survived his fate as princely successor and several generations of senseless family pride. It has been years now since his mother's ancient mansion was demolished, and the Count of Good Honor title will die with Ricardo. The lineage will expire, along with the legacy of that demented second lieutenant, that stump of a count. Ricardo's ruin is not just his, it is a very noble ruin that has lasted a thousand years.

Wednesday

That morning I woke up determined to be happy. I had slept my share and felt rested and content, feeling pleasantly sensual from the touch of the sheets still covering my body. I made up my mind then to have a splendid day, sunbathing on the balcony, listening to music, and attacking the books that had been piling up forever on the table by my bed. I put on my bikini, smeared myself with tanning cream, and grabbed my towel – mmm, the smell of suntan oil, that first whiff of summer, memories of warm, sweaty days, of faraway vacations – and went out onto the balcony, dragging an armchair behind me. Setting it up was a bit difficult since the balcony was a balcony in the strictest and most classic sense of the word, barely a meter wide and two meters long with a concrete railing that blocked the horizon. As a result, the armchair wouldn't

fit going the long way, the short way, or any other damn way, and sunbathing in an upright chair obviously just didn't live up to the summery image I had envisioned earlier. (Exterior sequence, take one: sensual young woman luxuriously installed on a magnificent terrace toasting herself beneath a radiant sun.) And so I stubbornly pushed and shoved the armchair until I managed to fit it onto the balcony crosswise with one leg in the living room. This position was an acceptably favorable one for tanning, even though I had to prop my legs up on the railing in order to have the sun reach my entire body – a slightly difficult position that tended to cramp the back of my thighs and make my extremities fall asleep. But in spite of all the difficulties, I undertook the tanning task courageously. I wanted to toast my skin, sallow from the long winter, with a rosy, healthy glow. I found myself much more attractive when I was tan, and I now wanted to be as attractive as possible, for I wanted Hipólito to find me alluring when he returned from his escape. I wanted him to be left speechless by the golden luster of my skin.

My skin was "like warm bread," Miguel said during that vacation week we spent together a few months before. We stayed in a huge hotel in the middle of an expanding tourist zone, a coastal area which the realtors had managed to subdivide into separate, atrocious, plastic landscapes. But we were together and happy, capable of enjoying the distant vista of the rolling waves beyond the grayish barrier of the skyscrapers on the coastline.

"Your skin is like warm bread," Miguel would say again and again during our dimly lit siestas at the hotel. We would take off our clothes and stretch out on the bed for hours while the late afternoon heat gathered behind the window shades. I felt smothered by the flush of my rosy skin and a bit intoxicated by the sea air, my body heated up like a copper iron. I would tumble onto the sheets, seeking a moment of fresh relief from the heat, and Miguel would sit next to me and caress my back with his experienced hands, murmuring sweet nothings: "Your skin is like warm bread, sweetheart." He would then draw a line down the back of my spine with his fingertip, lifting my hair from time to time and blowing

softly to ease the hot burden weighing on the back of my neck, surprising me with the wanderings of his tongue, which left a refreshing moist line along my shoulders and at the base of my neck, or a little path down my back until it reached the invisible line at my waist, always a sensitive zone. They were timeless, placeless, blue moments; blue because my eyes had seen too much sun in the morning, and when I closed them, everything became a cool, relaxed turquoise, a shiny indigo cloud that slipped into my brain, erasing preoccupations and anxieties, leaving behind only the capacity to feel, feel his hands and his tongue, feel the heat of my body against the sheets, feel a love for Miguel that washed over me and bathed my every pore. "Your skin is like warm bread, darling."

Poor Miguel, I remember, got completely burnt. His skin was very fair and soft, only darkened here and there by shadows of curly hair. On our first day at the beach, while I exposed myself to the sun by wisely rotating my body around its axis to get a uniform tan, Miguel lay down on a lazy chair beside me, propped himself up on his elbow, took out his book on equations, and spent the whole morning absorbed in his reading. By two in the afternoon his body looked painfully similar to a flag, one side white as a bone and the other a flaming red except for the white silhouette of his right arm, which had been branded onto his flank by the sun. And, in addition to his usual perplexed expression, one half of his tender sad-eyed face was flushed, its wrinkles marked on it like white war paint.

He couldn't go back out in the sun again for the rest of the week, and each night I rubbed a thick coat of cream over the area affected by the catastrophe. Meanwhile he clenched his teeth, then pursed his thick lips in a delicious pout inside the forest that was his bushy beard, crying, "Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!" in a variety of pitches . . . "Ooh! Be careful, sweetie, the cream is so cold . . . !"

I began to feel really uncomfortable. My legs had been propped up in that difficult position for a long time, with my heels crushed against the concrete railing. Even though the March sun was shining on my face, the lower part of my thighs and my back were getting chilled because of the cool breeze.

In front of me, just a few meters away and level with my balcony, I could see the black asphalt snake of the freeway on-ramp. As the morning advanced, traffic was building up, and the noise of the cars was getting louder and louder. Soon there would be the usual "bottleneck," as we then called it. It was the big escape, the escape for the holidays. The city was emptying as fast as humanly possible. People fled with determined haste in automobiles crammed full of kids and suitcases. They were in search of the highway south that streched out beyond the ramp. I saw their tense faces passing by me, the windows of their heated prisons open to capture a little breeze. They were edgy, bad humored, hating each other.

The traffic became so dense that the cars were stopped in front of me for long streches of time. I could see the faces of the passengers and even listen to their outbursts. I could see the fat guy with a moustache who was leaning his big sweaty head against the edge of his car window, gaping like a fish amidst the smoke from the exhaust pipes, and resignedly wiping his sweaty face from time to time with a big yellow scarf. And the small, dark man with the furrowed brows who bounced up and down in his seat, sticking his head out the window once in a while to size up the traffic and insult the world, chomping at the air spitefully. And a kid crying his lungs out, and a wailing woman, and a huge German shepherd, asphixiated by the heat, panting, with its big pinkish tongue grazing the seething metal.

I half-shut my eyes and feigned indifference, but I could still see them through my lashes. I saw how they peered out at me with hungry eyes, how some of them made the most out of their forced imprisonment by making ridiculous faces at me. They poked their sticky heads out the windows to smirk and shout rude, provoking phrases at me, which were muffled by the roar of traffic and the squeaking of brakes. Every so often, an isolated syllable or broken words would float up to me, along with a wave of metallic heat, wrapped in a cloud that smelled of melted rubber, ". . . bayyy . . . bee . . . bee . . . gonnaburn . . . oooweee . . ." I squinted through my lashes, hating and pitying them at the same time.

Wednesday. It was Wednesday already and I still hadn't heard from Hipólito. The week of blissful encounters we had planned together had ended even before it had a chance to begin, with his infamous flight down the stairs and with that smell of fear he had left behind in my apartment after our absurd meal.

What could he be doing in the meantime? I pictured him at home writing while his wife was away. Yes, he was probably there, in that house I had never seen and would probably never see – on his own territory. He tried to describe it to me several times, but I always stopped him. I preferred to ignore those aspects of Hipólito's life that could never belong to me, such as his role as husband. But with his usual pretentious air, he would insist: "Why don't you want me to tell you what my life is like?" I was quite sure he knew the answer, that his question was really a declaration of his superiority over me in our ongoing battle. Sometimes, just to make me mad, he would casually say: "One of these days you'll have to come to my house. I'll invite you over for dinner with my friends." And like an idiot, I would fall in his trap once again and answer him proudly: "Never. I would never go to your house!" And then he would smile and look at me tenderly. Hipólito could express his tenderness only when he felt superior.

His interest in my going to his house wasn't a simple formality. It was genuine. He was dying for me to go. Hipólito enjoyed all ambiguous, confused situations and underground conflicts. He really would have loved to gather a group of selected friends around him and have both his wife and his lover under the same roof, his roof. What a pleasure it would be for him to see me mingling with his acquaintances, to watch how I fended for myself. He would have loved to hear the clearly banal conversations I would have with his wife. I could picture him eagerly soaking up my suffering and his wife's pathetic innocence. He would love to intensify the predicament by moving us around him as if we were the characters in a cheap Hollywood sitcom so that he could thus transform his life and his contradictions into a show . . . a show in which he could enjoy first the sweet melancholy of really loving me during those times when he wasn't able to demonstrate it, and

then the slight feeling of guilt before his wife's candid faith in him. How Hipólito loved himself on those occasions! He was convinced that nobody was capable of discovering the complexities of his emotions, the deepness of his sensitivity, his merits and his faults. Since his was an intelligent and decadent narcissism, he loved himself more than anything for his defects.

I imagined him at home writing, in that house I had never seen or entered, which, consequently, I could picture to my liking. He would be sitting before an English-style desk, the sun filtering through beige curtains, and the stereo would be filling the empty rooms with echoes of Mahler. Or maybe not, maybe he would still be sleeping in spite of the late hour. He would be spread out diagonally on the double bed that was to be exclusively his for the next few days.

I imagined the scene in detail. I could see the velveteen bedroom wall, the matching night tables on either side of the bed, with two different books waiting patiently for their owners. By the window was a love seat with a skirt draped languidly across its back, the same skirt his wife forgot to hang in the closet during the final rush of packing, the skirt that was the evidence of her absence, a symbol of their daily marital life. Suddenly I felt a dreadful envy, the crazy desire to find Hipólito's dirty underwear under my bed, a need for that same sort of meaningless cohabitation.

And so maybe Hipólito was still in bed, stretching sluggishly, his temples trapped by a pounding hangover, his mouth dry and cottony from the whiskies he had drunk the night before with his buddies, who were selected for the occasion from his little black book under "fun party buddies" because their wives were also gone. Hipólito would observe himself from an ironic distance, thinking about the ridiculousness of his character and taking immense pleasure in playing his role of husband-free-of-wife-for-a-few-days. But perhaps I was thinking of the wrong movie. Maybe at that very moment Hipólito was cuddling up to a beautiful plastic blond he had picked up in some bar the night before. Maybe they had finished breakfast by now and were heading toward the shower. The bathroom would smell of family colognes

and deodorants, the shelves packed with his wife's makeup and creams. There, in that atmosphere of marital bliss, Hipólito would relish the anxiety inherent in cheating while he traced the narrow profile of the blond with his gluttonous eyes – he always liked the very thin ones – and then they would exchange a coffee-flavored kiss. And imagining all this, I felt a painful, indignant pressure at the bottom of my stomach.

It was then I saw her. She was walking down the sidewalk in front of the apartments, a black dot piercing the sun-beaten street. She hobbled along with visible effort, carrying a small packet, probably her dinner. She had to be returning from the market. Doña Maruja really left the house only to shop for groceries, that was her sole daily adventure. She appeared at the market every morning silently smiling – I had run into her there several times. The shopkeepers knew her well and greeted her cheerfully. "Hey, Doña Maruja, how's life?" "Fine, son, moving right along." She would buy her lunch meat, her small beef steak, and then return to the confines of her apartment, clasping the greasy packet in her hands.

My eyes followed her movements. She reminded me of a cockroach crawling along the sidewalk below. It took her forever to reach the crosswalk. Even though the jam up at the bridge continued, the traffic on the street below was now flowing easily, and Doña Maruja hesitated, tottering at the curb. Then suddenly she started off: she stepped off the curb decisively, took two or three strides with surprising agility, and halted again. She had stopped in the middle of the street, a small, black blotch amidst the uproar of the traffic. Cars swerved to miss her, the air bristled with the honking of horns, and a truck slammed on its brakes and began to skid toward her. Doña Maruja closed her eyes, squeezed her package, and smiled.

I barely had time to swallow the bitter saliva that had accumulated in my mouth before I realized everything was over. People came running out of nowhere and gathered around the scene. The truck driver had stepped down from the cab and was literally yanking on his hair while shouting at the top of his lungs. In the

meantime, tiny Doña Maruja was still standing in the same spot, glued to the street, trembling, just a few inches away from the huge mass of a truck that had miraculously stopped at the last second.

"These old ladies are a damned hazard! And then it's my license that gets revoked," the man kept yelling. "What?" he answered someone who whispered something to him. "Well, if she's crazy, why the hell don't they lock her up?"

Finally, a woman took Doña Maruja by the arm and ushered her toward the sidewalk as she murmured something in her ear. Doña Maruja followed her docilely, smiling and nodding her head. Then she resumed her slow shuffle and disappeared from sight under my window.

I turned to sit back on the sofa. I felt all queasy and shaken. Suddenly the sun didn't seem warm at all. I struggled to think of something pleasant and interesting enough to erase the scent of death that was suffocating me.

Hipólito. At times with Hipólito I reached moments of incomparable, intense feeling. There were very few such moments, but in those rare instants of brutal intensity I felt eternal, intoxicated by life, compensated. And then, after those fleeting moments of ecstasy, I had to plunge back into the tedium and grayness of my seclusion and fears. It was like watching a film that grabs your attention, draws you into its world, and makes you live, suffer, and breathe through it, the kind of film that makes you forget about yourself. But very soon it's all over, the movie ends, the screen darkens, and the lights come on. You suffer a moment of shock, a baffled instant in which you have to reunite with your body. You blink your eyes, trying to brush away the fictitious image that seemed so real. You are surprised to see the movie theater again, to hear the seats slapping shut. You painfully return to the monotony of reality after having been in that fascinating, make-believe world for too short a time.

Maybe that is why I always wanted to become a producer and make movies, not to communicate anything to anyone, but to store up those fleeting instants, to capture that intensity for myself and somehow satisfy my insatiable greed for life.

Miguel told me about it. We were eating out one day, a summer afternoon, at an outdoor cafe. Salad crawling with ants, greasy lamb chops, and wine spritzers. The meal was abominable, but there was a lake in front of us. And the drowsy three o'clock heat, and the shade of a tree that gave no relief, and the annoying drone of a horsefly. I felt tired, suffocated, and dissatisfied. We had slept together the night before, and I had enjoyed the warm shelter of his arms. We had gotten up late and showered together, filling the bathroom with water and laughter. During breakfast we saw how the summer heat was baking the streets and decided to get out of the city for the day. But the unappetizing remainders of the meal and the stifling heat had left me without words.

Miguel was looking at me across the table covered with leftover food, but I felt he was far from me, very far. We had been silent for a while, maybe a bit full of each other. The lake shimmered in the background, the horsefly danced merrily between our plates, and a dense drop of sweat rolled slowly down Miguel's neck and lost itself in the curly hairs of his chest, the same hairs I had ruffled and recombed with my fingers the night before, but which felt so distant at that moment.

I had so little love for Miguel during those instants; he was so indifferent to me that I was actually struck by the fear that he might not love me any more than I loved him. The thought became so unbearable that I broke the silence.

"Life certainly is precarious."

"Precarious? What do you mean?"

"Just that," I explained. "How our feelings, our actions are so precarious. There are moments in which we feel we are very intimate with someone, truly united with another person, and then the next moment we realize it was only an illusion, that we are completely alone. At times we think we are able to communicate with others, but a minute later we're certain that communication is impossible. Doesn't it happen to you? It does to me. There are times when I believe I care for someone, love them intensely, and then, an hour later, I realize I don't really feel anything for them at all. And at times I am happy, at times I feel so alive, so happy, so

content with my space in the world. But those moments are very short, so short, and right away I find myself hanging in the void again. Do you understand? As if everything were absurd, unreal; as if the world were absolutely irrational and I were paralyzed and inept."

The truth is, I told him all this not as a reflection that was strictly my own, but because I was eager to warn him that his lack of love for me at that time – if my intuition was correct – was quite normal and he shouldn't give up but strengthen his will to continue loving me. But my words seemed to have shaken him out of his lethargic state. He smiled with that pleased, candid expression I liked so much, leaned forward – resting inadvertently on the leftover lamb – and almost shouted with enthusiasm.

"Of course! That's the delta function."

"The what?"

"The delta function. You don't know what it is? It's a mathematical function, from quantitative mechanics, a priceless function, one of the most beautiful ones there is . . ." (I have always been surprised by the concept of beauty scientists have, their aesthetic rapture in the face of complicated formulas.) "It is a function that describes discontinuous phenomena of great intensity but of very brief duration," he continued. "That is, phenomena whose intensity extends toward infinity but whose duration is practically zero. If one could visualize it, it would look like a broken line of very sharp angles," and as he said this, he sketched the outline of a saw with his hand in the thick, damp air. "Do you get it?" He leaned back again and sighed with contentment, brushing his curly bangs out of his eyes with the same hand he had used to draw invisible saws. "It was invented by an English mathematician named Dirac, who is very old now . . . It's a lovely function, one of my favorites . . ."

The pain in my thighs was now unbearable. I could feel the skin on my nose getting tight, and I had just about had it with the racket of the horns and the stares of the onlookers. I was hungry. It was almost four in the afternoon, but the ramp was still glutted by the cars that were fleeing the city. Getting off the balcony and

entering the cool, dark living room was like diving into a swimming pool of shadows. I telephoned the coffee shop below, asked them to bring me a ham sandwich, and then ran into the bathroom to check my tanning process. The mirror rendered me the image of a somewhat distorted Lucía, with a pale, drawn face, but with rosy cheeks and a shiny nose. I looked closer. My face didn't really look so bad; it was just dirty. I ran a finger over my oily cheek, and it came away black, black from soot and urban crap, from pollution. I groaned and decided to take a bath. The tub filled, the water began to cool, and still my sandwich hadn't arrived. I continued adding hot water as I waited. Finally, after an angry second call, a boy in a dirty apron arrived and handed me a cold, greasy sandwich.

I set up a little stool next to the bathtub, placed a glass of wine on it, and got into the water, ready to share my lunch with the bubbles. I nibbled at the sandwich slowly, with no great pleasure, and when I was almost finished, a piece broke off and fell into the water with a sordid "plop!" I watched with a certain curiosity as the bread, buoyant at first, drifted off toward the right as it soaked up water, possibly forced in that direction by a little piece of ham that was still stuck to it. The surrounding water was filling up with miniature oil slicks, and the tiny piece of bread was slowly disappearing from sight. Finally, without a sign of struggle, the spongy crumb sank completely under, dragging the piece of ham down with it and humbly placing its wreckage on my right groin. It was precisely at that moment that I decided to write to Hipólito. It would be a cruel, bloody letter, a letter that would hurt him.

"Hipólito, maybe you would be interested to know that the clearest memory I have of you is of your back, your back escaping shamefully the last day we saw each other." The sun had already disappeared behind the buildings, and the street was covered with that glowing bluish shadow some summer sunsets have. "You are a coward, and there are times when I despise you. And you already know that spite – not hate – is the end of love."

The noise of the traffic droned on, loud and monotonous. I wondered if there could really be so many people in the city, or if

maybe the unending caravan was only a trick, an endless wheel, an infinite circle formed by the same cars passing in front of my house again and again in order to confuse me.

"You promise to love me forever, when you know your circumstances prevent you from doing it. You're afraid of loving me too much, and you hide behind your decision not to abandon your wife. You boast of having children, of having compromises and nonexistent obligations in order to make yourself scarce. Sometimes I think you take me for an imbecile. You're an immature coward, a selfish adolescent. You're so used to lies that you don't even realize when you use them. You want to keep me at a handy but safe distance. You don't dare lose me or win me over. I'm sick of it all, and I'm fed up with you!"

The evening was now cobalt. I turned on the lamp, and its artificial light made the night enter suddenly. I thought I had wasted the day away, it had escaped me in a flash. The telephone hadn't rung since the night before. I felt forgotten, alone on a sinking ship, that urban ship the city dwellers were rushing to escape, anxious and packed in like rats. "I'm sick of it! I'm tired of being understanding, of looking for impossible reasons to explain your absurd behavior. It's over. I won't put up with your childishness anymore. If you become an adult someday, call me. Maybe then we could reinitiate a different conversation." I stabbed in the final period with a flash of vengeance, reread the letter, and wrote a final draft.

I was quite happy with the venom seeping from the letter. I wanted revenge. I wanted to hurt Hipólito. But above all I wanted a reaction from him, and such a letter required a response. Hipólito couldn't leave it unanswered. He would call me, write me, send me flowers. I, in his place, would have immediately sent me a splendid bouquet of flowers with a tender, loving card. I imagined the sequence with delight, the doorbell, the delivery boy half-hidden by an enormous pot of violets, and a card tucked in between the purple flowers: "With all of my selfish adolescent love." Or, "From an insensitive fraud who, in spite of everything, doesn't lie when he says he loves you."

I sighed and came out of the dream reluctantly. Hipólito wasn't one for details. In order to send me flowers he would either have to have suffered a sunstroke or be delirious from yellow fever. At any rate, after reading my letter he would have to break his absurd silence, and we would be able to see and touch each other, meet and love again. It was all very clear to me. I had told him in my letter that it was definitely over between us just to provoke a sweet reconciliation. With premature pleasure, I pictured how distraught he would be after reading my message. It was a lovely offensive maneuver. I was advancing toward the battlefield with my few troops, and I had the initiative and surprise to my advantage. I got dressed in a hurry and went down to mail the letter. The city was dark and deserted. The traffic was much lighter now, and the onramp had cleared. From time to time one last fleeing car would buzz by. I walked toward the mailbox, placidly smoking a cigarette. I felt a sudden peace, that somewhat suicidal calmness that comes upon you after making a difficult decision. I reflected coldy upon my love life and had to admit that it had always been rather complicated. I suffered a disquieting tendency to fall in love with problem men, married or engaged men, elusive men. Maybe, I said to myself, it's all my fault. I thought of Rosa and her ability for initiating long live-in relationships, just like that. Then again, Rosa always got involved with ridiculous, inadequate mates. Some simpleton could offer her his room in a cheap boarding-house and that was enough reason for her to be touched by his courteous gesture and incorporate him into her life for years. As for me, I told myself proudly, I'm much more selective.

I had reached the mailbox by then, and before I dropped the letter in, I reread it once again, carefully folded it, and slipped it into the previously stamped envelope. I had already licked one of its sticky surfaces when a thought assaulted me. I took out the sheet of paper again and carefully crossed out my signature with a magic marker as a simple precaution. The letter was addressed to his house, and, who knows, maybe his wife had returned unexpectedly from vacation. Maybe that was why Hipólito hadn't called me, I said to myself hopefully. I closed the envelope, printed

a commanding "Urgent" in one corner and slowly pushed it into the slot with the childish fear that it would get wrinkled or caught on something or that some little hook the gnomes had left there would keep the letter from reaching its destination. But the envelope slid easily into the metal jaws and disappeared from sight in a quarter of a second. I stayed there for a spell, contemplating the mailbox, fascinated by the fact that it could still be as round, yellow, and indifferent as before, in spite of having my letter hidden in its belly.

"Hey, Lucía! What are you standing there for?"

I turned, a bit startled. It was Andrés, the agency's graphic artist.

"Oh, hi! Not much, just came to mail a letter."

Andrés was carrying a torn cardboard box in which several bottles of wine and soft drinks were precariously balanced.

"I've been buying all this," he said euphorically, laughing incongruously while pointing with his head toward the drugstore on the corner.

"Provisions for tonight, ha ha ha . . . !"

He shut up for a moment while trying unsuccessfully with his knee to stop a bottle of Coke from crashing onto the ground.

"Damn . . . !"

"Let me help you," I said grabbing the most dangerously placed bottles.

"Where are you headed?"

"Oh, thank you . . . To the car, that blue one on the corner. Thanks, thanks, I can get it now."

I scrutinized his face under the street lamp. His pupils were very black and dilated.

"Boy, you're really out of it," I said indifferently.

"Yeah, I am."

He opened the car and put his load in the back seat.

"I'm having a party at my place. Why don't you come?"

I hesitated a moment. The truth is I didn't feel like being alone that night.

"Is there any food?" I asked, suddenly feeling hungry.

"There's a little bit of everything, of ev-er-ee-thing," Andrés answered in a promising tone. "Delicious little things."

"Yeah, yeah, I can already tell there are delicious little things just by looking at you, but is there any real food?"

"Of course there is! Don't be a pain, woman. Come on, get in!"

And before I could think twice, I found myself seated in the car as Andrés zoomed across the city at the hair-raising speed of twelve miles an hour, chatting effusively all the while. "Weell . . . I'm completely stoned, really high, but don't you worry because I drive much better when I'm high than when I'm straight . . ." His place wasn't far, so in spite of our unbelievably slow progress, we arrived before long. It was a building, a tower of apartments with interminable hallways and a parade of identical doors. From the elevator I could already hear the loud music and commotion, and for a moment I regretted having come.

"Are there a lot of people?"

"Uff, gobs," Andrés answered in delight, discouraging me further. But it was impossible to escape now. Andrés had already opened the door and was sailing through a crowded hallway, using the box of bottles as his prow.

"Here's the wine and a castaway I rescued from the night," he yelled on his way to the kitchen. "This is Lucía," he introduced me, directing his words to what looked like a cupboard. "There is food in the living room. Help yourself to whatever you want."

The living room was spacious, with Hindu bedspreads covering the walls, a large built-in bookcase, and lots of cushions on the floor. There were some thirty people scattered about the room, laughing, talking – actually they were shouting to each other above the music. I looked around and didn't recognize anyone. I was overcome by a sudden attack of shyness, so I hurried to sit in a corner on the only cushion that seemed to be available. I hadn't even leaned back against the wall when the woman on my right handed me a smoldering "shillom." Back then the lighter drugs were still illegal. I took a couple of hits and passed it on to the bearded man on my left, next to the bookcase, who was deeply absorbed in some books on drawings and paintings. Andrés sud-

denly appeared, leaning over me, and asked me what I wanted to drink. "Tonic water," I told him, and he disappeared into the crowd and returned a moment later with a beer which he deposited in my hand with a charming hostlike gesture.

I looked to my right, and the woman beside me gave me a friendly smile. I looked to my left, where the bearded man was still soaking up his books. Someone passed me a gigantic joint in an advanced state of consumption. I took two hits and passed it to the bearded man. The packed ashes floated silently down onto the satin pages of the book, and the man carefully blew them off on his pants. I noticed the drawing he was studying. It was a fascinating, torturous interior space, a web of intricate tunnels that seemed familiar to me.

"Excuse me," I whispered in his ear. "Who is that artist?"

He automatically returned what was left of the joint without looking at me.

"No, no, listen!" I insisted, tugging at his sweater. "Excuse me, but who is the artist?"

The man looked up, and I realized he was cross-eyed.

"Escher," he replied. "It's a book on Escher."

This said, he plunged himself back into the pages, but a second later lifted his head and fixed one eye on me (the other one was looking at the door) and asked calmly:

"And what do you do?"

"Movies," I answered I don't know why.

"Porn?"

"No."

"Ahhhh!"

And he went back to his drawings and forgot about me. I looked to the right and met eyes with the same woman. We smiled again politely. So I directed my gaze ahead and concentrated on a couple sitting farther away on a sofa. It was the only sofa in the room, and they rose above the rest of us, who were spread out on the floor, as if they were on stage. She was a wisp of a woman, very thin and pale, with large, somber, intensely black eyes. He was the fleshy type, with drooping cheeks and an abundant, reddish

moustache that could have been his attempt at compensating for his premature baldness. They were both thirtyish and sat stiffly erect, looking straight ahead, talking loudly enough to be heard by half the people in the living room.

"Well, I simply prefer not to know," the guy was saying. "I prefer not to find out about anything, so now you know."

"But I do want to know. I want you to tell me," she was answering. "I want to know the truth."

"Fine. I'll tell you if I feel like it, and if I don't, I won't. I don't have to answer for everything I do."

"Besides," the woman was adding, "I don't know why you're coming up with all this now because we've always told each other everything, and you've always said you weren't jealous at all."

"I've never said that!"

"Yes, you have!"

"No sir, I've never said that," he insisted. "And if I've said so; I don't care because I am indeed jealous. I *am* jealous and don't you forget it!"

"Then I don't understand why you always start these fights. If you're jealous, why don't you just say so?"

"But I *am* saying so!"

"No. This is the first time you've said something about it, I don't know why you always say the opposite of what you're thinking."

"I don't say the opposite. It's just that I'm not going to start a big fight every time you go out with another man. I don't like it, and since I don't like it I'd rather not know about it. It's as simple as that."

"Well, I don't see why you have to be so controlled, why you insist on rationalizing everything so much. If you're jealous, why don't you act like a jealous person?"

"What do you want me to do?" he exclaimed. "Do you want me to beat you and drag you around by the hair?"

"No. It's not that; it's just that I don't understand why you say you're not jealous when you really are."

The woman on my right tapped me on the shoulder timidly: "Are you a friend of Andrés?" she asked.

"Yes." She smiled and gave a little sigh. She must have been pushing fifty. Her hair was short, and she wore black pants and a large, embroidered blouse, long enough to cover her wide rear end.

"I'm his sister-in-law," she explained. "I'm . . . married to Andrés's older brother. He's a nice guy, isn't he?"

"Yes, really nice." She fixed her gaze on me for a long moment as if she were trying to measure my listening capacity.

"I . . . I don't know anyone around here, do you?" she said finally.

"No, neither do I." My answer seemed to please her and she began to chat more animatedly.

"I thought so. I . . . Well, Andrés invited me because . . . He's such a good kid that . . . He's always telling me I need to get out and meet people, but I'm awfully shy and . . . besides you're all so young that I feel like your mother."

"That's crazy," I told her absently.

"The thing is I've just separated, you know?" she continued, blushing a little. "Well, he has . . . The truth is my husband has left me. Imagine, after seventeen years of marriage." She stopped, waiting for some sign of commiseration on my part, and I hurried to mumble an ambiguous, comforting "Imagine!" "We have two kids, one fifteen and the other twelve. Both boys, already little men, actually. They live with me now. Well, in fact, I kept the house. He . . . he's the one who left with someone else, a young girl. It isn't . . . it isn't fair, is it?" I noticed in dismay that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Oh, come on, now!" I rushed to add. "These things happen every day – love doesn't last forever. It's hard now because everything's probably so recent, but you'll see how you'll recover in no time. It's better to break up when things are miserable than to let a tense living situation drag on . . ."

I stopped for a moment and tried to think of some topic that might put off her tears and help her confidence, but nothing occurred to me. She was saying, "Yes, yes, of course," in a soft voice, and she had lowered her head, concentrating on holding

back her tears. I took advantage of the moment by straightening up on the cushion and looking around the room, trying to somehow escape her grasp. In desperation, I concentrated once more on the loud debate coming from the sofa.

"And don't forget your trip to the coast, dear. As soon as you arrived home you hurried to tell me in detail about all your affairs, about all the chicks you laid."

"That's not true. I told you briefly about some of my adventures, and I did so because I thought you'd probably find out from someone else and I wanted to be the one to tell you first so that you could see it meant nothing to me."

"And what about you and María Jesús?"

"You got awfully hysterical about all that. There was no reason to make a scene."

"What do you mean? You hardly came home for a month, and the whole time I knew you were with that woman."

"But, don't you understand? María Jesús had a . . . beautiful body. I was attracted to her physically, but we didn't have anything to talk about. We had nothing in common."

"You didn't have anything to talk about, but you spent all day with her while I was all alone."

"I swear that María Jesús and I slept together no more than . . . Look, I remember perfectly, I only went to bed with her four times, four exactly."

"Ahhhh! And so now you only slept with her four times! I already knew about it from other sources. But two years ago you swore to me you had only gone to bed with her once. It's amazing how I discover your little lies."

"I said that?"

"Yes, *you* said that. I don't forget easily."

"Well, anyway. I slept with her two, three, four times at the most. I don't even remember. It didn't matter at all, but you just lost your head about the whole thing."

The couple on the sofa had managed to attract the attention of most of the people in the living room. The guests were sitting serenely around them on their cushions, listening with fascina-

tion. Even my cross-eyed neighbor had put aside his books to focus on the dispute.

"And I don't know how you dare talk," the moustached man was saying, "because we aren't even going to start bringing up your lovers, like that fat guy you picked up in that bar . . ."

"I never abandoned *you*, ever. I picked him up one day and never saw him again, and besides he was . . ."

"Don't tell me, I don't want to know. I told you already I don't want to know anything, remember? Don't tell me about your little adventures."

"But, really, listen, that guy . . ."

"No, I said. Shut up! I don't want to find out. It's like that time when you came home drunk. Why would I want to know what you were doing? That night you started crying as soon as you got into bed, so why ask?"

"Well, I prefer to know about things."

"Well, I don't, I'm telling you. And what's more, tell your lovers not to call you at home, because to top it off, they get really obnoxious. I have to sit there and explain where you are and when you'll be home. It's really too much!"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know why we always discuss this in public. It's always the same story, and you're the one who keeps bringing it up; don't deny it."

The woman on my right began again.

"So what do you do?" she asked me with her most charming smile. I turned back to her impatiently.

"I work in advertising, in the same agency as Andrés."

"You draw too?"

"No, I'm a producer, I do the filming."

"Ohhh, what a wonderful job!" she marveled. "I . . . I have to look for a job," she continued. "It's difficult because, of course, I've never worked before. My husband . . . I mean, my ex-husband . . . gives some money for me and the kids, but . . . of course, I don't feel too good about it because . . . I have to look for work, but things are so bad right now, and, besides, what can I do if I don't know how to do anything? Oh God! I feel so lost . . ."

Her eyes filled with tears again, and her upper lip began to tremble. I felt uncomfortable and resentful. Someone passed a joint, and the woman refused it, shaking her head vigorously. I grabbed it, inhaled twice, and made use of the momentary silence to crawl off the cushion.

"Excuse me for a moment, I'm going to see if I can find something to eat."

I made the insane decision to start off toward the wall of people that were standing up at the end of the room, suspecting that behind it was something edible. And as a matter of fact, after struggling through the crowd (how was it possible that there were still so many people in the empty city?) I reached a long table covered with food. I selected leftover crumbs of cold Spanish tortilla, some cold cuts – hard salami was the only thing left, though I noticed one plate showed greasy signs of having held some ham – and some gummy, squished croquettes, and then proceeded to devour everything, accompanying it with all the bread I could find. I looked around. My old seat was the only free spot, and it was out of the question because of the teary threat of my recently separated cushion mate. Consequently, I resigned myself to standing and precariously balancing the plate, the glass, and the croquettes as I ate.

"How is it going?" It was Andrés, who had suddenly appeared at my side.

"Great."

"There's not much left to eat."

"No."

"Wait. I think there are some cheese sandwiches left in the kitchen. Should I go get them?"

"Would you please?"

Andrés left the room, and at that moment some new people arrived at the party. I saw them greeting the host in the shadows of the hallway and watched as they entered the living room. I was astonished: it was Fariño, the head of the agency, accompanied by a dazzling young girl. I was still gaping, with a croquette suspended mid-air between the plate and my mouth when Fariño discovered me and came over, dragging the girl behind him.

"Hello, hello, Lucía. What a surprise to find you here."

"The same to you," I choked.

"You don't know Dori, do you? Dori, Lucía."

The girl gave me a smile smeared with purple lipstick and a high sing-song "hel-lo" in a screechy voice. She had red-tinted hair, which she wore extrashort, and her skin-tight gold pants matched her sandals, which had suicidal spiked heels. Her phenomenally proportioned breasts were squeezed into a black-sequined T-shirt.

"Dori, Lucía is a famous woman, a movie director. She's going to premiere a spectacular movie next Sunday. I'll take you to see it one of these days. And Dori is . . ." Fariño added, turning toward me with an unbearably conspiratorial smile, "a good friend, a very good friend, right, Dori?"

"R-i-i-ight!"

At that moment Andrés returned carrying a plate with three sandwiches. "Oh, great!" the girl exclaimed. "I'm staaarving!" So she pounced on the plate and grabbed a sandwich in each hand. I rushed to snatch up the third one, beating Fariño by a tenth of a second, and sadly watched the sandwiches disappear with amazing speed inside the monster's purple jaws.

"Andrés," said Fariño. "I've got some really good stuff, or so they've told me. It's some of the best, 'Lebanese Red,' they called it."

"Hummm, it's good stuff, yeah."

"Here, take a look. Fariño took a block of considerable dimensions out of his pocket and showed it off proudly.

"Hey, all right!" praised Andrés enthusiastically. "Go ahead, Fariño, roll a joint. You know how?"

"I know, I know," shrilled the girl, clapping her hands and dangerously flashing her predatory nails.

"There's some paper over there on that little table."

When Fariño and the girl left us, I gave Andrés an indignant glare.

"What is that beast doing here?"

"Who? Fariño? Nothing. I invited him."

"I thought you hated him."

"Bah! No, poor guy. He can be a jerk at times, but he's really a fun-loving party animal. In the morning he goes to the office, and at night he smokes his brains out. He's cool, really. He's just discovered the smoking trip, and now he's high all day. Besides, he always brings some really good stuff . . ."

"I don't get it," I answered icily.

"But, why not? I'm telling you that outside the office he's a nice guy. He's always out of it. He's a lot of fun."

"Andrés, the fact that a person smokes doesn't excuse him from everything. It seems you divide the world into people who smoke and people who don't, and if they do, then they're okay."

"Well, it's kind of like that, isn't it?" He smiled amiably and, before I had time to answer, changed the subject. "Hey, by the way. Guess who I saw today?" Reluctantly, I abandoned the discussion.

"Well, I won't know unless you tell me, will I?"

"I saw your script-writer." I felt a twinge in my stomach.

"Hipólito?"

"Yes, sir, Hipólito. He was eating at that German restaurant, enraptured with his wife."

"His wife?"

"Yes, a good-looking, tiny blond."

"His wife is a brunette."

I believe I turned green, or at least I felt green inside, green with a ravenous desire to kill, to slap Hipólito silly, to shatter a bottle over his head, kick him in the balls, and saturate his eyes with his asthmatic spray.

" . . . and I like the way he writes, I really do . . ." I heard Andrés through my wrath. "I loved his last novel, so this morning I told him that . . ."

"Sorry, Andrés, I'm leaving," I interrupted him.

"Already?"

"Yes, thanks for everything. You've been wonderful, but I'm really tired."

It took me a while to locate my purse, but I finally recovered it from under the sofa, which had been taken over by Fariño and his

doll (the bickering couple had disappeared without leaving a trace), and because of their physical proximity I was forced to say good-bye to them. I received a woeful farewell from the teary woman, who was still installed on her cushion, and in three more hops I was in the hallway. I had smoked quite a bit and was feeling a little high, so first the elevator took me down to the underground parking lot, later I stopped at a basement full of garbage cans, and, finally, on the third try, when I had begun to feel a claustrophobic panic, the metal doors opened onto the main floor. Eagerly, I breathed in the fresh night air. Figuring I must be about twenty minutes away from home, I decided to walk, in order to clear my head and think a bit. My steps echoed on the recently showered pavement, and with each angry strike of the heel I imagined I was stepping on Hipólito's face.

I began to think Hipólito really was as I had described him in my letter: mean, selfish, and cowardly. I decided that it wouldn't be that painful if I broke up with him, that it could even be a relief, a liberation, a way to save my precious energy. Because passionate, fictitious love demanded such obsession and such a surrender of the will. It was an intensive job, an occupation of every emotion, a delicate invention that required daily affective gymnastics in order to survive. It was different with Miguel, though. Miguel's love was the solid accumulation of a thousand tender details; it was the complicity of two beings in the face of solitude and life's other preoccupations and worries. All of a sudden I felt lucid and clairvoyant, possessed with a remarkably transparent logic from the effects of the hash. That's it, I said to myself. With passionate love we try to deceive death, we try to reach the peak of life, those instants in which we believe ourselves to be eternal. With romantic love, we seek to overcome death, but without deception. We simply confront its very existence with the support of another person.

I met Miguel in the mountains. A mutual friend had invited us to spend a long weekend at his cabin, a beautiful house with ample whitewashed walls, a fireplace, and a pervading smell of burning wood. I hate going to large get-togethers where I don't know anyone, but I accepted the invitation because I was depressed,

probably about my conflicts with Hipólito. When I was young, all my depressions seemed to have amorous origins. I was pessimistic and on guard when I went, but, nevertheless, the weekend was a great success. There were six of us: my friend who owned the house, Miguel, a quiet, charming couple, and a young chubby fellow who had majored in philosophy and was working in a funeral parlor at the time for lack of a better job. The young man took on the role of the buffoon at the party and brought us to tears a few times with his caustic dry humor. It was a beautiful weekend. We got up early every day and ate huge breakfasts in front of the fireplace embers – goat cheese, honey, ham, eggs – all the while breathing in the sunny smell of the sierras that entered through the windows. We read, took walks through the countryside, and gathered around the fireplace at sunset to tell stories.

I liked Miguel from the very beginning. I was touched by his perplexed expression, his absent-mindedness; I admired the halo of serenity that seemed to surround him and his natural ability to express affection. I was captivated by his domestic self-sufficiency, so strange in a man. He cooked, washed dishes, picked up around the house, and washed his own clothes. He was a man who was used to living alone, but solitude hadn't marked him with its little misanthropic manias. His lack of masculine biases surprised and excited me. During our sunset gatherings before the fire, Miguel would pack his pipe, pick up a pair of knitting needles, and calmly begin work on one of the countless fluffy sweaters he always wore. "It's very relaxing," he used to say, when someone commented on his knitting; and he said it as though surprised that others were surprised. I should reemphasize here that in those days it was truly unusual to find a man with such characteristics. By our fourth and last day he had melted my heart away with his pleasant companionship, and my body was eager to receive one of his bear hugs. I liked his long bony hands, with their soft black fuzz curling over his wrists. I liked his big shoulders, and the corpulence that gave him a tender, comfortable appearance. I liked his familiar whiskers and their woodsy smell.

On our last night, we all took a walk under the nearly full

moon. I shrewdly paired up with Miguel and tried to match my steps with his long strides. He chatted on euphorically, relating scientific wonders about the heavens with his natural professorial style. "At first Einstein believed in a static universe, with no beginning or end," he was saying, "but he quickly accepted the theory of Alexander Friedman, the Russian mathematician, who in 1922 proposed the possibility of a dynamic universe." The brilliant night sky suspended above us was brimming with stars as I trotted along at Miguel's side, barely listening, though the subject interested me. I was obsessed with our imminent departure, time was slipping through my fingers, and I had to find a way to tell him how much I liked him. Now was the perfect opportunity, and there would be no second chances. I returned to his words once more: "And so, after turning into a red giant and scorching the Earth, the sun would collapse and become a white dwarf, very small, maybe even smaller than the Earth. Of course, this is only one of many theories . . ." Red giant, white dwarf . . . scientific terminology seemed fascinating, fun, almost poetic to me. It takes a special kind of imagination to see our sun as a white dwarf and to give it a future worthy of any children's story. Miguel was silent for a moment. The night was beautiful. I felt his arm and his warmth next to me, and, taking a deep breath of the fresh darkness, I decided to throw myself into the void.

"I'm happy. I'm very happy," I said.

"Why, sweetheart?"

The sweetheart, so sweet and intimate, drove me to the edge of tears.

"I don't know . . . because it's been a wonderful weekend. I feel happy . . . I get terribly sad at the thought of leaving. You're all great people . . . And to think I almost didn't come . . . It's just that it seems strange that six people who barely know each other can hit it off so well, don't you think?"

"Yes, it is strange," he commented. "The truth is they are all, you are all, great people. And José, with his incredible stories about the funeral parlor, he's a hilarious guy."

I closed my eyes, held my breath, and let it out. "Yes, José is a lot

of fun. And the couple is very nice. And you . . . I am very attracted to you, and the problem is I don't know how to get things started."

"Antonio is also a fantastic guy," Miguel went on saying, impassively. "Well, I already knew Antonio. Actually, he was the only one I knew, but it's the first time I've ever been to his house."

We had continued walking, and Miguel was maintaining the same calm, serene attitude, as if he hadn't heard my words. Miguel was thirty-nine then, exactly ten years older than I, and I had depended on his maturity to help me out. But faced with his serene, adult behavior, I felt insecure and didn't quite understand the meaning of his reaction, or lack of reaction. So I added a "Yeah, I didn't know anybody besides Antonio, either," in a somewhat dismayed tone. And we walked on in silence while bits of laughter and conversation floated forward from the others, who were a few yards back. Finally, Miguel decided to address the subject, and in a casual tone, without looking at me, he asked:

"Hey, what did you mean by what you said before?"

Suddenly I understood he was fragile and shy, and I felt a pleasant warmth in my stomach. I smiled to myself in the darkness.

"What do you think?"

"Well, I don't know."

"Let's see, what is it that I said to you?"

"You said you don't know how to get things started."

"And before that?"

"That you liked me a lot."

"And what do you think that might mean?"

"About getting things started with me? Did you say it in the classic meaning of the phrase?"

"Of course."

Miguel laughed in delight, muttering, "Allright, this is great." I also laughed, infected as I was by his joy and nervousness. We continued walking in silence for quite a distance without touching each other, periodically shaken by sudden spasms of laughter. And then, with no warning, Miguel slipped his long arm around my shoulders and crushed me against his chest. I felt the rough-

ness of his jacket on my cheek and, beyond that, the warmth of his body.

"Well, me too, sweetheart, I like you a lot too."

And I was silent, numbed by my happiness. I stayed there, incrusted in his side, even though a button on his jacket was poking me in the eye.

I had already reached my street; the neighborhood was dim, black, silent. For a moment I felt overwhelmed by the calm, as though I were the only living soul inside that concrete cemetery. In fact, I was alone in the city. My friends, my lovers, my family were all gone. I thought of my parents, on their way to some beach, and in my dismay a sort of morbid pleasure caused me to imagine an accident: the vacation traffic, a bad curve, a car running off the edge of the road. An anonymous voice that phones to inform me of the misfortune, "Your parents, I'm sorry, please be strong." I was choked with anguish imagining all this. I savored my state as a future orphan as though I wanted to prepare myself for the suffering and solitude that awaited me. Doña Maruja also had parents, lovers, and life when she was young.

The night was vacant, and I heard a siren in the distance. I hurried along, suddenly overcome by vague fears, fear of a faceless murderer with no motive to kill, fear of an image of Doña Maruja drinking an insecticide tea. I was practically running when I reached the entrance. The cold air bit my cheeks, and my nose felt tight and itchy, the skin irritated by the sun. My skin like warm bread, darling.

October 14

I felt better this morning after having endured a week of persistent dizzy spells. After breakfast María de Día ushered me out of bed and up to the glass-enclosed patio to get some sun. I am writing here, seated in a rattan chair that crackles and complains with my tiniest movement. I hardly move, though, because I feel weak and fatigued. My arms and legs seem to be made of lead.

"It's lack of exercise, Doña Lucía," María de Día said, pretending to be angry. "You're getting very lazy; you hardly leave your bed anymore."

Which isn't true. I don't get up because I just fall down. Or at least that's what was happening. Today those damn Ménière dizzy spells seem to have disappeared. What a stupid, deceiving sickness. It comes and goes without warning and fills me with useless

hopes only to dash them a moment later, when it seems the world starts spinning crazily around me once again. It's actually not the world that spins but myself. They are strange, these dizzy spells. When they come over me it is the room that seems to stay put while I am unable to remain upright. I bump into walls, and the floor tips. Now a whole month has passed since I decided I was cured and ready to return home, but it was all a form of naive optimism. The doctor told me so.

"You have to be patient, Doña Lucía. These dizzy spells are like that; they come and go. It can all be very tiresome, but one day, after a crisis, they disappear and never return."

They disappear and never return. Could that moment have actually arrived? I feel good today in spite of my weakness. "So you're probably cured," María de Día encourages me. "You'll probably be back home by November."

I would like to believe her, but I know I can't pay much attention to what she says. My bubbly little friend is more affectionate than effective; she's very sweet but not very professional. Her pretty head seems to harbor only simple thoughts. She sat beside me here in the patio for a while and spouted gossip about María de Noche. I think María de Noche scares her a little bit, too.

"She's a very . . ." María de Día paused and concentrated on finding an adequate adjective, "strange woman. That's what she is, strange. She's so serious, and so boring; she's always uptight . . ."

"Up tight?"

"Yeah, uptight, super uptight, she's an uptight person. Don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about."

"Well, no, I . . ."

"But, Lucía, it's obvious. To get uptight, an uptight person is someone who goes around all day pulled into herself, yeah, uptight, like dry, somebody who doesn't laugh, who's always in a bad mood, tense, tight . . . And when you clam up like that, people say you're uptight."

"Is this one of your own expressions?"

"No, everybody uses it, it's a very common expression. Don't tell me you haven't heard it before. It's like being from the Middle Ages. That's one problem with her, she's a medieval.

"And what's that?"

"Well, how can I explain it? To be a medieval is to be medieval. It's just that: medieval, from the Middle Ages . . . those people who are always looking back and talking about how it was when they were young and all that. Those antiquated types.

"Meaning old people, so I'm a medieval too."

"No, no, it's not a question of years. There are a lot of young people who are medieval and many old people who aren't. To be medieval is to refuse to look ahead and to complain constantly about the world and about change. They are people who have no idea what is going on in the world around them."

María de Día stopped for a moment in the midst of her linguistic dissertation to stare thoughtfully out the window.

"You see, that woman is so uptight that during the periods when we were laid off, all she did was study, and so she earned scholarships for all her class hours. And with those credits she worked her way up to level four. Imagine, she's already two levels above me."

I tried to look interested, but the truth is I have yet to understand how all these professional classifications operate.

" . . . Of course working your way up to the fourth is a good idea: for one thing, because you make more money, and on top of that you have more options, you can stay with one job longer if you want and all that . . ." María de Día kept chatting as she gnawed away at a lock of hair. "But I don't think it's worth the trouble, spending all your free time studying like crazy, don't you think? Bah, I'm not into that."

"So what do you do when you're laid off?"

"Me?" She burst out laughing. "I have a fantastic time. I've only been out of work once so far because I started two years ago. But I went and lived in a community in southern Italy on a marvelous sunny beach with some people I met there. I made two wonderful friends, and we did some traveling in Africa. I don't know, I just had a great time." She paused and gave me a malicious smile, "Besides, just think about what all her high ranking is good for. Since she's at the fourth level, she has to work nights, because there are fewer doctors and more responsibilities so . . . no thanks, I'm not interested in night work and classes, no sir."

She stood up with a decisive gesture. "Don't go back to your room till I come and get you, all right? Just yesterday you had some dizzy spells, and you could fall down again, eh?" And after patting me on the cheek with a brazen maternal gesture, little María de Día took off across the patio like an arrow. I'll be obedient and wait for her, even though today I'm feeling better and better with each moment; this glass-filtered sun is almost making me sweat, and it lifts my spirits.

And what's more, I just got a letter from Rosa. An unexpected, affectionate letter she wrote from her farm in Avignon. After all these years, I was surprised by my reaction when I received it. I felt teary, and I almost cried. It must be the so-called emotional instability resulting from the hospital stay that is making me so sensitive, because if I look at it objectively, Rosa's letter is nothing out of the ordinary:

Lucía Dear,

You are probably surprised to hear from me. It's been so long since we've seen each other. I believe the last time was at the concert in the Royal Theater, wasn't it? Seven or eight years ago. I'm still here in Avignon, still living the same life. I'm doing fine. Older, but fine. How about you? Ricardo wrote and told me you're in the hospital. He said it wasn't anything serious, but after hearing about you I suddenly felt like getting in touch. It's foolish to lose touch with each other like we have, isn't it? I think of you often, Lucía, and I would really like to see you. When you get out of the hospital you should come to the farm; it would be a good way for you to recover, and we could have fun reminiscing about old times and going for walks in the country. The farm is really beautiful (did you ever get to see it?), and the people are very nice; all of us girls lead a calm, healthy existence – perfect for this stage in our lives. There are five of us, plus two children. By the way, one of them is my grandson. Can you believe it? I'm a grandmother. He's darling; he's five years old, and he's got curly blond hair – a beautiful little rascal. And then there is Antea, Carolina's daughter, who's already very wise for her nine years. Carolina is the strong one at the farm. Her mother was German, and she's a large, strong, forty-year-old woman, the only one capable of instilling a little discipline and order in the

community. Without her this could be real chaos. She's the one in charge of planting and harvesting, and she takes care of the animals (if you could see me milking, Lucía, you'd die laughing). She's also in charge of the house. Then there's my daughter Clara and Lucette, who was the last one to join us. She's only twenty-two and doesn't know what to do with her life yet. I doubt she'll stay with us much longer. And then there are the two oldies, of course, my friend Andrée and I. You know her, don't you? Andrée Coulet, the violin player. She and I give concerts from time to time and earn enough money to keep the farm going. Such are the benefits of fame, of Andrée's fame, especially. Clara also helps out with the money from her translations, and she has just sold some short stories. I think she's going to be a great writer; I hope I'm not just blinded by motherly passion. The truth is, we have all the money we need because we don't have many expenses. You have to come, Lucía. You'd like this place. You'd feel very much at home with our little "harem" (do you remember?). I think you'll especially like Carolina, she's the maternal type. And the time arrives when you begin to feel old, when you need that maternal affection once again. At least I do; as you know, I've always been rather weak. Get well soon and come visit us. And write in the meantime, okay? All of my love,

Rosa

It's strange. If someone had told me thirty years ago that in the end Rosa was going to make it in the music world, I wouldn't have believed it. Of course she was perceptive and knew how to play well, but she wasn't conscious of her own talent, which in a world based on appearances was just as bad as not having any. That is why her recitals always took place in a variety of bleak, nondescript auditoriums. She played for idle circles of art lovers, for trade guilds and social clubs. It was always the same: a half-filled room of older women, draped with furs, their aging ears covered with stiff permed curls, and Rosa, who walked out on stage, blushing and stammering, overshadowed by her frightening orange "concert" dress, the only dress she owned. She had purchased it in a rush and with a scrupulous lack of taste at some department store years back, moments before her final exam-recital at the university. Years later she was still wearing it, even though the

synthetic material had cigarette burns on it and the back of the skirt bulged up, making her round figure look even rounder.

She would thread her way cautiously toward the piano, as if she were blind, and then begin the concert with trembling fingers. Hardly a day passed without her suffering some misfortune. Like the evening when she played one of Liszt's most transcendental studies, number ten, the one with such a brilliant, unforgettable finale. It was exactly there that it happened: with a euphoric gesture she deposited ten mistaken fingers onto the keyboard, ten erroneous notes, in unison. To this day I remember the fright, the expression of desperation on her face during those moments of anguish when the sound of the last note was lingering on in the room, verifying her blunder. Finally, she decided to repeat the finale and pounded on the keyboard once more, this time hitting the ten fatal notes successfully. In reality it didn't matter that Rosa had massacred Liszt's final chord, because when she finished, the bored ladies in the auditorium would still clap their ring-laden hands together enthusiastically and then thrust themselves upon her and wrap her in a cloud of their perfumes. They would kiss her hand dutifully and then try to display their musical expertise as they congratulated her on the recital.

"Your technique is perfect!" one of them would exclaim in rapture.

"And the way you use the pedal," the one beside her would insist, proving she knew that pianos had pedals.

But even more embarrassing and obvious than the musical mishaps were the others, the physical ones. Like the time when Rosa stepped on the orange hem of her dress and crossed the entire stage with one awkward lurch. Or when they presented her with a bouquet at the end of a concert, and, hugging the flowers nervously to her breast, she leaned to acknowledge the applause, only to water the necklines of the ladies in the front row. And then there were the performances at the rest homes. Rosa would announce the piece she was about to play, begin the recital, and during the long minutes, whispers could be heard, barely muffled by the music:

"What was it that she said she was going to play?"

"Chopin"

"Whaaaat?"

"CHOPIN!"

"Oh, how beautiful . . ." they would bellow, as people who are hard of hearing tend to do.

Finally the piece would be over, the old folks would clap their arthritic hands, and Rosa would stand up to greet her public, as was the ritual. But they would have already finished their ovation, since old people get tired of clapping quickly. So then Rosa would face a scattered audience in which the women had returned to their knitting and the men were rolling their cigarettes; and once again an audible muttering could be heard:

"What did she play, now?"

"Beethoven."

"Whaaat?"

"BEETHOVEN!"

"Ooooh, how nice."

They were absurd concerts, concerts for the deaf. As I said, if someone had foreseen Rosa's success then, I never would have believed them. Now that I think about it, though, after rereading her letter, I find it amazing that Ricardo has written her. I thought that he also had lost track of her years ago. But Ricardo is so mysterious; he likes to keep absolutely meaningless secrets . . . Maybe they have been keeping in touch all these years, they may even still be very good friends. That imbecile. I don't care if they're friends; what bothers me most is that they hide it from me. Could he possibly believe that I would be jealous of his friendship with Rosa? How vain can he get? What a narcissist! He has proved once more that he doesn't know me at all. If there exists a non-jealous person in the world, it's me. I've never been jealous, not even during the many years of my relationship with Miguel. Life taught me not to be possessive. For many years I played the third wheel in relationships, always involved with men who were already paired up. Back then all men were either married or engaged, not like today, where stability is only valued by the aged, the crazy, or the privileged.

I am continuing to write later because Ricardo arrived, and I abandoned my journal. He trudged in looking downcast and depressed, dragged a chair up to mine, and sat down with a theatrical sigh.

"You're so comfortable here, Lucía," he lamented, "I have to admit I envy you."

He was in one of his self-pitying moods, ready to play the victim, when it is I who is the victim, it is I, who has spent two months in this hospital, that he is so envious of. His selfishness made me angry, and so I kept stubbornly quiet and refused to ask him what was wrong. I wasn't going to play his game. Ricardo shifted back and forth in his seat. He sighed several more times, gradually increasing the volume and force of air exhaled, as he continued with his dramatic gestures of melancholy. After five minutes he could no longer resist my indifference, and he finally exclaimed:

"I am sick."

I was silent.

"I feel really awful," he added, almost shouting.

I remained impassive.

Ricardo tipped his head to one side and studied me with his little birdlike eyes.

"What a life," he commented bitterly. "Maybe I'll die before you, after all. It is a sad situation, but it is usually the dying who bury the healthy."

I got up from my chair without a word and walked up the hallway toward my room. When I reached the lobby I met María de Día with a tray of medicine in her arms.

"Hey, Lucía, where are you going?" Irritated, she accompanied me to my bed. "If you had waited just ten more minutes I would have come to get you. Can't you sit still?"

It was the first time María de Día had scolded me, and I felt like a little girl, or even more like a useless old woman, a bothersome piece of junk nobody could find a use for. María de Día straightened the sheets, lit the reading lamp over my bed with a mechanical gesture, and left in a rush. "I'm having a horrible day," she muttered somberly before disappearing down the hallway.

The sheets were crisp and clean, and the TV screen reflected the end of the movie I tuned into yesterday, an old Houston video from the seventies, *Fat City*. It was a sad, heart-breaking movie María de Noche had discouraged me from watching by reminding me that I "should watch more uplifting programs." I observed my toes sticking out from under the hospital bedspread, and I had the sensation that every day I take up less space, that I am shrinking by the moment, that I hardly leave an indentation on the smooth surface of the recently made bed. I thought of Ricardo. I still don't really know why I got so mad at him, why I couldn't stand the way he said he envied me or his whining tone. Lying there completely immobile, contemplating the ceiling, I missed Ricardo and regretted not having asked him about his rheumatism and melancholy. I felt so alone and so lifeless. I forced myself to stay motionless for ten minutes, trying to breathe as little as possible, holding my breath to the point of asphyxiation. I didn't want to make any move that might give away my tidy, motionless cadaver in its well-prepared resting place. I was absorbed in this morbid game when the door to the room opened silently and Ricardo appeared, grave and reserved. I felt an unexpected rush of irritation.

"So . . . you've taken your sweet time before deciding to come by my room . . . Did you get together with María de Día on your way over here? Or were you enjoying the hospital's magnificent indoor patio, the same patio you envy me so much for?"

I don't understand myself at times. An instant before he appeared I was missing Ricardo, feeling guilty and selfish for my lack of attention toward him; and then suddenly his actual physical presence was enough to put that sarcastic, aggressive tone in my voice that, deep down, made me feel miserable.

Ricardo was leaning silently against the doorway, maintaining a neutral expression I couldn't decipher. But then he kind of grimaced and limped toward me threateningly. He came up close to my bed and, without any warning, raised his right arm. Instinctively, I cringed beneath the sheets and closed my eyes. And then, while my heart was pounding absurdly fast and my eyes were still shut tight, I felt his hand caressing my cheek, his fingers smoothing the hair behind my ear.

"But you dummy, did you think there was any chance I was going to hurt you?"

I opened my eyes. Ricardo was watching me with amusement, almost tenderly. My heart melted.

"Ricardo," I murmured, "did you write Rosa to tell her I was dying?" I don't know how or why that question occurred to me. It was a thought that crossed my mind like a flash, and right after I uttered it I realized how ridiculous it sounded. "What's happening with you today, Lucía? You're acting so silly." Ricardo had sat down next to me on the bed, and he spoke amiably. "Maybe you're feeling worse? In pain?"

I straightened up against my pillows, trying to regain a virtuous pose.

"No, in fact, I'm feeling especially well today," I said in my most dignified voice.

"Oh, Lucía, you're so absurd . . ." Since he didn't have a backrest, Ricardo was bent over, and his shoulder blades were sticking out indecently from his gaunt back. I looked him over carefully and saw that he was old and tired, his face broken up by an infinite number of tiny wrinkles. He was wearing a turtleneck sweater, and there was hardly any difference between the color of the gray material and his ashen complexion. The sweater stuck closely to his flesh, showing how sunken his thin chest was and drawing attention to a meager, soft belly that was peeking timidly over his belt. Suddenly I felt sorry for him, for how disastrous he looked. I took his hand.

"And you, Ricardo, weren't you saying earlier that you weren't feeling well?"

He started to pat the back of my hand distractedly, "The same old story you know, my rheumatism acting up; I'll end up being a perfect invalid." He was gazing out the window as he continued to pat my hand and drone on.

"Don't you worry. When you become an invalid, I'll take care of you, just like you take care of me now."

He gave me a cold stare. "I'm very grateful, Lucía. It's a thrilling prospect."

"Okay, I'm sorry. I was just teasing . . . are you really that sick?"

"What do you think?" he said, "Do you believe by chance that I am egagropiling you indecently?

"That you what?" I asked, feeling confused. At times I don't understand Ricardo at all.

"That I am egagropiling you. You don't know what egagropiles are? The truth is, I must say, you tend to egagropile quite a bit."

"But what is it?" I repeated impatiently, instinctively preparing myself for some kind of insult.

"Birds, my dear, eat lots of rubbish throughout the day: little pebbles, small branches, all that. This waste doesn't go to their stomachs, but rather to a special pouch where they store extras. When the pouch fills up, the bird eats some grass, which wraps around the waste matter and produces a little ball that the bird regurgitates. Those minute balls are called pellets. You can find them around their nests. I've always been fascinated by this relationship that birds have with humans. From time to time, we also respond to this need to wrap up our sorrows and throw them up on our nearest neighbor. Some human specimens are particularly bothersome with their regurgitations. But not me. I'm a respectful and prudent individual; I only regurgitate on rare occasions."

"Come on, Ricardo. Don't be so ridiculous. Is it that complicated to answer and tell me how you're feeling?" Instead of responding, he concentrated his efforts on getting up from the bed. He positioned his hands on the bedspread, carefully felt for the floor with his left leg, and straightened up very slowly, filling the air with "uffs" and "ouches." He finally stood up completely and began to rub his knee vigorously.

"Not really," he answered, "I feel perfectly fine. It seems that you alone have the right to feel sick; therefore, I prefer to maintain a dignified silence."

It was almost comical to see him limping across the room with such dignity, directing his slow steps toward a chair in the corner.

"Wouldn't you rather sit on the sofa and stretch your legs?"

"No way. The lower the seat, the worse it is. I'll be just fine over here."

"Poor Ricardo."

"Yeah, poor Ricardo, poor little Ricardo."

And we burst out laughing. He dragged his chair back over by my bed, recovered his jacket on the way, and handed back the folios I had given him yesterday.

"I read the chapter already."

"And?"

"Pchisss . . . the writing style isn't bad . . . but I maintain that it is full of falsehoods."

"Oh God, don't start again, please, we've gone over it a hundred thousand times . . ."

"But this time I'm referring to a blatant falsehood. It isn't just that the events didn't happen that way, it's that LIFE doesn't happen that way. Life is not black and white, it isn't made up of heroes and traitors. According to your memoirs, Hipólito is totally wicked, and Miguel seems to be the sole bearer of goodness. But I have to admit I admire you, Lucía. Maintaining such naiveté at your age is an art in itself."

His commentary annoyed me. I don't try to describe a world of good and evil; I only describe the world in which I live. For me, Hipólito was like that and so was Miguel. Besides, why lie? I think of myself as fair and impartial. At least I'm capable of self-criticism, something Ricardo is incapable of. He thinks he is perfect, without a fault, always in full possession of the truth. He's a pretentious, annoying man. How dare he say my memoirs are false; he who lies so much that he blushes when he tells the truth . . . Besides, I think Hipólito's was an especially good description: his desire to always be the star, his ambiguity, his fears. The months I spent studying and analyzing him weren't spent in vain. I tried to decipher him with that obsessive curiosity that comes with passionate love. Because somehow we believe that we can come to own the object of our love through knowledge: if you know enough, you dominate. In the end, it's Ricardo's same old song and dance: you should never give away everything about yourself because you will lose power.

"It all happened that way," I answered, infuriated. "I remember perfectly."

"Oh come on, Lucía . . . I can't believe you have a memory that's so miraculously exact," Ricardo was giving me a sly look. "So exact that you even remember the name of the Russian mathematician Miguel mentioned to you in the mountains."

At times Ricardo seems determined to complicate things, to get caught up in senseless details.

"Don't be absurd," I told him. "Of course I don't remember exactly what he told me. I copied that part from a series of articles in a magazine called *Science 2000* that María de Día brought me from the hospital library."

"Aha!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "So you admit that what you are writing is false. You probably copied the part about the delta function from a textbook, and the . . ."

"Nothing I write is false, understand? The part about the delta function is just as I described it. I remembered it perfectly. I only copied some data out of a scientific article so as not to get completely off track. I can't believe you find that so shocking; it's a very common technique, any writer knows that."

He observed me with curiosity. "So you're writing seriously; you want this to be a novel, a work of literature . . ."

"And why not?"

We remained silent for a moment. Ricardo balanced on the back legs of his chair with a look of intense concentration on his face. Then he returned to the subject with the same belligerence:

"Anyway, Lucía, I'm surprised by your lack of social consciousness. I mean, you don't ever mention the political environment in which you lived. You write as if you and your damned boyfriends were existing in a vacuum."

"Why should I talk about all that? I'm not even interested."

Ricardo widened his eyes in an exaggerated expression of astonishment.

"Noooo? But how can you say that? Those were the years of fear, don't you remember? Those years had a tremendous impact on our lives."

"Especially on yours, since you left the country. You did everything possible to escape the situation while I stayed and lived through it all. And I don't want to be reminded of it."

He looked at me, expressionless for a long moment, until the silence became too awkward. Ricardo seemed to have fallen into a trance. He wasn't blinking or making any gestures; he had even stopped swinging back and forth on his chair and was now rigid and tense, as if he were petrified. Suddenly I noticed his lower jaw was moving backward and forward, almost imperceptibly at first, and then to the point of convulsions . . . I was alarmed:

"What's wrong?" I asked. "What's the matter with you?"

He didn't answer. His jaw continued moving spasmodically. Finally, he turned away from me and lifted his hands to his mouth. From the side, I saw how he probed inside, took out his dentures, and put them back in again.

"Oh, what a relief!" he exclaimed once he had finished. "Excuse me, but I had some food stuck in my gums for hours, and I couldn't stand it any longer." And he bestowed on me a smile full of splendid teeth.

"I didn't know you had false teeth," I commented, feeling irritated without knowing why. "I thought they were yours."

"Well, yes, they are false," he answered, amused. "I've had them for years. Not one of them is mine. I'm a real wreck."

Now I know why I was hurt. I was wounded by the fact that Ricardo didn't maintain his customary coquettishness with me. That he regarded me as so old that he didn't mind revealing his toothless secret to me. It's not that Ricardo interests me in the least; he never did, and he certainly isn't going to now. To be honest, it's a relief he doesn't find it necessary to keep up his honey-sweet coquettish behavior with me. However, it's always a little painful to admit that you no longer appeal to a man who used to find you attractive. And I'm sure Ricardo was very attracted to me for many years.

"You're right about my escapism," Ricardo suddenly added. "And about yours and everyone else's. Maybe we're like this now because we turned our backs then."

"It's not so bad," I answered antagonistically. "I don't know what you're complaining about.

"It's not so bad, huh? No, of course not. It's not so bad," he

repeated cynically. "We live in the best possible society, the happiest world one could ever imagine. It's the triumph of leisure and pleasure. How marvelous! It's too bad, of course, that we're becoming more stupefied and lonely every day. Too bad it isn't proper to keep the same house, the same mate, the same friends, or the same job for more than a year. We live in an ephemeral world," he concluded, relishing his last expression.

"Don't be silly. There's not enough work for everyone, so jobs have to be rotated. Besides, I don't know why you are complaining; isn't this the leisure society we all fought so hard for? I remember you always said you wanted to live off everyone else and not work."

"The bad thing is when leisure consists of consuming your days in front of the television," he said, pointing to the flickering, luminous screen on the wall. His gesture shamed me, and I switched off the machine. "TV, Lucía, with its wonderful expanse of channels and videos, has consumed our lives."

"Don't say that, Ricardo. It's not fair. One can do other things too. I do, you do. We, for instance, are still living in the same homes, we're still leading our lives more or less as before. I don't even have a video machine, and you know it."

"We are still just a couple of bull-headed, eccentric old people, unable to adapt to the modern world, to progress. There aren't even half a million of us left in the city now, down from the six million we were twenty years ago. We're the only ones left, the aged, the maladjusted, the marginated. The city is sinking, Lucía, the world as we knew it is coming to an end. Today, the healthy thing is to be happy living in the suburbs, in those beautiful little boxes on the hillside, to live on, satisfied and content, in this conforming superstate."

Ricardo was in the midst of one of his rhetorical tirades, pacing, or rather hobbling, back and forth across the room.

"Because people keep talking about the wonders of the electronic revolution, they go on and on praising the wonders of this miracle. But, interestingly enough, nobody says anything about the major technological accomplishment: having created a perfect

system of oppression. That poor bureaucracy of the past, remember? The ancient administrative machine glutted with paper, those comfortably dusty archives holding files stained by the coffee honest workers drank during their mid-morning break . . . Papers used to get lost back then, information could be mislaid, and keeping the infrastructure of the state up to date was an impossible task. But today, dear Lucía, there is no way to get waylaid. We are all filed away there, conveniently coded, transistorized, and perforated in the WIC. And it's so simple, you only have to punch your personal code into a terminal of this microelectronic spider, the Western Information Center, and it spits out your entire life: all your personal data, an exhaustive review of all your obscure, ambiguous behavior. I'm afraid that even my false teeth are recorded on the magnetic band of my ID card, not to mention my tenacious determination to continue living downtown; that must be imprinted in neon for easy detection."

Ricardo finally stopped. He was standing at the foot of my bed, right in front of me. When he looked up at me his troubled eyes betrayed his frivolous and sarcastic tone.

"Lucía, don't you realize? You and I are asocial citizens. They hate us; we are the enemy."

"Don't get paranoid. I've never had any problems, and don't . . ."

"The problem is we're old, OLD, don't you understand? We are the generation that got lost in the shuffle during the transition. They know they have to be patient with us, that they only have to wait until we're all dead . . . all those poor, useless old people who didn't know how to adapt . . . They're condescending, they put up with us, that's all. But if we were young they wouldn't let us in; we would be disposed of immediately. I shudder to think about the future that awaits the young people who dare to be different."

"Maybe there won't be any young people who try to be different. Maybe they are truly happy this way."

He gave me a sharp glance and turned to gaze out the window, surely contemplating suburbia below. After a minute he added, in a voice which was barely audible:

"Maybe. . ."

He patted his pockets in search of a cigarette.

"And," he said, turning and smiling icily, "what's more, as if my miseries and defects were not enough, I smoke! I am truly a social menace."

He lit up and inhaled deeply. At that very moment the door opened, and María de Noche entered.

"What?" I exclaimed. "So soon?"

"So soon? It's already seven o'clock, Doña Lucía. Time for you to take your pills."

María de Día hadn't come in to say good-bye, as she usually does, and her absence hurt my feelings. I'm afraid she's still angry at me for disobeying her earlier. María de Noche went into the washroom, and I heard her filling up a glass of water at the sink. On her way out, she stumbled upon Ricardo and sternly took note of his cigarette.

"Smoking is not allowed in this hospital, sir. You should know that."

Ricardo stared insolently at María de Noche and slowly released a cloud of smoke in her face. I felt uneasy and embarassed. They regarded each other with contempt for a few seconds, both wrapped in a blue halo of smoke. Ricardo turned to face me and smiled, pointing at his cigarette.

"It's getting late, Lucía. I hope it isn't too late for everything. I'm leaving, dear; we'll continue our conversation tomorrow."

This said, Ricardo disappeared through the door, limping with dignity.

María de Noche hadn't added another word. She came toward me silently, handed me the glass of water and the pills: a huge red one I always have a hard time swallowing, and two small pink ones. She waited for me to take them, picked up the glass, and took it to the sink. When she came out of the bathroom she stopped a moment at the foot of my bed and observed me uncertainly with her sharp, severe expression, as if she wanted to say something but didn't dare. Finally she barked a "good afternoon" and turned to leave. But before she reached the door she turned, as if she were overcome by a sudden resolution, and came back with such a troubled expression on her face that she startled me.

"Doña Lucía, it's just that . . . smoking really is harmful to your health . . . And of course there shouldn't be any smoking in hospitals for sanitary reasons. Do you understand?"

I was silent.

"But . . . ," she continued, "the thing is . . . the truth is that I smoke, too, you know? It's one of those . . . those manias that stick with you . . . and, well, that I understand."

And there was an expression of secret complicity on her tired face. It was a sad gesture from another medieval accomplice.

Thursday

The worst thing was that I missed him with a passion that morning. It was a sunny day, though cooler than the days before, and springlike days have always infused me with a special eagerness, a greedy lust for life, even now, at my tired, old age. As I was saying, the worst of it was I longed for him that morning. I loved Hipólito deeply, with an intensity of feeling I hadn't experienced for a long time. The craziness of my emotions never ceased to amaze me, the debilitating fluctuation of mood that made me go from one extreme to the other in a matter of hours, from loving Hipólito to loathing him, from preferring Miguel to forgetting he even existed. I felt confused and fragile, as if my capacity for affection were a taut metal wire ready to snap. But the worst of it was how much I missed him.

I couldn't find relief. I was obsessed. I remembered Hipólito's malicious smile, those smooth lips that were always a bit too moist. Hipólito had a rather ugly face, but his dark, piercing eyes were lively and intelligent. His thin lips were hidden under a long moustache that he constantly chewed on with his mouselike incisors, and he had an indecisive, unreliable chin. Despite his thirty-six years, he still had a slim, adolescent build, a long, nervous body with slumped shoulders and a few scattered hairs on his chest. His thick, strong neck and wide wrists were the only features that seemed to match his adult condition. In short, his was an unremarkable body, but one that drove me crazy with who knows what sort of mystical, blind love. Suddenly I craved his irresistible charms that I risked losing forever. I made myself a cup of coffee, and Hipólito appeared in one of his most becoming poses, superimposed on my kitchen tiles. I picked up the morning paper, and Hipólito peered at me from between the pages, implanted there by my own imagination and desire. I understood then that it would be simply unbearable to go on without seeing him any longer, so I began to dial his phone number, blinded as I was by the pain of his absence, pain that had by then become physical. But I hung up after the third number in a prodigious display of will, for calling him would be to waste my last opportunity.

I began to wander aimlessly around the apartment. I went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water I didn't drink. I went to the living room, swept up some ashes that were scattered on the floor, and dropped them distractedly on the edge of the table. I passed through the bathroom and decided to take a shower. The news was on the radio; they were talking about a bomb that exploded under a police van and had dismembered, chopped, mutilated, deboned, gutted, and decapitated twenty men. How could the few survivors go on living? Those men without legs, without arms, without eyes, with half-blown-away faces, who arrived at the hospital, barely alive, holding their guts in their hands? I scrubbed myself frantically with the sponge; my anxiety had charged me with the overzealous rhythm of a woodworker, and I was leaving my poor skin painfully raw.

Now the radio was talking about the corpse of an eighteen-year-old girl, who had been found with her hands tied behind her back, her face mutilated by four bullet holes. The girl had belonged to some left-wing group. The Escuadrón del Orden had left a letter on her chest claiming responsibility for her death: "And this is how we will get revenge for each and every policeman that has been assassinated," the announcer was reading in a neutral, empty voice. And once again a shudder of horror ran up my spine: her face was destroyed only by the gun shots? Or did they beat her up and then kill her? And because she was a woman, they shot her in the face. In the face, of course.

Before I knew it, I found myself in the street. The avenue was empty, silent. A few pedestrians were scurrying along the sidewalk, looking as though they too believed they were the only inhabitants left in the city. A few abandoned husbands leered at me with lonely, greedy smiles. I made my way toward the sunny patio of the café in the square. There were a few neighborhood customers sitting at the outdoor tables, mostly young people because lately the old bar had been taken over by the progressive crowd. I sat down at a table that was well exposed to the sun and ordered a vermouth. It was a nice place to be, that warm, tranquil asphalt terrace. That's one of the things I miss the most right now, the colorful, jumbled street life, those urban havens, the outdoor cafés. Next to me was a woman who must have been around forty years old, reading a novel. She was wearing a thick wool dress that was making me sweat just looking at it. A little farther over a group of teenagers were going through their first flirting rites, laughing and shrieking. Next to the entrance, a couple about my age were cuddling and caressing each other lovingly. Near the edge of the sidewalk, a large bearded young man with a No-Nukes button pinned on the lapel of his corduroy jacket was absorbed in his newspaper. And Hipólito's reflection continued to flutter idiotically above the shiny surfaces of the marble tables.

If I really think about it, I told myself, trying to be impartial, I don't know why I miss him. Our relationship had been limited to a few lovers' quarrels, to orgasms hastily stolen at inappropriate

hours, to long silences and too many reproaches on my part, and to an interminable succession of good-byes. I had spent two years just seeing Hipólito off; I had already rehearsed every farewell scene: the melodramatic, the definitive, the urgent, the sulky . . . farewells tainted by the anger of indifference, gallant farewells, farewells ruined by the constant repetition of the same scene. Hipólito had been thus transformed into a farewell himself, a getaway on legs, a departing back. This vision I had of Hipólito haunted me: he's emerging from the shower, all wet; first he puts on his underwear, then his socks, pants, shoes, then his shirt and sweater, and finally his elbow-patched jacket and his watch before combing his hair and asking, "How do I look?" Then he escapes down the stairs. I even timed his dressing ritual once. It took him five and a half minutes from the first sock to the combing of his hair if he was wearing boots, and six and a half if he had to tie his shoes, keeping in mind for this last calculation that it would take him thirty seconds to untie the knots, because he would have undressed in a hurry, so pressed by his erotic stimulation (we saw each other so rarely) that he somehow managed to yank his shoes off without loosening his laces and even made love with his socks on. This last quirk was the only aspect of our hasty relationship we enjoyed that held any resemblance whatsoever to the absurdities that daily contact with the same person brings.

Another aggravating factor I should mention is the dark mood that would overcome him as he got dressed, because Hipólito belonged to that group of men who tend to suffer crises of post-coital melancholy. After we had completely spent ourselves on each other, he would usually be exhausted, easy prey to the discouragement and academic depressions that made him more metaphysical than usual.

I was thinking about all that and feeling a little drowsy when I heard the squeaking of brakes behind me. I shifted my position to look and saw about twenty young people getting out of two cars and a jeep. They were very young, with crew cuts, and they held their fiery chins up in the air. I could see the black and green insignia of the Escuadrón del Orden on their sleeves. It was too

late to escape. The youth group had quickly fanned out around the square, following orders from a middle-aged man who was with them. They were carrying chains and billy sticks in their hands, and the older man took out a gun. It was a very black, shiny gun, a terrifying gun.

"So it's nice out here in the sun, eh?"

They were looking at us defiantly, with provoking smiles on their lips. Like the rest of the customers, I assumed the behavior advised by the new security rules. That is, we pretended not to see or hear them. The thing to do was to look like an imbecile, to be invisible, to avoid the eye of the assailant, like we used to do at school so the teacher wouldn't ask us to recite the lesson we didn't know. One had to become one with the walls, to acquire the color of asphalt with the powers of a chameleon.

The woman kept on reading her book, the young man stayed absorbed in his newspaper, the teenagers fell silent and looked at each other with anguished eyes, the couple lowered their eyes while holding each other's hands tightly. I chose to pretend I was still sleeping even though I was watching everything through my lashes. The man who seemed to be in his forties pointed to the bearded young man. Five or six from the Escuadrón del Orden went up and snatched the newspaper from his hand.

"Hey, you! Can't you see we're talking to you?"

They had surrounded him. The guy raised his head and stared at them in silence.

"What are you doing here sunbathing, you shit-face commie? Rats like you belong in the sewers . . ."

The young man turned white but remained silent, the woman was forever reading the same page in her book, the teenagers were gazing at each other, the couple were squeezing hands. And I was sleeping.

"You're wearing a nice little button, huh, you pussy? Let's see if you have the balls to say it aloud, you shit-face commie."

They grabbed him by the collar and pulled him to his feet. The young man was quite a bit taller than his attackers. The one who had spoken, a dark young man about eighteen, still with the peach fuzz of an adolescent, spit in his face.

"What's the good of being so tall if you're a filthy coward who lets other people spit on him?"

From that moment on everything happened too fast. The bearded young man mumbled a stifled "son of a bitch" and punched the one who had spit on him. Then the members of the Escuadrón del Orden threw themselves at him. They struggled briefly and tied him up. The dark young man with baby skin got up from the ground. An open knife had mysteriously appeared in his hand, and he smiled, a little blood on his lip. He was still smiling when he stabbed the bearded guy in the stomach. When the blade entered the flesh it made a surprising sound, a dull, dry thomp! like the sound a drum skin makes when it bursts. But the knife must have met a bone, because the blade wouldn't go all the way in, so the young man pushed and pushed and then cut his way upward, rasssssss . . . ! The blood gushed out. The bearded man was shrieking like a butchered pig. The woman was reading her book, the teenagers were staring at each other blindly, the couple's knuckles were turning white from the pressure, and I was still sleeping.

They disappeared as quickly as they had arrived. The man was still lying on the ground in a puddle of blood. The waiter came out, pale but unperturbed. "I've already called the police," he said in a neutral tone, addressing everyone and no one at the same time. He inspected the corpse for a little while and covered the face with a dirty napkin. Then he turned toward me, "Would you mind taking care of your bill, miss?" he asked in an icy, monotone voice. As I was getting ready to leave I heard the police sirens in the distance.

So I decided to take a trip to the mountains and visit Ricardo. The fields were a bright green. I hadn't taken the car out for several days, and I enjoyed driving along the empty roads. I made a stop at the village before turning toward the fish nursery and bought some bread, fruit, and cold cuts, suspecting Ricardo wouldn't have anything to eat. I was wrong. I found him working busily in the kitchen with an apron on.

"Lucía! What a surprise. You've arrived just in time to taste the lamb I'm making."

The kitchen in the old country house smelled like firewood and spicy roast meat. I breathed in that aroma with pleasure; it was the peaceful smell of domesticity, a homey, protective smell.

"How are things going for you in the city?" he asked.

"Bad, as always."

"I can see you're still suffering from that curious form of depression that arises from having two boyfriends."

"I wasn't thinking about myself just now. But that isn't working out either."

Ricardo wasn't paying any attention to me, so in disappointment I didn't say another word. He took off his apron and began to take out plates, glasses, and a decanter full of wine from the cupboard.

"Set the table while I make the salad."

It was then that I saw them. I was approaching the living room unsuspectingly with the tablecloth and napkins under my arm and the plates in my hands, when suddenly I met the first one peering at me from the other side of the door.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

My scream, as is usual when I'm scared, was barely strong enough to be audible. Fortunately, though, the clamor of plates shattering on the floor was ear-catching enough for Ricardo to run to my rescue from the kitchen.

"What's wrong?"

There it was, standing tall, dressed in a gray suit, its hand held out as if to trap an innocent passerby. A brown bandana covered half his face and left his only eye exposed, a blind, glassy blue eye.

"Oh, come on!" Ricardo was saying amidst bursts of laughter. "I can't believe Pepe scared you. Here, Pepe. Greet my friend."

The mannequin was staring at me impassively with his cyclopian eye and his cardboard grimace.

"But . . . What is this?"

"They're my friends. Hadn't you seen my mannequins before? I bought them at a department store liquidation sale. Aren't they fun?"

"They're horrible."

"Look. That blond one over there is Clara, my favorite. That one a little further over is Belén, that one's Manolo, you've met Pepe, and Carlitos is in the studio. I'm warning you so you won't get scared if you go in there."

They were scattered across the living room, sitting on the sofas, leaning against the wall next to the fireplace, cross-legged, with their unnatural arms posed in natural positions, with tilted, battered heads that were half-hidden by pieces of cloth.

"I normally cover their faces because I can't stand them staring at me all day long. Although sometimes, if they behave, I take the cloth off their faces, especially Clara's, who's a doll."

"You're crazy."

"Why? I like the way they look. They're unsettling, aren't they? But they keep me company, especially during the long winter when the snow hits."

So we ate in the company of those four big dolls, four mute guests, four corpses.

"Do you screw them?"

"Who, if I'm not asking too much?"

"The female dolls. Do you jerk off with them?"

"And why not with the male dolls?" Ricardo answered, laughing. "What do you think?"

"I don't know," I replied, shrugging my shoulders, feeling a little uncomfortable with my own teasing.

Ricardo was attacking a huge plate of lamb. He was in a very good mood.

"You know, when I was little I used to jerk off with the streetlamps," he said.

"A little complicated, isn't it?"

"Oh, no. It was a marvelous invention. I was probably about four years old and my German babysitter – back then having a foreign babysitter was the chic thing to do – she would take me out every afternoon for a walk on the boulevard. But the moment I saw my chance I would escape from her grip and climb the highest streetlamp. You know those streetlamps on the bouvelard I'm talking about? They're beautiful, made with cast iron, modern

volutes, and emery-polished glass. So I would climb up the streetlamp saying I liked to climb to high places, but I really did it because one joyful time, by chance, I had discovered that if I rubbed myself against the post, it was really pleasant. I still remember my babysitter saying in her horrible accent: "I cahn't believe how zis boy likes to climp everryzing he seess. Hess going to be an ahcrobaht ven he grrowss up."

"And she wasn't mistaken."

"Then later, when I was about fifteen, in the midst of a pubescent crisis, I kept a record of how many times I jerked off in a little accounting booklet. When I did it by fantasizing, I would draw a circle, and when I did it without, I'd draw a line. Of course, the times marked with a little circle were twice as sinful. Religion used to contribute a great deal to the pleasure of prohibited filth. . . ."

After having our coffee we went out to see the fingerlings in the fish tanks, and he showed me the artificial pond, which was almost finished. The evening was hot and sultry. Several dense clumps of purplish clouds were gliding toward us from the tops of the mountains. The pond sat in a hollow depression amongst the hills, with natural rocks on one side and a concrete wall on the other. There wasn't much water in it, and weeds, branches, and broken canes were visible on the surface.

"I built a wall in order to change the course of a nearby stream and direct it into the pond. Now it just has to be filled. You can't imagine how much work it has been to prepare all this, it all used to be swampland."

As we made our way around the rocks the horseflies began buzzing in the background. They seemed to have gone crazy with the approaching storm.

"See that? Over there on the other side of the wall is where the swamps continue."

He was pointing at a vast extension of dry, rocky, yellowish land stained with dark spots of grass.

"That's a swamp?" I asked skeptically.

"Of the worst kind. It looks like firm ground, doesn't it? Well, it isn't. A few areas are more or less safe to cross, but there are also

really dangerous sinkholes, true quicksand that can gobble up an entire cow without leaving a trace."

"You're kidding . . ."

Suddenly, I suspected Ricardo was once again telling me one of his stories, so I stopped and looked at him with distrust.

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I am. Look."

He bent down, scanned the ground for a moment, and piled a bunch of stones at his feet. After selecting a good-sized one and taking aim, he threw it toward the swamp. But the throw was short of the wall, and the rock fell into what little murky water was left in the lake. He tried again, his face red with the effort. I noticed he was sweating, and then I realized I too was dripping from the muggy afternoon heat that was made worse by the damp, sickly bottomland.

"Look, look . . ."

This time the stone had reached the right spot. With the force of the throw it seemed to have incrusted itself partway into the dirt. It stayed there for an instant, half-visible and half-buried, and then suddenly disappeared mysteriously beneath the brown sand.

"Incredible!" I exclaimed in wonder.

"And there's more," Ricardo said with satisfaction. "There is a most beautiful and sad story associated with this swampland. You see those houses on the hill?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's where the village ends. That building over there with the slate roof is the school, and the tiny dollhouse next to it, with the green windows, is the schoolteacher's house. They say a few years ago a new teacher arrived here. And they say there was a girl in the village named Engracia, who was about twenty. Now you may use your imagination to adorn those two characters with all the typical traits associated with a true rural tragedy. That is, the teacher was a young, handsome, evil Casanova, and the girl was the Heidi type, sturdy, beautiful, and plump. Well, I imagined her that way, sweet and naive, with rosy cheeks from her healthy

life in the mountains. But she couldn't have been too naive because she fell in love with the teacher. They say she would even sneak out of her house at night and go make love with him in his little green candy house. Engracia would circle the hill so as not to be seen, cross the swampland she knew so well, and arrive discretely at her lover's back door. She would then throw small pebbles at the window, he would open it for her, et cetera, et cetera . . . They kept that relationship going for an entire year, but the following year the young man was transferred to another school on the outskirts of the city, so he told the girl he was leaving. She panicked at the idea of losing him and asked him to take her along. Naturally, he said he couldn't since he had a fiancée in the city, and that is why he had asked for a transfer. Engracia cried her heart out, lost weight, and dark circles appeared under her eyes, but she kept going to his house each and every night. The teacher, though, wanted to break up with her, maybe because he thought he had hurt her enough already, or simply because the poor devil got frightened by Engracia's ardent, crazy reaction and feared being discovered. So, the story goes, the girl kept throwing pebbles at his window every night for hours on end, crying and begging but then always having to leave without an answer. Things continued the same way day after day during the two or three weeks that were left in the school year. Finally, one night a few days before he had to leave, Engracia was punctual as usual and threw her little pebbles. The teacher was already used to the visits and didn't even look out the window. She insisted again and again. Finally, she threw a rock that broke the glass. The noise jolted him out of bed, and he stuck his head out the window, trembling and indignant. Engracia was standing next to the house, staring at him. He must have really yelled at her. And then, without a word, Engracia began to walk backward slowly, very slowly, still with her eyes on his. He warned her, in a low, sweet voice: careful, you're nearing the marsh. But she remained impassive, unperturbed, marching backward, very erect, until the mud began to cover first her ankles, then her calves, and finally her knees, her thick country-girl knees. She stood there stiffly staring

at him with the same expression. She was sinking rapidly. The sand was climbing up her thighs by then as she struggled to keep her balance; soon it was around her waist, then her breasts, and she kept sinking faster and faster with each passing second. The teacher shouted, begged, and pleaded for help. And all the while Engracia was being swallowed by the ground. If you tack on the poetic details such as the full moon and the clear night sky, you'll get the whole picture."

"And then what happened?"

"Nothing. Engracia let herself die. The marsh reached her neck, then her chin, and she kept on looking into his eyes. All in the midst of a terrifying silence interrupted only by the schoolteacher's screams. They say when the quicksand reached her eyes they were still opened wide and fixed on him, though this last detail must be a simple but beautiful adornment to the legend because even with the full moon, he couldn't have told whether her eyes were open or closed from such a distance."

"And what about the schoolteacher?"

"So, what about him? He married his fiancée from the city, and by now he must already have grown children and be a fat, balding teacher with a duodenal ulcer. The truth is Engracia loved him so much that she even gave him the gift of her death. Her suicide is probably the most significant thing that has happened to the poor devil in his entire life."

For a moment I contemplated that seemingly dry, grayish, empty expanse of land. We were next to some tall, woodsy bushes, and two little caterpillars were dangling from their leaves, hanging on a thread so fine and transparent that they seemed to be suspended in mid-air. They were two minute tobacco-colored things that looked like dry twigs with tons of little feet sticking out on both sides. The smallest of the two was perfectly still, sitting on the upper part of the silk thread, and the other one, ten inches below, was patiently trying to make his way upward. To do this, he would stretch out the upper part of his minute body, bite the thread with minuscule jaws, and, once anchored, draw the back of his body up in a wave and grab onto the silk thread with his back

feet in order to throw his head forward in a whiplike action and then once again bite the fine thread a fraction of an inch higher. He continued the tedious climb toward his motionless companion. And just when he arrived and whipped his body upward for the last time, the smaller caterpillar began to shake the thread furiously until the other fell to where he had just been. He stopped his fall by grabbing onto the silk line once again, paused there a moment to recover his strength, and bravely resumed his climb up the thread by painfully twisting his little body with laborious movements that reminded me of Doña Maruja's wavering hobble as she tottered down the street. And when he reached his companion again, the whole painful scene repeated itself.

I watched for a long time, unable to discern whether the large caterpillar meant to make love to the little one, devour it, or both. Irritated, I turned toward Ricardo.

"Why do all your love stories end with the woman committing suicide? First the story about the Lipari Isles and now this one. It's about time you had the man kill himself. . . ."

Ricardo burst out laughing.

"What do you want me to do? I can't change reality. You women just seem to have more capacity for passionate love."

There was a deafening clap of thunder over our heads, and a torrential downpour began abruptly. We ran all the way to the house, slipping and sliding along the rocks, but in spite of our sprint we arrived completely drenched. Ricardo busied himself with building a fire in the living room while I grabbed the mannequins and dragged them mercilessly out of the room, for the storm was making them seem even more sinister. They felt like stiff, lifeless bodies in my arms.

"What I still don't understand, Ricardo, is how you can talk and fantasize so much about love when you aren't capable of falling in love with anybody. Can you explain this to me?"

We were lying on an itchy straw mat that was leaving my elbows raw. Ricardo didn't answer. He clasped his knees as if he were hugging a bunch of bones and stared into the fire. The flames reflected on his pallid, boyish face, and his eyes seemed very dark,

like the jet-black eyes of a teddy bear. I took a sip of cognac and answered myself aloud.

"Maybe that's precisely why. Because you just keep talking about love but are incapable of really living it. You men seem to have a special ability to live more through words than actions. It's really not an ability but an inability. An inability for true affection, that's it."

He smiled to himself and turned to look at me. His eyes had recovered their violet-blue color and were as cynical as ever.

"You're such a brute, Lucía, such a pitiful brute. You don't understand anything. Do you remember the other day on the phone when you asked me which I would rather be, a lover or a companion?"

"You said you would prefer to be a lover. And what's more, the only brute here is you."

"Yes, always a lover. The only love possible is passionate love. The rest is just giving up and lying to fool yourself."

"That's not true. Passionate love is love in its adolescent state. You are not only a brute, but you are also immature. You still haven't managed to untie Doña Sagrario's apron strings. You don't even dare live with a woman. What do you know about love, for Christ's sake? When you've never lived with anyone in your whole damn life, when you've never had a normal relationship, when you've never even had the courage to really fall in love!"

"That's precisely why I've never lived with a woman, Lucía, because I'm looking for passionate love, because I'm brave enough to choose only that. The rest is just routine you cling to out of fear. And I assure you, people need a special inner peace not to compromise, not to fool themselves, but to keep their alliance with passion . . . And yet that's the only thing we have. Passion is the creative impulse that makes the world turn. Without it there is no art, no genius. And if you give it up like a coward, you've been defeated, you've accepted monotony and routine."

I sat up, aggravated by the discussion. He, as always, was still cool, serene, and consequently twice as dangerous. Meanwhile, I was choking on my own anger, trembling with fury.

"That's idiotic, Ricardo. Passionate love is intellectual; it's all conjured up in our heads and poses no risk to anyone because it's suffered and enjoyed in private. The other kind, though, daily, committed love is the only real love. And please don't call me a coward. Don't talk to me about art or creativity or any of your grand abstractions. There's your problem: you intoxicate yourself with big words and concepts, and then you're completely inept when it comes to truly living."

"Don't scream. Have you read *Lolita*, by Nabokov?"

"I'm not screaming. No, I haven't."

"And Robert Musil?"

"Neither."

"You're one of the most uncultured people I know, Lucía," he added with a resigned sigh that made me want to climb the walls. "I don't know why I even bother to argue with you."

"Well, I only have one last thing to say . . ."

"Don't scream at me. Listen, in order to bet on passionate love you need to be extremely courageous, almost mad. Passionate love is dangerous and brutal; it's antisocial because it leads to solitude, to isolation. Passion is always backward, the more taboo, the less honorable it gets, the more intense it is."

"Very typical," I spat with all the venom I could gather. "That's very typical. You protect yourself behind writers and philosophers; you display novels as evidence to support your version of passionate love. Great. The point is, life is life, understand? It's not a novel. How pathetic! As it turns out, your ravishing passion is only a product of your literary world. You masturbate mentally with your books and your magnificent concepts; meanwhile, you're unable to express the least bit of true tenderness. You have no idea what tenderness is all about. You're completely dried up."

"And what do you know?" Ricardo had turned his back on the fire and was staring at me, very serious. "Dear Lucía, what the fuck do you know about my capacity for love? How do you know how much I've loved? I've loved a lot." He paused. "I . . . I've been deeply in love with my sister."

There was an embarrassing silence. Ricardo kept looking at me

with a quiet, sad expression, and I lowered my gaze, troubled not so much because of his sister, but because he was confiding in me for the first time, and somehow that seemed profoundly immodest.

"Yes," he continued with a sigh. "I've been deeply in love with my sister. It's the perfect form of passionate love, incestuous love. It's prohibited and sinful par excellence, impossible by definition. It's pure madness. At the same time, the titillating, intoxicating possibility of discovering yourself lies with your sister. She, who has grown with you, who has shared your blood, experienced the same growing pains, is the only person who can fill the other space. She's the perfect fit, your perfect soulmate . . . the woman in whom you can lose yourself, the woman who can put an end to your solitude." And he shook his head as if the melancholy were a horsefly he could shoo away. "That's why I can say with confidence that the only thing worthwhile is passionate love. Leave the dull consolation of routine to the mediocre who are content with substitutions. You and I belong to another class of people, Lucía. We're different."

"To begin with, you're a prejudiced snob for saying that . . ." But I immediately regretted having attacked him, because I sensed he was too downcast, too surprisingly sad. I tried to find something nice to say, anything to break the silence. And suddenly I remembered.

"Heeeeey . . . You don't have any sisters!"

I could feel myself redden, a wave of anger had rushed to my cheeks, which were already flushed by the fire. Ricardo came closer to me, looking at me seriously.

"Yes, I did, but she died. She died in a manner my family considered less than noble, and so we never talked about her again." Confused, I didn't respond. Ricardo continued.

"In reality . . ." He had been watching the fire, and when he turned to look at me I thought I saw a spark of mischief in his eyes. "In reality my sister was Engracia, the poor woman who was in love with the schoolteacher."

"You are . . . you're an imbecile! I'll never believe a word you say ever again."

Ricardo was laughing and clapping his hands like a child. Finally, wiping the tears and shaking with merriment, he added:

"You're very much in trouble, then. This type of story is one of the few things that's worth believing these days."

And leaning toward me he slipped his arm around my neck and pulled me tight against his chest, still shaking with laughter.

"Leave me alone, you idiot."

"Hey, hey! Weren't you just talking about tenderness a minute ago?"

The truth is, I too was having fun and only pretended to be angry, partly because of the trace of self-respect I had left, and mostly for pure sport. I let him hug me, and we remained in that position for a long time, watching the fire spark in silence. I thought maybe Ricardo was going to make a move, and I didn't know then whether I felt like making love with him. The heat from the fireplace and the sound of the rain were beginning to infuse me with an acute melancholy. I felt the intense desire to be in Hipólito's arms, to have his moustache tickling my ear instead of Ricardo's hairless cheek. I suppose I was wrong, but without thinking I said:

"I'm upset, Ricardo, I'm really upset. I sent a horrible letter to Hipólito, breaking up with him, and since I did that I can't stand the pain. You don't know how much I love him, how I do . . ."

I noticed Ricardo's body getting tense. He moved away from me slowly. The expression on his face was neutral, impervious. He ran his hand over my head with a motion that was partly a caress and partly a slap and gave a little sigh.

"Aha! Your boyfriends. That's right, we can't forget about your boyfriends." The corners of his mouth were curled in a cold grin. "Weren't you saying passionate love was a lie, an invention; that one didn't risk anything or suffer because of it?"

He grabbed my chin, leaned down, gave me a tentative kiss, and then pulled away. I didn't say anything; I didn't make a move. He tried a second, longer kiss and then remained thoughtful, scrutinizing me for a few seconds. He smiled to himself, scornful and distant.

"And if we sleep together?"

I thought about it. The option had as many possibilities in favor as it had against. But it was raining hard, and the wind outside was making my heart sink.

"Okay."

"You don't sound particularly enthusiastic."

He stood and helped me get up. We were cutting across the dark living room on our way to the bedroom when I bumped into the box of records and bruised my shin. "Careful," was Ricardo's useless advice as I rubbed the pain away. I dragged myself to the room, took my pants off, and we carefully examined my shin. I had wounded myself slightly, so Ricardo went in search of disinfectant while I got undressed. The whitewashed walls of the room were thick and humid, and there was a little window with a wooden frame embedded in one of them. The bed took up almost all the available space in the narrow room, and in the back there was a trunk covered by a brightly colored Peruvian tapestry; next to the bed, an old chair functioned as a night table. It was awfully cold, so I eagerly jumped into bed. When Ricardo came back, the only thing I would poke out from my cozy refuge was the cursed leg. The iodine he brushed on my shin felt like ice, and we still had to wait for it to dry. Ricardo began to undress while my leg remained exposed to the frigid air. I looked at him. He was taking his clothes off with contracted movements I attributed either to the cold or to a sudden attack of shyness. I studied him dispassionately. His features seemed too small and meaningless for his blurry face. His was one of those faces that's bound to get better with age. Only his beautiful eyes, violet and cold like the crystal eyes of a stuffed vulture, stood out from his doughy features. He got into bed, and we hugged each other awkwardly. His body was small and narrow but well built, a solid body with nicely distributed muscles. We lay there stiffly, in silence, as if we had lost our voices. My shin was smarting terribly, and I felt out of place in this cold, empty room in the arms of a friend I had never envisioned as a lover.

"So here we are," Ricardo said.

"That's what it looks like," I replied.

And we burst out laughing. We began to kiss in good faith; his body felt pleasantly warm. We nibbled and squeezed each other somewhat skillfully, rolled around in bed a few times, and attempted manual explorations of each other's unknown body. We were face up, then face down, then on our sides. Ricardo kicked my shin twice, and I accidently stuck a finger in his eye. Finally we stopped, panting from the exertion.

"It's no use," Ricardo said.

We rested for a moment and smoked a cigarette, commenting on how odd sex can be, how it sometimes refuses to work, it just doesn't. Then Ricardo launched his attack again with renewed frenzy. We kissed, pressed against each other, and tumbled from one end of the bed to the other till the blanket slipped down to the floor. Ricardo stuck his big toenail in my wound, and I kept touching him once in a while only to verify he was still limp. We were freezing, and I was getting tired of our unproductive gymnastics. So we stopped again, lit up a second round of cigarettes, and talked about how these things happen every so often, millions of times, in fact, and how they don't really mean a thing, so they're not worth worrying about; no, I don't worry, I've noticed the most sensitive and intelligent men are prone to this sort of thing; yes, of course, I'm relaxed, but since it's the first time, you're going to think it's always like this; I don't know what's wrong with you men, when something like this happens you think it's terribly important, I can guarantee you we don't think it's that traumatic, relax, this is really nothing; sure, sure I'm okay. The thing is, this almost never happens to me. Let's not talk about it anymore; when things don't get up, they don't, and that's it.

Ricardo got up to put on some music and came back to bed with our cognac glasses, almost empty by now. We held each other underneath the covers like someone would hold a pillow before going to sleep. It was a comfortable, sexless hug.

"I got my first girlfriend at this Mozart concert," Ricardo was saying while nibbling at his nail distractedly.

"Oh yeah?"

"We were both sixteen. Her family was very well off, too. We used to go to the matinees at the Palacio de la Música. It always looks good, you know, when the son or daughter has a musical education, so our progenitors did their best to help us cultivate the habit. I knew her by sight and had adored her in secret. One day a mutual friend introduced us. Naturally, I played the only card I had, music. We began talking about classical music, naming off concerts. From that point on, every time I bumped into her, that is, after standing for hours in the corner of her schoolyard waiting for her to appear, we would stop to chat and always get wrapped up in the same cerebral subject. We discussed Brahms, Carloff, Schubert, Monteverdi . . . We paraded them through those meetings, and they practically became our chaperones. The truth is we were as pedantic as one can be at sixteen, especially after two seasons of matinee concerts. Till finally, one day, I got up the nerve to ask her if she was thinking about going to the concert on Saturday. She said yes, she'd like to go since Mozart was her favorite composer. So I mentioned that I just happened to have two tickets."

"Which was a lie."

"Of course, but I ran to buy them immediately. Anyway, I told her I had two tickets, and she accepted my invitation. So we were together on that Saturday morning. We were to meet at the bus stop, and when I saw her I almost fainted. She looked ravishing in her pink jacket, white blouse, and her checkered pleated skirt, high heels, and anklets. The image is still with me, so you can imagine the ecstasy I must have felt at the time. However, instead of telling her she looked gorgeous, I started talking about Bach. We were discussing music when we arrived at the theater, and when we found our seats the subject still hadn't changed. The concert began. I was desperate. I didn't give a damn about Mozart or all the music in the world. I was sick of our melomaniac dialogues. All I wanted to do was kiss her all over, tell her I was dying of love for her and her little bones. Because I fell in love with her for her bones; her wrists and ankles were so fragile, almost transparent; her cheekbones were so sharp yet so delicate . . . What this all leads up to is that I had a great idea just then."

"You asked her to marry you."

"I picked up the concert program and wrote in one corner: 'Did you know you have wonderful eyes?' I didn't dare mention the bones, just in case she thought it strange. 'Although everyone must tell you that.' I passed her the program and continued watching the orchestra with great dignity, hearing nothing, the blood pounding in my ears. Then she took a pencil stub out of her purse and wrote: 'I've been told that before, but this is the first time someone has said it in writing.' And she returned the program."

"How fascinating. And then?"

"Then a furious correspondence began during which we used up all the margins of the program, the back of our tickets, and every scrap of paper we had on us. You should keep in mind, too, that our postal maneuvering had to be handled with the utmost discretion because the people next to us were already looking at us suspiciously and also because, while I was frantically searching my pockets for that last-minute bus ticket, I kept elbowing the person seated next to me. But, to make a long story short, by the end of the concert we had declared and sworn eternal love for each other, exchanged life stories – which couldn't have been that long – and we had discovered we were twin souls who really didn't care the least bit about music."

"And what ever became of her?"

"Weeelll . . ." Ricardo touched his face with a tired gesture and peeked mockingly at me through his fingers. "It was really sad. She ended up throwing herself into a swamp."

November 2

My old nightmare returned last night. It's been years since the last time I had it, but nevertheless it came back to me in full detail. In my dream I'm sleeping in a small, fragile bed, a maiden's bed. I awaken, stand up, and go to the mirror. That is where the terror begins. There, reflected in the glass, I discover that I've suddenly changed into an old woman, as though during the night someone had robbed me of my youth. I look at my image time and again, trying to recognize myself underneath the wrinkled, decrepit skin. I know that if I can make it until the next evening I will sleep again and recapture my youth. But I also know I don't have a chance, for the day is ominously long and my own end is hiding beneath the dark circles under my eyes. And so I curl up in a corner of the infantile bed and try to remain perfectly still, barely breathing,

saving my strength so as not to consume any more of my aging organism in a useless, desperate effort to survive.

Before, when the nightmare kept recurring, I would awaken in a cold sweat, exhausted. Then I would bask in the euphoria of knowing none of it was true, knowing I still had my whole life ahead of me. But this morning my awakening was simply an agonizing continuation of the delirium. Because it is true that my flesh sags and my skin is wrinkled, true that I feel old and sick. I sense time running away from me.

It's absurd, but I'm afraid. I still haven't managed to free myself of the feeling of agony that nightmare instilled in my bones.

To say that life is a mortal trap is a distortion, a crude play on words, but there are times when I feel that way. At times the inevitableness of my death poisons the present with fears. It's like taking a roller coaster ride. You adjust the safety belt, grab the bar fearfully, and as the creaky car slowly approaches the cusp of the first wave, you see the track collapse sharply below you. The pause at the edge of the void is just long enough for you to take a deep breath, and then the car dives, dives, dives. You cringe, shut your eyes, and brace yourself against the bar, and you repent – the horror and vertigo are so unbearable you regret ever having got on, and with terrifying desperation you realize there's no return, that you can't escape, that you'll plummet again and again, and there's no way to stop the nausea. And that's how I feel at times: falling, falling toward death.

I'm afraid.

It's not true that you get used to the idea of dying as the years pass. On the contrary, it becomes more terrifying each day. At times I feel I've been cheated, and the indignation burns away at my spirit. Cheated by the lies they educated me with. The serenity of old age. The calm acceptance of the end. False, all false. And how cruel it is to discover the falseness of those panaceas at my age. When I was young, death didn't exist. Others died, but I thought of myself as eternal and strong. Mine was a mythical and senseless courage, a blind courage. Actually, death is like an unintelligible equation that, little by little, reveals its horrors; living is the ongoing process of acquiring fears.

Over the years my days have been filling with seemingly absurd worries. I learned to be afraid of swimming too far from the beach, when as a little girl I used to relish losing myself in the sea. I learned to be afraid of flying, which had never bothered me. I learned to be claustrophobic when I had not been so before. I learned to fear darkness and empty streets and to fear fast, reckless drivers. But it's the fear of death that starts overpowering you, that starts biting off large pieces of your life.

Something is definitely wrong inside me. It happened suddenly, when I thought I was getting better. All of a sudden, while talking to María de Día, I went totally blind. I don't know exactly how it happened, but the whole world was switched off abruptly. I shouted, "What happened?" Her voice sounded surprisingly close, "What do you mean, what happened?" "I don't see you, I can't see anything, can you see me?" I was saying. "I'm blind, I'm blind." I remember María de Día lost her head and shouted, "Don't panic, Doña Lucía, don't panic." I didn't even have the strength to shout. I felt so alone, so stunned.

The doctors came and fluttered around me for a long time. Finally they told me it would be temporary, but I didn't believe them. I remained in darkness for an eternity, or that's how it seemed to me, and suddenly I recovered my sight. Ricardo was at my side holding my hand in silence. His face was a blur, and then I realized it was because of the tears I had been shedding all that time. I think they had given me a sedative because everything seemed very murky and confusing.

From that point on they doubled the amount of radiation and changed my medication. Physically, I don't feel bad now, but I don't have any strength. There's something definitely wrong inside me that won't heal. I'll never get well. I feel so tired. At times the fear of death itself makes you wish you were dead. Like Doña Maruja. Now I finally understand her. I know I couldn't stand going blind again.

I'll be officially old when I turn sixty, and the thought of more physical deterioration continues to terrorize me. I would prefer death a thousand times over losing my sight or becoming useless.

But I'd better change the subject, because I'm sure this morbid pessimism is bad for my health.

Yesterday the young doctor decided to give me a speech on my illness. "Listen, Doña Lucía. In the semicircular channels of the middle ear there's a liquid called endolymph, end-o-lymph, you understand? And floating on the surface of that liquid there are stratocites and statolites – cells, okay? And those cells are the ones that help us keep our balance. When the endolymph – that's the liquid in the inner passage of the ear – is put under too much pressure, the cells get all scrambled up instead of staying on the surface where they should be, and that's what causes the dizziness." He spoke slowly, marking the syllables with the sing-song tone of a schoolteacher explaining a lesson to a four-year-old. I almost expected him to give me a lollipop when he finished.

"And the blindness?"

"We've already explained that to you, Doña Lucía. Why are you so apprehensive? In your case, and this is what's so annoying and difficult about your sickness, the Ménière dizzy spells are provoked by a virus, which is like a little bug that . . ."

"I know perfectly well what a virus is," I cut him off icily.

"So . . . a virus momentarily affected your optical nerves and produced that short-lived blindness, like a short circuit, understand? In brief, it's nothing to worry about, but it will be a long time before it's cured. Be patient and leave it all in our hands; we'll make a new person out of you."

"Could you hand me my glasses?"

"Certainly, Doña Lucía."

I put them on and observed him carefully. He was perspiring, nervous. He bared his teeth in an attempt to give me his sympathetic-friendly-efficient doctor smile. Then he patted my hand with one of his huge doughy hands and said good-bye in a confused rush. This boy is a hysteric. I don't trust him. To tell the truth, I don't trust anyone. At times I even have the ridiculous feeling that everyone is lying to me, that everyone, including Ricardo, knows I'm seriously ill. They know I have something more than those dumb Ménière dizzy spells. Or maybe it's the

virus that has affected my brain. Lucía, Lucía, don't you start that again. After being in the hospital for so long, I'm an irritable hypochondriac. Besides, that scary blindness has left me weak, predisposed to believe anything. I've always been a strong, healthy woman. Maybe that's why I can't stand sickness. Miguel used to say my health was insulting. Miguel, my dear Miguel, my friend and companion. You lied to me, Miguel, you promised to be with me in my old age, and you're not. You promised to help me overcome my fears, but you left.

Miguel had me figured out; he knew me well and could even foresee my bad times. He conquered me completely one evening, barely two months after we had started seeing each other. Back then I used to have painful, loathsome periods. My belly would swell, and my abdomen would contract with pain. One evening Miguel was coming to pick me up to go out for dinner. I was waiting for him, despondent, slumped over on the sofa, paralyzed by the pain and cursing our date. And then he arrived, weighed down with sacks of food and bottles of wine.

"According to my calculations, you must be having your period, right? So I thought I'd make dinner and pamper you a little, how about it? Is your poor little tummy up for a little pampering?" And he rubbed my belly softly – his hand was like a soft breeze. Later I would repeat the story often, and each time he would laugh.

"You won me over the day you remembered my period."

"But sweetheart, it was nothing special."

"Ha! Men never remember those things. Having your period is your own problem, contraception is your own problem; the only thing they want are lovers who are always agreeable and uncomplicated . . . Men aren't into details; they don't worry about getting to know you or finding out what's going on in your life."

"Oh come on, sweets, men aren't like that. Don't generalize. You must have just had some awfully bad luck and run into some real jerks."

Miguel was a breath of fresh air, the cool shade of a full tree in midsummer. But Miguel has abandoned me, and I can't count on his soft hand anymore to rub my belly and clean away the pain. It's

been years since those monthly pains ended, years since I last bled. Menopause. When I was young, the old wives' tales about menopause irritated me. Lies, I would argue, it's all lies. A woman is not suddenly old just because her periods have ended, menopause is not a trauma. On the contrary, it's practically a liberation to see the bothersome thing come to an end. No more pills, no more diaphragms, no more IUD's, no more tampons, no more painful, swollen stomachs. Of course it's all true, and yet how difficult it all ends up being. The bitterness inherent in menopause lies in the irreversibility of the process; your body closes a page of your life, and it can't be stopped. I suppose the first period could be as sad as the last, since it means the end of the first fragment of your life. Only then you are at that agitated adolescent state when you still haven't learned the true significance of the verb to lose. Today, however, I conjugate that verb with regrettable precision: I lost my youth, I am losing hope, I have lost Miguel, I will lose my life. We are losing the world we used to know and the world that I grew up in.

Even this morning, while I was leafing through some issues of *Ciencia 2000* before returning them to María de Día, I skimmed through an article about the microelectronic revolution. It says that miniature microcomputers were tested out in the watchmaking industry in Germany from 1975 to 1980 and that during those five years they caused the disappearance of seventy percent of the jobs in that sector. "From that point on, the microelectronic revolution, of more historical significance than the industrial revolution," the article reads, "developed at an uncontrollable speed... Along with its other accomplishments, microelectronics will turn two social ideals of the past into realities: one, the realization of a leisure society, in which individuals can enjoy a whole year of paid leisure for every eight months of work; and two, the practical disappearance of all borders in the western world; that is, the utopic internationalization of the Industrial Era, which is now a reality owing to the flexibility of contemporary society."

But what this article fails to mention is that the "flexibility of contemporary society" favors consumption so that the tran-

sient working population changes not only housing developments every year but also cars and all domestic possesions. This is terrible; I'm already speaking like Ricardo. I'm sure he will repeat the same story when he comes in and sees this article, this magnificent, slanderous scientific work that I ripped from the magazine for him so that he can enjoy being an indignant reader and so that . . .

Disaster. A total, absolute disaster. Ricardo just left, slamming the door behind him. How could we have reached the point where we say such terrible things to each other? He seemed so cheerful when he entered the room. He read the article in *Ciencia 2000*, and even though I was somewhat let down by how little attention he paid to it (he simply made a few irritated comments), everything seemed to be going fine. The problem began when Ricardo started on the subject of my last chapter.

"I've already told you I don't like it," he grumbled.

"But why?"

"Because you make everything up, and what's more, you do it poorly. The latter is what bothers me most. You really paint a dreadful portrait. Pedantic, stupid, impotent . . . in short, my ego was not overflowing with joy when I read it."

I burst out laughing.

"Don't be silly, I don't say that . . . For instance, I say you're the type of man who gets better with age."

"A very nice gesture on your part."

"And I don't say you're impotent, either. It's incredible . . . just incredible how you men exaggerate the importance of these things. I would have never concluded you were impotent from that scene in the mountains. The thought wouldn't have even occurred to me, and yet you . . ."

"And if at least," he interrupted without listening, "if at least you had painted an honorable pedantic, a genius of pedantry . . . But you've described me as coarse and bullheaded." He stopped and looked at me with curiosity. "Hey, Lucía, how did you happen to choose that week to write about?"

"I don't know . . . Because it was crucial in my life, I suppose. Because my movie premiered. Because I decided to move in with Miguel. Because I opted for the love of companionship."

"And that," he said abruptly, "that is the worst part of the whole chapter. That morose, absurd rhetoric about passionate love versus companionship love. Those idiotic things you make me say. It's a nonexistent problem, Lucía. Companionship love and passionate love can't be isolated, pulled apart like that. Companionship love has its passionate moments and vice versa. And besides, love usually begins passionately only to take refuge in companionship as time goes by. You're artificially classifying things that are unclassifiable."

"You didn't use to think so. I remember that conversation we had in the mountains word for word and many others, too. You always threw a lot of literature into passionate love."

"I doubt it, and who cares if I did? That was thirty years ago, and I'm older and wiser now. I've changed my mind."

"Besides, Ricardo, passion truly exists, and it can't be mistaken for anything else; it's different, like a drunkenness that overcomes you at times. One day you suddenly fall in love, you don't know how or why, but you do, and it feels different from all other relationships, you feel a warmth in your stomach, a vertigo . . ."

"Dear," Ricardo leaned forward and slowly enunciated his words, "I don't know about you, but such a thing hasn't happened to me for many years. It's been centuries since I have suffered that exciting warmth; it's been so long I'm beginning to think it never existed."

"Too bad for you," I answered angrily. And then a new, brilliant argument occurred to me, and I continued the discussion. "You're partly right in saying passionate and companionship love are intertwined to a great extent, but the difference lies in the point of departure. Passion suddenly comes upon you without your being conscious of it . . ."

"Really, Lucía," he interrupted me again. Ricardo has no listening skills. "According to you, the only difference lies in yourself, in what you're after, in whether or not you give in."

"Give in?"

"Yes, yes, give in. Judging by what you say, passionate love means fighting, becoming independent, staying alive, being a

person. And what you call companionship love, on the other hand, means taking refuge in another, resigning yourself to being less free in exchange for security and protection. That's exactly what I mean by not giving in."

"That's not true."

"In fact, according to how you insist on classifying relationships, passionate love means acquiring the qualities traditionally labeled "masculine," that is, staying centered on yourself: confident, active, battling, independent, and free. And companionship love means assuming the traditional feminine role, the woman in need of a safe harbor. In reality, the absurd problem you create between those two nonexistent categories is nothing but a sublimation of your own identity problem as a woman: between the independent woman you wanted to be, and the 'wife of' woman you carried inside and were educated to become."

"That's not true."

"Ask the young women of today. Ask María de Día. You'll see how they don't perceive such a sharp difference between your two types of love. Because social pressures aren't as strong now. Because they've grown up in a world in which the separation between masculine and feminine roles, even though it still exists, is not so marked."

"Don't be silly, the situation is still more or less the same and . . ."

"And in fact you did give in. When you started to live with Miguel you were finished as a person. You never made another movie."

"Of course I didn't. The crisis in the movie industry was tremendous, and you know it. Making a movie was almost impossible. Besides, everything was twice as difficult for a woman."

"Don't kid yourself. You gave up the fight. It was even more difficult to make a first movie, but you did it. Why didn't you go on afterward? Because you chose the secondary role, the sweet mediocrity of security. Because you became the mathematician's companion."

"*That* is not true, it isn't."

I felt a lump in my throat; Ricardo's words were surprisingly

painful. "I continued living my life as always. I kept my job, I never stopped working. You have no right to speak to me that way, Ricardo. You're being extremely unjust."

"You kept working, indeed, making fewer and fewer of those pitiful advertisements."

"You know nothing. *Nothing*. Our relationship wasn't like that. Miguel never stopped me from doing anything; instead he encouraged me, he gave me strength."

"At any rate, it wasn't Miguel's problem, but a question of what you were looking for in the relationship. It was the old feminine tradition that won over. What you call everyday love is really nothing but fear."

Suddenly I was drained, with nothing left to argue with. But I knew what he was saying wasn't true. I knew he wasn't right.

"Just forget it," I finally replied in anguish. "We're just a couple of ridiculous old folk. You're right in saying you haven't felt any amorous palpitations in years, but we won't discuss that now. . . I don't want to talk about this anymore, please. Love has ended."

"It may have ended for you, but not for me. My saying I haven't felt those extravagant amorous symptoms you've described doesn't mean I have gone without love. You see? There's one other detail. You are about to turn sixty, and the decent, dignified, and orthodox thing to do is to think that life ends at sixty and that from here on love is something brash and obscene. You see? You're full of biases. You're right, Lucía, you are old, because you are old inside. When you decided on Miguel, you also decided on good old tradition, and you've been getting more and more conventional each year."

I said nothing, intending to tire him with my silence and force him to abandon the subject.

"And another thing," he continued cruelly. "Your Hipólito, your famous Hipólito. You insist he was afraid, that fear was the only barrier. That he loved you 'intensely' but that he was afraid of loving you because you were an independent, free woman. Nonsense. Don't you realize that it's much simpler than that? That the only reality was that Hipólito wasn't in love with you? It's that

simple. I suppose he must have liked you. Besides, it's always flattering to have a woman fall for you to the very bone; we men are vain animals. But he didn't love you, do you understand? You can attack him, insult him, but he behaved in a coherent manner. You can invent all the excuses you want, repeating to yourself that Hipólito feared leaving his wife, that he was terrified of abandoning his comfortable routine . . . it's all lies, lies. Remember, he did fall in love with that girl later. . . ."

"She was an imbecile."

"No, she wasn't. And what if she was? That wouldn't matter in the least. I'm surprised you still continue with this childish jealousy after all these years . . . Or is it simply pride? In any case, what's important is he did fall in love with her, understand? And that time nothing mattered to him. He left his wife, created a scandal, moved in with the girl . . ."

"It only lasted a few months, and then Hipólito hurried back to the family sheepfold to be with his wife and children."

"So what? That was because the girl left him. And you'll have to admit that on that occasion Hipólito didn't show any of the cowardice you accuse him of."

They hurt. How his words hurt. I observed his halo of stiff gray hairs and his pointed, predatory face, and he repulsed me.

"And what about you?" I challenged with fury. "You say I'm old on the inside, and you? You're young because you stick out your chest and strut around when María de Día comes in? Is that what you mean when you say you don't go without love? You're ridiculous, Ricardo, a miserable, ridiculous ruin."

I don't like myself when I get mad. I am capable of brewing an indescribable venom with my words. I hear myself shrieking, out of control; I imagine my face twisted with nasty expressions, spitting out hysterical, venomous slobber. When I rage, my eyes blur, and I am overcome by murderous tendencies.

"Tell me," I asked slyly, "why did you get so aggressive with me?"

"I'm not being aggressive," Ricardo answered with a stiff calmness. "I'm telling you the truth. It's time you confronted reality."

"No, no . . . you're being aggressive; it's as if you were defending

yourself against something, I don't know what, as if you were trapped . . . Could it be you are envious? Envious to see that another person lived and loved? How can *you* go on about all this, Ricardo? You're a sterile, failing mediocrity. You said it before, and you were right: I think you're impotent. Not sexually, but in everything. You're a eunuch; you're not even a person. You've been alone all your life. The only relationship you were capable of maintaining was with a handful of damn mannequins. Speaking of confronting reality . . . have you stopped to think about what your life has become? It's really a shame, a boy with such a good family background, so promising, and yet . . . your whole life has been one failure after another. You're a useless parasite. Nobody respects you, nobody loves you or has loved you. You envy me, don't you? That's it. Because maybe I gave up my principles, but I've lived. I've shared, enjoyed, and loved. *Someone has loved me*, understand? You only lived through your imagination, a useless *Reader's Digest* erudition. You think you are the center of the world, and you're pathetic. You nauseate me."

Oh my God, how can I be such an animal? Ricardo got up without a word and left. Bang! The door slammed against the frame as he departed in a rage. The room is so white and empty without him. Ricardo, please forgive me. I'm so alone. I didn't realize how alone I am till now. If I died now no one would cry for me. And a death without tears is like a nondeath. Or worse yet, it's like a nonexistence, like having passed through life invisibly. I feel so insecure about everything I said to Ricardo. Have I lived, have I shared, have I loved? Have I been myself, truly myself? My memories seem unreal, as if another person lived them. But it was I. It was I who hugged Miguel that day, filled with sad premonitions. We had just made love; his chest was warm and soft. His chest was the territory I knew best. I buried my face in it and smelled his warmth, anxious to hold back time.

"Miguel, I don't want to die alone," I said, without knowing why.

"Hey, now. Where do you come up with these crazy ideas?"

"I don't want to die alone," I repeated. I believe it was getting dark, and outside his arms, his arms that wrapped me in their

warm, invisible refuge, the room was freezing. We were glued to each other. I could hear his heartbeat beneath my chest; I felt the warmth and the curls of his sex against my belly, his dry, ardent hands caressing my back. He began giving me tiny kisses all over my hair, as if my head were made of priceless crystal, as if he were afraid of leaving an imprint.

"Don't worry, silly," he was saying. "My frightened little bird, don't worry, I'll be with you." And I, knowing it was just an amorous lie, an impossibility, at that moment wanted to believe it was true.

November 4

Ricardo didn't come yesterday, and it looks like he won't come today, either. I'm afraid he'll never return. María de Día asked about him. "And your friend? Why doesn't he come by anymore?" I'm not sure why, but I lied. "Oh, he's traveling." These past two days of waiting have seemed so long. Without him the hospital routine becomes atrocious. Poor, broken Ricardo. How could I have thought of telling him he's a miserable failure when it's the truth? His whole life is an accumulation of failures, of impossible business ventures. His millions of gaping trout. Or that pathetic venture, a design for an ingenious miniature crane that could suspend people by the armpits with leather straps and transport them, pendulumlike, at an average speed of three miles per hour. Ricardo was negotiating a contract to sell this invention to a con-

vent of ancient nuns who lacked a pair of young arms to assist them in moving from refectory to mass. During the test run, the mechanical arm was dislocated, and the ancient nun, who was in a trance of motorized levitation, bounced off the floor with a crackling of starched robes and a collision of rosaries and bones. Poor, broken Ricardo: he's the reincarnation of defeat.

I don't feel good. I can't say I feel especially bad, either: there are no dizzy spells, and my health is what they call clinically stable. But I don't feel good. Everyone around me seems determined to label me neurotic. They tell me my distress is pure hypochondria. It's a lie. I am sick, terribly sick. I would love to believe the story about my hypochondria, what joy if it were only that. But I know that it's only an excuse: my body knows that it is gravely ill. That's it, my God, it's got to be "that." And "that" is eating at my head. I remember perfectly well, I remember that movie critic who was suffering those notorious dizzy spells. He had them for years, and nevertheless he carried on with his life as usual. Only once in a while would his world crumble. His life as usual. And I've been tied to this bed for nearly three months. Everything corresponds fatally. The strange blindness. The profusion of explanations that everyone has been giving me about my illness lately, when medical people usually prefer to maintain a ridiculous atmosphere of secrecy and surround their diagnoses with convoluted technicalities. The obvious nervousness of the young doctor when he comes to see me. The loss of weight, the general decay of my health. The Ménière vertigos aren't like that, I know; that movie critic was vibrant and hearty. And the treatment. G-2 rays are also used to combat "that." It's the most effective way they have found to fight cancer. Cancer. My God, I know the G-2's are used for other things. But so many sessions, that much radiation, only to fight an inoffensive virus . . . I don't believe them. My God, Ricardo's frequent visits must just be compassion, and the letters Rosa has suddenly begun sending, and maybe María de Día's considerateness. Everyone is deceiving me; they are plotting against me. I'm so alone, so alone and defenseless. My God, I am so afraid of dying, I wish I were dead.

I don't feel like doing anything. I don't even want to write. Ricardo was brutal with me the other day. He started the fight. It was him. If he's not going to come, fine, then, I don't need him. No one can help me, not him, not anyone. It would be better if he didn't come anymore. I don't want to see him again. I don't want to need anything outside of myself. I don't want to lose anything again in my life. I don't care about anything now. If he doesn't want to come, then I don't want him here. I don't care. I don't care.

November 5

Only two lines before the radiation session begins: this morning the woman doctor appeared in person, and we had a long conversation. I don't have time right now to transcribe it in its entirety, but I feel very relieved and satisfied. She's a fantastic doctor. How different from that other nitwit substitute. I told her about my fears, of how I knew no one was sent to the hospital because of the Ménière dizzy spells, at least not for such a long period of time, anyway. "Look, Doña Lucía, I'll be frank with you," she told me. "As you know, we doctors are not gods . . . although at times many of us try to appear so. We know almost everything about certain illnesses, quite a bit less about others, and nothing at all about many. Each illness is really a world of its own, and the maladies we think are perfectly controllable can manifest themselves with to-

tally different symptoms from one person to the next. Take hepatitis, for example. Some are viral, and some are not; some last two months, and some last up to a year. There are people who suffer from such benign hepatitis that with a little rest and the proper treatment they can more or less continue their lives as usual. Some people, however, die of hepatitis. It's the same with the Ménière spells . . . although no one has died from that illness." She's such a calm woman. She emanates such an aura of confidence that I even felt a little ashamed of my fears. It was all apprehension, I'm sure, because after talking to her I feel perfectly fine, healthy, and strong. Besides, Ricardo has come back. At noon he appeared at my doorway hiding behind a huge bunch of yellow roses. "Are you still angry with me?" he asked while poking the tip of his nose through the stems. I laughed from pure joy.

"Of course not! I thought all along that you were the angry one."

"Me, angry? I never get angry, dear Lucía. Besides, as hard as you may try, you can't hurt me."

I didn't know if I should take that as a compliment or an insult, but I'm so happy today that it didn't matter, so happy for life and for his return that I wanted to give him a gift myself.

"You know María de Día asked about you and why you had stopped coming?"

"Oh yeah?" His eyes lit up, and he automatically straightened up in his chair, tidying his jacket coquettishly.

"Yes, indeed. And what's more," I lied, "she told me you were a very interesting guy and she liked you."

"Yeah?" He feigned indifference. "What did she say exactly?"

"That you were . . . just that, very interesting with that white hair and those eyes of such an incredible color . . ."

Ricardo was smiling, delighted with himself. He passed his hand over his face with a gesture meant partly to caress and partly to make sure his face was still there and that it could still be attractive.

"How charming of her," he said in an affected casual tone. "She's a nice girl, although, naturally, very young and scatterbrained."

"Naturally."

At times Ricardo seems as candid and transparent as a child.

Friday

I didn't sleep well at all that night, which was strange for me. I was wide awake early in the morning, but I managed to go back to sleep. At eight I awoke for the second time, and with enormous effort slept again. I opened my eyes around ten-thirty, but insisted on turning over, hiding underneath the sheets, and losing consciousness of a day I didn't feel like living. To burn time. I wanted to burn time, annihilate the hours, skip over the days, and arrive at Sunday, the day of my premiere, of Miguel's return, and, above all, the day I would finally, inevitably see Hipólito. That is what irritates me the most about passionate love: the need for consuming time between meetings, the desire to sleep indefinitely until you can see him again. You foolishly give everything away to passionate love, even your own life: your days, your hours, your

minutes seem empty, unworthy of being lived without him. It is a repugnant, sickly obsession. With passionate love you find yourself possessed by another self, infinitely more stupid than your real self, which is banished to the farthest end of your conscience. From there, imprisoned by your confused, senseless, amorous personality, your real self groans in desperation: *Don't you realize you're making a fool of yourself? Can't you see it's not good, not smart, not useful, not worth it to act like this?* But the Lucía in love holds on to her blindness. *Don't you understand you can't throw your life out the window and embitter your days for an individual who is as vulgar as thousands of others?* The real self spouts enlightened allegations, but the Lucía in love rolls over in bed and perseveres in going back to sleep and forgetting his absence. So when the doorbell woke me it was already twelve-thirty in the afternoon.

It was the postman. "A certified letter, señorita." I signed the book under "received" with a trembling hand. It was an urgent letter from Hipólito. Urgent. A letter. Without bothering with a tip, I hastily shut the door on the man's indignant face and leaned against the doorframe, breathless. *You see?* the Lucía in love was saying triumphantly to the wise Lucía, *These are the satisfactions of passion, these moments of infinite joy, of thrilling intensity.* I tore the envelope with no regard, a gray envelope that matched the paper – Hipólito was always so scrupulous with his things – a gray envelope, his gray, the handwriting on the envelope, his envelope. Ah! I would have kissed the paper for joy if it weren't that even the Lucía in love thought it would be too ridiculous an outburst.

Thursday, March 23, 1980

Dearest,

I hold only beautiful memories of you. And they will all be beautiful, even your last letter. You will be a great movie director, you already are, and that satisfies me just as much as if your success were mine. But you're a poor psychologist: you insist on stereotyping human thought. I've never lied to you more than I've lied to myself. Weakness of character? Perhaps. I claim my right to be weak, and to be selfish. It is not among my habits – adolescent, no doubt – to judge others, and that's why I'm so benevolent

with myself. What worries me is that you think I manipulate you and that you have such a low opinion of me. It worries me, but that doesn't change the affection I feel for you one bit. And I regret that the only time I have been totally sincere with someone, I have been called a liar. In any case, I don't aspire to perfection, but to affection. You gave it to me, and I have lived moments of real happiness with you.

And I don't boast about anything; neither my children, my obligations, nor my dreams. I don't boast of my failures, either. And I have been a failure to you, no doubt. But you will always be able to count on me, although it's obvious you won't care to do that in the future.

Yours always. A thousand kisses,

Hipólito

I was terrified. How could it be possible? He accepts my breaking up just like that? How could he be such a bungling idiot? How could he take my words seriously? I began pacing around the house, holding the letter in my hand, feeling an acute anguish, an anxious distress that wouldn't allow me to stop. I wanted to phone him, insult him, say a thousand tender words to him. The desire to have his arms around me was becoming insufferable.

Dearest,

I hold only beautiful memories of you. And they will all be beautiful, even your last letter. You will be a great movie director, you already are, and that satisfies me just as much as if your success were mine. But you're a poor psychologist: you insist on stereotyping human thought.

And that repugnant literary tone, that flashy oversentimentality, that Harlequin romance crap oozing from every word. I could imagine Hipólito writing the letter in a painfully clear sequence. I saw him getting more moved by his own words than by the situation itself, gazing out into the distance with an exhausted expression, pretending to be Armando, feeling misunderstood, feeling sorry for himself in an abominable manner. I hated him, oh how I hated him. And I loved him, oh how I loved him. I felt so devastated inside, all ruin and debris. "What do I do?" I was asking

myself in my delirium. "What can I do, how can I reconquer him, seduce him, punish him? I was pacing the living room frantically, when the phone rang. I lurched at it expectantly.

"Yeees?" I shrieked.

"Lucía?"

The voice didn't sound familiar at all.

"Yes . . ."

"Ah, I'm glad to find you at home. It's Juan Antonio."

"Juan Antonio?" I repeated, perplexed by his tone of familiarity and my total ignorance of his identity.

"Sure. Juan Antonio Fariño."

"Ah . . ."

"How are you?" he said, and without waiting for an answer he continued. "Look, I'm calling you because . . . It's a bit delicate, but . . . I believe I can speak frankly with you . . ."

I remained cautiously silent.

"You see, Lucía, it's about Dori."

"Dori?"

"Yes, that cute girl I introduced you to the other night at Andrés's party."

The one with the smeared purple lips.

"Oh yeah, I remember now."

"As it turns out, this girl wants to become an artist; well, you know, you all want to become artists, ha-ha . . ." he joked awkwardly.

"Aha."

"What I mean is . . . well, Lucía. I'll tell you, all I'd like is . . . you know I'm a man who gets to the point . . . What I would like is for Dori to do the washing machine ad."

"The ad?"

"Sure. I thought it could be really good . . . you know, the one with the girl trapped inside the washing machine and then the new model with the girl beside it. Dori is very modern, very impressive physically, and very young, with impact, don't you think?"

"Yeah, ummm, yes," I sputtered disgracefully.

"I really believe Dori would be perfect for the ad, really. I wouldn't mention it to you otherwise. The girl is perfect, audaciously bold, but naive at the same time, don't you think?"

"Eeeeh . . . Ummyeah; but there is a problem, Fariño. Does Dori belong to the union?"

"To the union? No, I really doubt it . . . No, she doesn't."

"Then it can't be," I answered in triumph. "It cannot be, Fariño. We could get ourselves into a considerable mess. If she doesn't have the professional ID, she can't do the ad. You wouldn't want the entire association of advertising models on our backs, would you?"

"You're right. I didn't think of that . . ."

"You see?" I continued with a little more confidence. "It's really a shame because the girl could have worked out all right, like you say." And I remembered the greedy sandwich gobbler with a shiver. "I'd like to help you out, but it just isn't possible to overlook the rules, you know that better than anyone . . ."

"Don't worry, Lucía, that's easily fixed. I have a couple of friends in the association, and I can get the ID in two phone calls, so that's no problem. Good thing you remembered; you think of everything, Lucía, you're a jewel."

"Yes," I muttered dejectedly.

"So leave everything to me. I just wanted to let you know and see what you thought of it. So it's yes, right? Dori will do it . . ."

"Weeell . . . Uhhhum, yeah, sure."

"Perfect. When I get the ID business out of the way I'll give you a call. How are you?" – And without waiting for an answer once again – "We'll see each other at your premiere, and I'll fill you in with the details. Thanks. See you soon, Lucía."

"See you . . ."

"Ah," he interrupted. "Of course, I would like for this to remain between you and me. Well, you know, my position, my wife . . . You understand, don't you?"

"Oh yes, indeed," I answered, swearing to myself I'd tell everybody.

"Good-bye, then."

I said "good-bye" to the already cut connection and was left with the phone in my hand, listening to its beep and feeling impeccably miserable. But I hardly hesitated. I dialed Ricardo's phone number, and the phone rang insistently, with no answer. Then I remembered him telling me he was leaving to visit his mother, and my anguish grew. I needed to talk with someone urgently, to discuss my misadventures, my hipolitical misfortunes. Rosa. Rosa was the ideal person; my friend Rosa, my dear Rosa. I had to locate her on the Isla Blanca.

"Say, José-Joe? Look, this is Lucía, I wanted . . ." I tried to be as fast as lightning, but José-Joe didn't let me finish the phrase.

"Oh, Lucía, how nice to talk to you. How are you?"

"I'm very fine. Look, I wanted to see if you could . . ."

"How's your work going?"

"Fine. Do you know where Rosa is?"

"We only have two days before the big date, huh? How nerve-wracking. What are you going to wear?"

"I don't know, José-Joe, and I don't care. Do you have Rosa's phone number?"

"Don't call me José-Joe, come on. She's on Isla Blanca."

"I already know that. Why do you think I'm calling you?"

"Listen, Lucía, did you mention anything about what I told you?"

"Do you have her number or not?"

"You know, about the campaign for Vampire pants . . . I've just seen a wonderful article in an American magazine with Joe D'Alessandro dressed as Dracula. I'll lend it to you; we could get some ideas from it. It's fantastic; you'll see that vampires are in vogue now . . ."

I tried my best to restrain myself, to moderate my irritation, and gather all my patience and kindness.

"I don't give a DAMN about your magazines, your vampires, and your STUPID pants. Would you just do me a favor and tell me if you have Rosa's number, or should I hang up?"

"Ah, Lucía, don't be like that . . . Yes, I do have her phone number, wait a second."

I waited for an eternity before he finally picked up the phone again.

"Are you there, Lucía?"

"What do you think?"

"Okay, okay," he said in an appeasing manner. "She's staying at the Miramar Hotel, at 4432 on Isla Blanca."

"Thanks."

"Hey, wait. Did you do anything about the pants?"

"They're all on vacation; it's Easter Sunday, or haven't you noticed? I'll say something next week, don't worry. Bye."

"When I become famous, Lucía, " he said, laughing but a bit irked, "I'm going to charge you a lot when you want to contract me for one of your movies."

"Get lost."

And I hung up. I anxiously looked up the area code and called Rosa. After combing the hotel, they found her in the swimming pool, and I finally heard her frightened voice at the other end of the line.

"What's wrong? What's wrong? Is Clara all right?"

"Yes, yes. Sorry Rosita, forgive me for getting you out of the water. Your daughter is perfectly fine, nothing's wrong, it's just that I'm so down in the dumps."

"Why?"

"Because I broke up with Hipólito."

"Ahhhhh . . ."

"The truth is I sent him a letter telling him horrible things; that I didn't want to see him, that I was fed up with him . . . And he just sent me another one saying good-bye, that he's loved me a lot, that he's been very happy with me, and blah blah blah. Breaking up, that is, the imbecile."

"Okay, but let's see if I understand this, Lucía. You broke up with him first, right? What was he supposed to say?"

"But Rosa, don't be silly. Everyone knows a love letter, especially if it's spiteful, should be understood the other way round. And that idiot has taken it literally, word for word. Listen, can I read it to you?" So I read her Hipólito's letter, then I read a copy of mine,

then I reread Hipólito's, and then I complained bitterly about my fate.

"What are you going to do now?" Rosa asked.

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"You want to break up with him?"

"No! I want to see him, I'm dying to see him. What's more, I think I'll call him right now; we can't leave it like this."

"Don't be silly, Lucía. Control yourself. See how fast he answered your letter? That's a good sign. Let him think about it and get depressed. You'll see each other on Sunday anyway, right?"

"Yes, but his wife will have returned by then, and he'll be with her."

"It doesn't matter. At any rate, you'll be able to see how he's breathing. He'll have to say something to you, at least ask you if you've received the letter. Don't lose the upper hand."

"Yes . . . Maybe you're right. But it's so difficult. I don't know if I'll be able to handle it."

"Come on, Lucía, it's only two days."

"They seem like years to me."

"Go on now. Don't call. It'd be worse. Although I really don't know why I bother to say all this to you because you'll just do as you please, as always. I don't see why you ask me for advice."

"No, no, Rosa darling. You don't know how much I appreciate this, how important it is to me." I truly was feeling a great affection and gratefulness toward her, and my anxiety seemed to have diminished slightly. "And how are you?" I asked her.

"Well . . . you won't believe it if I tell you . . . I've decided to break up with José-Joe."

"You're kidding! And how did that happen?"

"Because it's a useless, stupid relationship. I think. For once in my life I'm going to try to be an adult and . . ."

"That's what you have to do. It sounds wonderful to me. It's the best decision; I'm very happy for you. Funny, isn't it? Suddenly the two of us are breaking up with everyone, as if we were possessed. So you think I'd better not call him, right?"

". . ."

"Rosa?"

"Yes, I'm here. I've already told you. Don't call him, don't lose the upper hand you have now."

"Okay, I'll try. But you don't know how much I miss him, Rosa. It's horrible."

We said good-bye till Sunday, and I hung up somewhat soothed.

There wasn't a cloud left in the sky from the storm the day before, so I decided to go out, although my conscience was certainly nagging me for not having read one single page of all the books I had promised myself I would read that week, the week supposedly devoted to reading and resting. But the air inside the house was too stuffy, so I took the car and went downtown to Estrella Square and the Gran Avenida, anxious to feel some human warmth, thinking the empty city wouldn't seem as empty downtown.

I wasn't mistaken: the avenue was considerably inhabited, its cafés swarming with clients consuming sun and appetizers. An early afternoon procession was going to pass through the square, and its route was outlined by wire fences. Some early bird spectators had already positioned themselves in the first row: Japanese with camera faces, pasty, tense tourists, idle citizens in that city on vacation. After a long search at one of the cafés, and thanks to my special talent for giving dirty looks, I got a table from a fat lady who had already finished her drink and looked like she had been sitting there for centuries. I remembered I hadn't had breakfast, and an uncontrollable hunger came upon me, so I decided to skip the alcoholic trifles and order a steak. Sitting next to me was a big-headed bald guy with a poorly shaven neck that was being strangled by a narrow brownish tie.

"Looks like the weather's changing, huh?" he said to me with a servile smile. "It might even rain on us . . ."

I ignored him but looked up to verify his words, trying to appear casual, as if my checking had nothing to do with his comment. A few indecisive clouds had begun to cover the sun and were galloping crazily from one corner of the sky to the other, a sky framed by buildings. Finally they brought me my food. The

steak was leathery, the potatoes frozen, and the peas were a suspiciously bright green. I took two bites and pushed the plate aside in disgust.

"You should eat," was the guy's soft comment. "All of you young women are always trying to stay thin," he added, looking me over shamelessly. "Although you don't need to worry, señorita, if I may say so . . ."

I cast a venomous glare at him. His dark tie was speckled with ancient dandruff. For a few seconds I remained absorbed in my effort to resolve the problem of that dandruff's origin, so mysterious on a bald man.

"Are you from around here, señorita?" he persisted.

I remained silent as he continued.

"I'm from Barroso, but I've lived here for years. Are you a student? When you sat down at that table I said to myself, 'Look, Antonio' – because my name is Antonio, always at your service – 'look Antonio, what a pretty girl you have for a neighbor . . .' You won't take it wrong if I say all this, will you, señorita . . . ?"

Drums and cymbals were crashing nearby, and the drone of the music was quickly getting closer. The procession, I thought. People rushed to the fences, and I couldn't see anything for a while. Finally, a saffron-colored group appeared between the yellow bars. It wasn't the procession; it was the Hari Krishna, one of the many mystical Asiatic groups that proliferated during those years. They came closer, repeating their psalmody insistently, taking advantage of the fact that their audience had grown with the rush hour. I watched them as they passed by; there were many, maybe forty. I had never seen such a display of Hari Krishnas in one place, all dressed in their best spring attire: their saris, their oriental clothes, their shaved heads and decidedly Latin features, their minuscule ponytails hanging from their napes, the markings painted on their foreheads, their bracelets, their amulets, their western lace-up shoes underneath the orange robes. They were advancing rhythmically, some of them jumping and tumbling about, all singing with beatific smiles etched on their faces, hallucinating about the Himalayas and Nepal in the middle of an urban center. And suddenly I saw him.

He was at the end of the line, attached to the procession with the clear intention of protecting himself with their presence, taking advantage of the suspense they were causing. I didn't recognize him at first, although his figure caught my attention at once. He was wearing a woman's cheap, oversized, vomit-green blouse over a man's gray suit pants. His bare skin, adorned with several loops of pearls, showed through the V-necked blouse, and over his shoulders he wore a faded silk shawl with ragged fringe. A huge, stiff blond wig half-covered his face. He was walking strangely, swaying over his needle-heeled shoes and fanning himself frantically with a flowered black fan. He was coming straight toward me, casting his eyes triumphantly around him, his eyelids heavy with the weight of the fake eyelashes, his pallid cheeks rosy with blush, and his mouth stained with a greasy lipstick that kept sliding down his chin. I didn't recognize him until he was almost on top of me, and I think it was his frightened stare that gave me the clue.

"Señorita Lucía!"

"Tadeo!"

He hesitated next to me for an instant, fanning himself furiously (whoosh, click, the wood sticks collided with the pearls), and then gave me a smile full of lipstick-smeared teeth before he continued forward.

He looked like a pathetic green horsefly surrounded by his buzzing fan. I watched him walking away, his great globular head expanded even more by the wig's synthetic curls, strutting and swinging his ass exaggeratedly, perhaps with less emphasis after our encounter. I turned toward my bold neighbor, and he avoided my gaze, horrified. I lamented having seen Tadeo, or should I say I regretted his seeing me. I remembered him walking toward me with that peculiar expression on his painted face, an expression that was both timid and victorious, half-arrogant and half-bashful; and his smile, his sad-happy smile, his bold strut of an ornate monster. So this was Tadeo's other life; the agency's janitor-pageboy during the day and a miserable, feathered transvestite during his free time. He had been waiting for the anonymous refuge the

Hari Krishna would provide so he could make his triumphant parade, his walk across who knows what stage, imagining perhaps that he was a star escorted by his "boys," his unusual, shaved oriental "boys." His mother was probably in some old house in the neighborhood, her forehead propped against the window. Maybe she'd be able to see him from there, adorned with an embroidered silk shawl that was probably hers, with her pearl necklace and her dignified old lady's fan.

My spirits darkened, and I felt cold, maybe because Tadeo had once again managed to communicate to me the profound discontent that poverty causes, or maybe because my anxieties had returned to mind and made me feel lonely in the midst of such a commotion, or maybe it was just that the day had gotten cold. The sky was coated with evening clouds, and a cutting wind was clearing the cafés of their occupants.

I arrived at my house right when the first rain broke; the evening smell was a mixture of fresh ozone and steaming blacktop. I was so lost in thought that I didn't notice anything strange at first. The elevator seemed to be broken again, so I climbed up the stairs to my floor which, luckily, is only the third. As soon as I reached the stairwell, I noted an unusual hubbub. On the second floor I ran into two policemen with axes in their hands, discussing soccer games and lotteries. Upstairs I could hear voices and strange noises. When I reached the third floor I caught my breath: the landing looked like a battle field. Doña Maruja's door was in splinters; only a pair of sharp, broken boards was still attached to the lower hinges, boards that were being earnestly shattered by a hammer-wielding policeman. The custodian and his wife, a handful of neighbors, and more police formed an animated, compact group that took up more than half of the stairwell. The other half was covered by the remains of the wrecked door, and precariously balanced on top was an old, grimy red velvet armchair. Sitting in it was Doña Maruja, minuscule and distant, smiling vacantly. The neighbors all rushed to fill me in on the details. An accident. Fortunately my husband smelled it. It could have been deadly. It's a miracle she's okay. At her age they barely have a head on their shoulders, so naturally these things happen.

The landing still smelled of gas fumes, even though the window to the patio had been opened. A siren howled in the distance – "Of course," the custodian commented, "that must be the firemen." "Well, well, right on time as usual," spouted a lady from next door. "If it weren't for these officers, who happened to be at our very door . . ." We heard running steps on the stairs, and shortly a group of brassy helmets with their respective occupants appeared. "Everything is already taken care of," the police corporal said sententiously. "Let's see if we can get it together," growled a fireman, "because if we keep moving in on other people's beats, it'll just be a mess." The custodian apologized, "Pardon me, but if we hadn't managed to break down the door she would have died on us, and since these officers were passing by . . ." "Yeah, but what I'm saying is, who turns in the report, you or us?" persisted the guy in the helmet. "C'mon, man, don't make it difficult," insisted the corporal in a conciliatory tone, and the two of them disappeared down the hall to check on the gas situation and the house. "What luck, huh, Doña Maruja?" chattered a neighbor. "You could practically say you've been born again." And Doña Maruja smiled placidly and said "thank you" in a barely audible voice. The ring of spectators began to break up as the men came back out of the apartment. Before he left, the head policeman went up to Doña Maruja: "And now, grandma," he roared, a foot away from her face, at a thunderous volume, "let's pay closer attention to the gas, or you're going to give us all a real scare someday." Doña Maruja nodded, smiled, and thanked everybody. Her head was wet because the rain was blowing in through the open window on the landing, but she sat perfectly still in her threadbare armchair on top of the wood splinters.

When I entered my apartment I had to turn on the lamp in the living room because the afternoon was dark, and that aggravated my depression. Artificial lights have always caused me anguish during the day; they seem kind of sinister and faint. It was a summer storm. The rain was pounding against the pavement with a humid rumble that was becoming ominous. I was afraid. Afraid of what, I don't know; afraid of everything. Mine was one of those

imprecise fears, fears that slip through your fingers when you want to capture and crush them. And I loved him then, I loved him intensely. I was shattered in tiny pieces because of Hipólito's absence. I've never been able to discern if fear comes before love or vice versa.

And I don't boast about anything; neither my children, my obligations, nor my dreams. I don't boast of my failures, either. And I've been a failure to you, no doubt. But you'll always be able to count on me, although it's obvious you won't care to do that in the future.

The ringing interrupted my tenth reading of the letter. I leaped at the telephone.

"Yes?"

". . ."

I was suddenly terrified that no one would answer me.

"Yes, hello?"

"Eh . . . Señorita Lucía?"

Tadeo.

"Yes . . ."

"It's Tadeo, Señorita Lucía, from the agency, you know who I am?"

"Sure, Tadeo, of course."

"I saw you this afternoon, señorita."

"Yes, yes, of course. I saw you too. We said hello."

"Yes . . . the weather was splendid this morning, wasn't it, señorita? It's too bad it didn't last."

I pictured the sequence vividly. I saw him running toward his house, piercing the puddles with his pigeon-toed pumps, spattering his pants with dried mud, his wig tilted to the side and soaked with water, a stream of mascara imprinting black grooves in his heavily painted cheeks.

"Yes, it's too bad."

"Uhhhh . . . Señorita Lucía . . ."

"What is it, Tadeo?"

"Look, I wanted to . . . How did you like the way I was dressed?"

I hesitated a second before answering, trying to guess what it was he wanted to hear.

"The shawl you had on was very pretty, Tadeo," I ventured finally.

"Really? You liked it?"

I could tell by his pleased tone that I had guessed right.

"It belongs to my mother.

"And the pearls! The pearls were beautiful."

"Aren't they? They look real, I know. Well, they're cultured, but they're very pretty. You really liked them?"

"Yes, yes, very much."

I heard him let out a big sigh at the other end of the line. After a moment he said:

"It's just that . . . I knew you would understand me, Señorita Lucía, because you're an artist. I knew you wouldn't think it was wrong . . ."

"Of course not, Tadeo," I hurried to add, affecting a completely natural tone. "You can do just as you please, go out on the street with your pretty silk shawl, or whatever you want . . ."

"Yes, but . . . I wanted to ask you . . . well, ahem, if you wouldn't mind, if, hummmmm, if you could please not say anything about this at the agency, because . . ."

"Don't you worry, Tadeo," I cut him off. "No problem. This is between us, although you don't have any reason to be ashamed."

"No, I'm not ashamed, but . . . you understand it because you're an artist, Señorita Lucía, but people can be so mean."

"Don't pay any attention to them, Tadeo. Don't worry about people."

There was another silence, and then he said softly with what sounded like a note of reproach in his voice:

"That's very easy to say, Señorita Lucía, but very difficult to do. I've been hurt, miss. I've been hurt badly, if only you knew . . . How could I not worry?"

Suddenly I felt ashamed of myself, of my frivolous comments, of my turmoil, of preferring to pretend the problem didn't exist. I didn't say another word.

"Because I . . . we were happy, you know. My father, well, he and his brothers had a hardware shop, you know? But a big shop, a

beautiful one, don't think it was a tiny shop with a couple nails. No, it was a first-class hardware store. I'm the oldest nephew, you know, and I was already in charge of the store, you know? I was really pretty good at it; I shouldn't say so, but I was. The older ladies just loved me, and sometimes when they came to the store they would say: 'No, no, I want the boy to wait on me.' That was me. Because I would talk to them and ask them about their families, and I knew them all really well. And that was when my father died. I can picture it even now. I was twenty, and my dad was in his box: he looked very handsome, young and tall, and he was in his box as if he were asleep, I can see him now. My father in his box in the living room and the whole family in mourning – because we were a really close family – and we were all there, my seven uncles and the sister and brothers-in-law and my cousins and my mother, who looked gorgeous in her black silk dress with a ruffle on the skirt just below the knee . . . And that's when we had our little mishap, because when it rains it pours, Señorita Lucía. The thing is, my mom had to go to the bathroom, and, well, it was occupied, so she climbed up on a chair to look over into the stall. I don't know why it occurred to her to climb up and look over the door because back then I didn't . . . Anyway, she climbed up and . . . well, ahem, she saw us, me and my cousin Julito, who was fourteen, and I was buttoning his, well, ahem, fly, right? So I don't know what my mom thought when she saw me kneeling before him, and she fell backward, and there was a big noise, and everyone rushed in from the dining room. I could hear them screaming on the other side of the door; they were telling us to open up, but we were so frightened that . . . And then Uncle Julio and Uncle Antonio flattened the door, and Uncle Julio slapped me around and took his son away. It's as though I'm seeing it all right now."

Astounded, I listened to him in silence, barely able to hold back my improper, disconcerting desire to laugh.

"And so they threw me out of the shop, and they gave us our share of the money, but it ran out right away because my mom had hurt her spine when she fell, you know? And we went from doctor to doctor for years, and they operated on her, and they put her in a

cast, and at the end of it all the poor woman was left paralyzed. I don't know what the poor thing thought when she saw us, Señorita Lucía, because, I cross my heart, I swear on my mother's bed, I, señorita, wasn't doing anything, nothing . . . I just wanted to look at him."

I exploded in bursts of laughter, covered the mouthpiece, and laughed joylessly until my sides ached.

"Well, Señorita Lucía, I don't want to disturb you further."

"Oh, no, you're not disturbing me," I stammered as best I could.

"Thank you very much for everything, and please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, Tadeo."

"Ah . . . And you know something? My cousin Julito is now a real fairy, even crazier than I am, my little cousin Julito. That's fate for you . . ."

I hung up, thinking how unreal reality can be. If I were to put a character like Tadeo in a movie, I said to myself, if I were to film a sequence like the one I had just lived, it would seem like an exaggeration, an impossibility, an invention. With delight I anticipated telling Hipólito all about it. He would get a kick out of the whole story because Hipólito loved life's literary situations. "Guess what," I would tell him, "I was relaxing at home when the phone rang, and it was none other than our Tadeo . . ." Suddenly, I realized I wouldn't be able to tell him, that my ties with Hipólito were broken, apparently forever, and there wouldn't be any more laughter, confidences, or confessions. I was once again overcome by depression. Maybe Ricardo's right about what he told me in the mountains yesterday, I thought somberly. It could be Hipólito doesn't love me at all, and his behavior is truly coherent and honest. Perhaps I'm the one who is completely mistaken. At that moment, with all of this in mind, Hipólito became the only man in the world worthy of being loved. I felt the ideal of the perfect couple could only be realized with him, that only with him would I be able to find my other half. Back then, I was still young enough to believe in such ideals. I was gnashing my teeth in desperation and loneliness, and finally I cried for paradise lost, for Hipólito. He and only he would be capable of appreciating and understand-

ing all my tenderness, all my complexities. I was feeling so rich, so full of things to offer him that, after crying a bit for myself, I cried five more minutes for him, for the many marvelous things Hipólito was losing by not loving me. When I was out of tears, I felt worn out and defeated. So I got up, went to the phone, and dialed the ill-fated number.

"Hipólito?"

"Yes?"

"This is Lucía."

"Ah . . . Hi."

It wasn't a good start. His voice sounded hollow, cautious, and strange.

"How . . ." I stammered, "how are you?"

"Fine. Did you get my letter?"

"Yes, that's why . . . that's kind of why I'm calling, Hipólito. It just seems absurd that things stay like this. What I mean is, I would like to talk to you."

"Very well, we'll talk."

"But, when?"

"I don't know right now. I'll call you?"

The possible delay horrified me. I could just picture myself glued to the phone again for gray, fatal hours.

"No, no. I want to see you now." I lost all my shame and even pleaded. "Couldn't I see you today, just for a moment?"

"Mmmm . . . No, no, it can't be. I'm really sorry, I can't. I'll call you one of these days, how's that?"

And as if that weren't enough, he had that suspicious, urgent tone in his voice.

"Is your wife there? Is she back already?"

"No, no. She's coming tomorrow morning."

"But you aren't alone . . ."

"That isn't a very discreet question."

"I don't give a damn about discretion."

"I don't have to answer you."

I felt a cold sweat of jealousy break out on the nape of my neck. My voice tightened.

"Okay, so you aren't alone . . . I don't know why you're always so ambiguous, why you insist on keeping stupid secrets."

"You already know what I think. You shouldn't give everything away because that's how you lose power."

"I know. I've already heard it too many times. Fine. I won't bother you anymore."

And as I was hanging up I could hear a hurried "I'll call you" in the distance.

November 17

Tomorrow it'll be a week since the pain began. It's nothing serious, just one more side effect of the virus. When I lost my sight I didn't believe I would recover it, like they said, but they were right. This pain is nothing compared to losing my sight, nothing at all. I suppose it must be normal for a virus to cause such intense pain. But the pain is so strong. And I had no idea what a headache was until I suffered one of these. Ricardo laughs and teases me, making such a fuss about a headache, he says. But he doesn't know what it's like. There's the pressure that feels like it's going to push my eyes out of their sockets; a ring of fire squeezes my temples, and each heartbeat feels like a lash. The pain hindered my thinking, because even thinking hurt. It's a good thing they gave me the painkillers. After the injection I feel peace arrive in refreshing

waves, as if a hand were snuffing out the torturous flames. The sudden absence of pain is ecstasy. I know the drugs are really strong, and I'm afraid I'll start to depend on them, but I couldn't survive without those injections, and I'll be cured before I get used to them, I hope . . . But the pain is so intense. This isn't normal, something's wrong, something's definitely not working, I know. Calm down, calm down. The blindness was much worse, and it went away. I shouldn't complain; it might bring bad luck – it's strange how superstitious I've been getting lately. I shouldn't complain, though, because I feel fine. There's only those headaches, and they hardly count since, before the intense pain comes the sweet, marvelous relief of that magical invention, the painkiller.

Progress isn't that bad, after all, regardless of what Ricardo says during his frenzies. Progress is worthwhile, even if it is only for the sake of the invention of this amazing drug. Surely what the doctors say is true; I must be better. The dizzy spells have finally disappeared, the last one was weeks ago. The treatment is working; it's only a matter of time. I need to be patient. You are an impatient woman, María de Noche says to me in that dry, brusque voice that fits her so well. It must be impatience. Yes, I'm sure it's just that, impatience.

When I got up this morning to take my daily walk I slipped into the hospital library. I looked up my illness in a thick volume on medical pathology. It said:

Ménière's disease: Ménière's disease involves a sudden onset of tinnitus, nausea, vertigos, and vomiting, resulting from an organic disease or a disturbance in the labyrinth. Seen in a great many conditions, particularly during the course of such infections as lues, brucellosis, typhoid, and meningitis. Just as in nicotine poisoning, the Wassermann reaction should always be employed. Treatment: Should be directed toward underlying cause. Symptomatic treatment is eliminative: sedative and withholding fluids on the basis of edema of labyrinth as cause of symptoms. Relief is obtained by performing Dandy's operation of severing equilibrium branch of the auditory nerve.

The account of horrors continued for two pages, with language that became progressively more incomprehensible. I've patiently copied it all, and I'm studying it in detail, trying to shed some light on all this. It is obvious that I enter under that reference to "some infections," but what comes next really disturbs me. I looked up "lues," and it turns out to be nothing but syphilis. I doubt I have syphilis, so I'm concentrating my anxieties on the note on meningitis. These migraine headaches, are they normal? Headaches are a symptom of meningitis, but so is a stiff neck, or is it? I wanted to look up "meningitis" in the book, but it was late, and I had to leave the library. Anyway, I've had this pain for a week, and nothing else seems to be getting worse. When I'm on the painkillers I feel perfectly fine. It can't be meningitis, it's impossible.

And yet this pain is so intense, so strange. There are two more details that scare me: in the description there's no mention of temporary blindness or migraines as symptoms. At any rate, there's no cause for panic. Later they also add that "the patient's medical profile varies greatly from one case to the next," exactly what the woman doctor told me that afternoon. She warned me, she said this sickness is like hepatitis because some cases last only weeks, while others can last up to a year. When you read these volumes brimming with aches and pains you start believing you have all the symptoms yourself. It's pure hypochondria. It's simply fear. If I really think about it, it's even funny. A few days ago I tortured myself thinking that I might be suffering from cancer, and today I'm terrified again by the idea of meningitis. What is obvious is that I can't have everything at the same time. This is ridiculous. Tomorrow I'll decide that what I really have is tuberculosis, what do I know? Absurd. I'm suffering from Ménière's disease, that's all, and this disease is caused by a virus. Why would they lie to me? Everything written in this book seems so foreign and cold. But it doesn't say anything about blindness, nothing about headaches. I won't sift through these volumes on pathology anymore; they only serve to feed my obsessions.

And to make matters worse, there's María de Día. I knew something was up, because the last few days she has been rather

aloof. Smiling and friendly, as usual, but evading conversation. She finally told me yesterday. She arrived at five and stayed with me almost an hour, solemn and pensive.

"I'm leaving, Lucía."

"You're going?"

"Yeah, I'm leaving this job."

"Why?"

"It's normal, isn't it?" She responded irritably. "I feel like not working for a while; I've been here almost a year. That's too long."

I was quiet, already saddened by her absence.

"You're really going to be missed," I said finally. "When are you leaving?"

"At the end of the month."

"So soon?"

"I'll give a joiner before I go."

"A what?"

"Oh, c'mon, a joiner," she repeated impatiently. "A party, a get-together."

She rose and began pacing the room, her head bowed, her left hand in the pocket of her uniform, sucking on a lock of hair.

"Lucía . . ."

"Yes?" I answered softly, inviting her to confide.

"I don't want to go."

"So why are you going?"

She turned on me.

"Because I have no other choice! The questions you ask! They've already sent me two statements saying that I've been here for too long, that they are grateful for my services, that I must understand positions are needed so that others may learn the trade . . . ha," she laughed cynically. "You know, the typical crap, all in that dried-up official language of theirs."

She resumed her march with a furrowed brow.

"Lucía, do you think I'm weird?"

"No."

"It isn't that I want to work all the days of my life," she was wringing her hands nervously. "It's not that at all. I love the

unemployment periods like everyone else. But if I quit my work, I also have to leave my apartment complex, look for another place . . ."

"And you're tired of moving around so much," I ventured, trying to make it easier for her, to show her my empathy.

"Tired? Tired of moving? Me?" She exclaimed in surprise. "Oh, no. It's not that. Traveling is exciting, isn't it? I couldn't stand being in one place for too long . . . that's for imbeciles and old people."

"Thank you very much."

"Oh God, I'm sorry," she blushed and waved her hands around in the air as if she were trying to erase the residue of her blunder. "I know you still live in the city, but it's different with you. When I talk about old people I mean people who are old inside, and you're different."

"Because I'm old on the inside and the outside."

"No, no. Because you're from another generation, and you've had a different life. Besides, I suppose when I'm your age I won't care to keep going from one place to another. I'll find myself a little place in some apartment complex at the coast, and I'll live there with . . ."

She stopped for a moment and bit her lip.

"I know it sounds ridiculous and impossible, and it doesn't exist, and it seems romantic and silly and old-fashioned, but I'd like to have a life-long companion, a companion to die with."

"That's not ridiculous, silly."

"You don't think so? Everyone else thinks it is. I mean, my friends say those things are for Harlequin romances and . . . It doesn't seem ridiculous to me, but it's impossible for love to last an entire lifetime, isn't it?"

"It seems so. Or if not impossible, extremely difficult."

She fixed her gaze on me for a moment and then ran to my side, trembling with emotion, grabbed one of my hands, and squeezed it so tightly it almost hurt.

"Lucía, I've found it, I've found it!"

"Found what?"

"That companion. That's why I don't want to leave this place. I don't want to stop seeing him. I can't stop seeing him."

"Is it the cardiologist you told me about once?"

She sighed, and her eyes glazed over as she stared at the wall in a trance.

"Yes, yes . . . It's Javier. Since he's a specialist and he's in the second category, he can keep the same position for as long as he wants, and he's going to stay here. Ay, Lucía, I can't lose him, I can't stand this, I'll die. He's the most wonderful man in the world, I'll never find another one like him, I know I could live with Javier forever and ever . . ."

I was touched by her youthfulness, her intact faith. The world's still the same, after all.

"And what does he have to say?"

"He loves me very much. But he has his work, his life is set. He's an older man, almost thirty. He says I'll find other loves, that the one and only love doesn't exist. He says I should go, that we'll see each other once in a while, that I can still come and visit him, that we'll stay in touch."

"How old are you?"

"Me?" asked María de Día with surprise, as if she thought I might be asking someone else in the room, "I'm eighteen."

And so I patted her on the back, trying to cheer her up, and told her indeed Javier was right, that they could see each other once in a while, and that she'd find other men. I'm going to miss her. I'm going to miss her terribly. Today I told Ricardo all about it, and later I asked him.

"You won't go, will you?"

"Never," he responded emphatically.

"That's what you all say, and then you abandon me." He started to laugh, lit a cigarette, and with the first puff he was hacking away.

"I'll never go," he wheezed between coughs, "unless I cough up a lung during one of these miserable convulsions."

"Why do you smoke if it makes you feel so bad?"

"What about you? Why did you quit?"

"Because it was bad for me. Because smoking is stupid."

"Well, look what it's done for you," Ricardo pointed his burning cigarette at me. "There you are, at the mercy of a hospital bed for months, while I, on the other hand, serenely pass through life with my worn-out lungs."

I was depressed.

"Ricardo, do you think I'll ever get better?"

"Don't start with that silliness again. Of course you will. I was only trying to humble you a bit. By the way, have you heard the news?" he added brightly.

"What news?"

"About José-Joe. Of course, you don't know anything about him, do you?"

"No. Is he still alive?"

"Yes, yes, he's still alive, but by a hair's breadth. He tried to commit suicide. He climbed up the Torre, the old skyscraper in Estrella Square, and threw himself from the fortieth floor."

"You're kidding," I said uneasily.

"Yes, indeed. The funniest thing is that José-Joe didn't really mean to kill himself. Apparently, he's been in a state home for several years because his neurons have failed him, and he believes he's Count Dracula."

"Impossible."

"No, really. Didn't you see it in the papers? It seems that he escaped when a guard was distracted. He grabbed a bedspread and tied it around his neck like a cape, carved a set of gigantic fangs out of a potato, and climbed up the Torre and jumped, thinking he could fly, believing he truly was the character that made him famous."

"And he didn't die?"

"No, because his quilt-cape got caught up in the remains of the neon sign, do you remember it? That huge one at the top of the tower; I think it was an advertisement for Coca-Cola. He stopped there, hanging by his collar, thirty-nine floors up, and they wouldn't have discovered him for hours if his potato dentures hadn't slipped out of his mouth during one of his tantrums. The teeth dropped into some lady's neckline, she looked up, and *voilà*, there was poor José-Joe, like a moth pinned by its wings."

"It's just not possible. I can't believe it."

"Allright . . . the truth is that the potato fangs didn't fall into a lady's neckline; that was my own stylistic adornment. They fell at the feet of some honest citizen. But the rest is true. And it's nothing new. That neon sign has saved the lives of several dozens of suicidal people, they've even formed a club, a kind of charitable association, the Rescued by the Neon Confederation: RENECO, I believe it's called . . ."

"Ricardo, please, don't tell me this is another one of your lies, because it's in especially bad taste."

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Fine, don't believe it. But it's the truth. Remember, truth always surpasses fiction; you just said so yourself in that stuff you're writing."

I was doubtful. I've never known how to discern when Ricardo is serious and when he's teasing, or where the truth ends and the fabrication begins.

"By the way," he added in a superior tone. "In reading what you've written recently, I've noticed that you've begun to follow my advice. That's very good. Your work is noticeably better, thanks to my suggestions."

"I've followed your advice? Where?" I asked, offended.

"Well . . ." he gestured vaguely, "almost everywhere. For example, when you introduce your doubts about whether Hipólito loved you or not, doubts which are more than reasonable, if you'll allow me to say."

"You are insufferable! Do you think I wrote that only because of the discussion we had? Do you think I am, or was, stupid enough not to be capable of having my own doubts? People always doubt that the other person loves them, Ricardo. Don't be absurd."

"But dear, you repeat almost word for word what I said to you, which, by the way, you debated heatedly. Don't deny the evidence. There's no disgrace in admitting that you were wrong, not even in recognizing that another person is smarter than you."

I laughed, thinking he was joking, but almost immediately I suspected he was serious and

November 19

I quit writing the other day because my head was starting to hurt, and everything suddenly seemed futile. But not today. Today life seems beautiful, even this hemmed-in hospital life. This morning I woke up depressed. Ricardo didn't come yesterday, and he didn't even call to let me know, as he's done in the past. I waited for him all day, an entire morning, each hour of the afternoon. It was an endless day. Caught as I am in the silent white void of this illness, I begin to lose all notion of time. I often find it difficult to tell if it's morning or evening, or if I've eaten yet, or if it's been a long time since I woke up. Such is the monotony of the hours. One minute is a replica of the next. But not yesterday. Yesterday I counted the seconds waiting for him. Yesterday I pictured him free and healthy, roving through my old haunts, spaces that were once

mine and that had seen me grow up. At times I feel trapped by a sharp melancholy. I long for those August nights, for the meringued milk we greedily consumed on the outdoor patios of Nueva Street. The traffic, which was so brutal back then, was tame during those late hours, and the empty streets were taken over by street-sweepers. I would lick the cinnamon from the tall glass and discuss ideals and blossoming projects with friends or lovers who were as young and untarnished as I. At my back was the sound of water showering the pavement. The evening brought a chill to my perspiring skin, and it was a pleasure to shiver and drape a sweater over my shoulders. The hours smelled of dawn and summer, hours full of promises.

But today I've already lost my tenuous paradise. Even if I could live my life freely, I could never recapture the intensity of those nights. The cafés and the cinnamon-flavored milk are gone, as are the men with the big hoses who once showered the streets. And, above all, that loud, lively Lucía doesn't exist anymore. There's no greater melancholy than remembering the days when one was happy and unaware of the pain and solitude ahead. There's no greater sadness than remembering what one's dreams were before they turned into failures.

But I was saying that yesterday I pictured Ricardo healthy and free, that I imagined him forgetting me and, what's worse, living, while I am consumed by this exasperating inactivity, by this colorless tranquility. When María de Día brought my breakfast this morning I was about ready to faint from boredom. I never thought boredom could become so unbearable. I'm talking about a lack of appetite for the days, about a dark tedium that engulfs the present and transforms it into something shapeless. Sometimes I anxiously await the small daily routines: breakfast, shower, a walk in the park if it's nice, lunch, shot, pills, radiation session . . . as if these programmed acts were my only reason for living, as if they could rescue the days from their unreality and madness and turn them into something sensible. But on other occasions each of these minimal daily events seems like slavery. On those days I have no strength to go through the same routine even one more time, and

my future unfolds into a never-ending succession of breakfasts: butter the toast, chew, swallow, pour the coffee, milk, spoon the sugar, stir, blow on the mixture . . . an interminable repetition of the same meaningless movements. And at those moments discouragement overcomes me, a smothering discouragement that I think brings me close to insanity. That's how I was feeling this morning when Ricardo arrived. How was I to know the miracle would occur earlier than usual, before I finished my toast?

"Ricardo! I didn't expect you so soon, how nice! I'm so pleased!"

"I came early to compensate for my absence yesterday."

I was saddened a bit by the sense of obligation that seeped from his words.

"I don't call roll, Ricardo; you don't have to come if you don't want . . ."

"Hummm, that toast looks delicious; may I take a piece?"

"Take all of it. I'm not the least bit hungry."

He hovered over the plate and began to devour its contents. When he had finished, he gathered the leftovers crumb by crumb, and they disappeared through his magnificent teeth. He smiled with satisfaction, licked the marmalade from his fingers, and added, "I do not come out of obligation, Lucía. I come because I find it a true pleasure to be with you. What would I do without you?"

He caught my hand and kissed it with exaggerated courtesy.

"You're so kind today, I hardly recognize you."

"I'm just in an excellent mood. C'mon, get up, we're going to take a walk in the garden."

I went into the bathroom to shower and get dressed. Since they've already instilled in me all the little hospital routines, I didn't shut the door for fear of suffering a dizzy spell and fainting. So when I suddenly decided to put on some makeup – moved by who knows what foolish vanity – I had to take refuge in a little corner of the mirror so Ricardo wouldn't see me applying it. I know it sounds absurd, but it was a sudden flash of vanity. I rubbed a little color into my pale cheeks, accentuated my eyes with a black pencil, and even took off my glasses. But Ricardo didn't notice

anything when I returned to the room. He grabbed me by the elbow and steered me down the hall at full speed.

"Your head doesn't hurt? You feel okay?"

"Perfectly fine. Don't go so fast, Ricardo; remember, you're with a sick woman."

He didn't pay any attention to me; I don't think he even paused to hear my answer. We went out into the garden. It was a cool, bright day, and in the shady spots there was still frost from the night before. I made him sit down on a sunny bench because his pace left me breathless. Meanwhile Ricardo talked and talked, and his words floated off, wrapped in a cloud of vapor.

"And I think I've got it this time. Yesterday was the key meeting, and the people seemed to be all for it . . . It's going to be a success, Lucía."

"But, what is it this time?"

"It's a fantastic idea – why not say so – a fantastic idea, though I shouldn't boast since it's mine. It's a highly precise miniature sensor which can be implanted underneath the human skin without danger of rejection by means of a very simple operation. It sends signals to the brain, electric signals that can be converted into light impulses" – he looked at me with satisfaction. "Don't you see?"

"No."

"It's an eye, woman, an artificial eye."

"An eye? You mean to say that you can see with this thing stuck underneath your skin?"

"Yesss! Do you realize what this means for the blind?"

"Interesting," I answered vaguely, impressed in spite of it all. "And where is this sensor implanted?"

"Wherever you'd like. On the forehead, on . . ." He stopped for a moment, triumphant, lowered his voice, checked to see if anyone was listening, and added, "That is what's truly grand, Lucía, you can put it wherever you want. And here is what makes the invention revolutionary: why not have another eye? All of us, I mean, not only the blind. At first I thought about a sensor that was solely for the visually impaired, but later I realized it was selfish to leave

it at that. Let's all get a third eye. In the index finger, for instance. Do you know what that would mean? If we all had a third eye at the tip of our finger, we'd be able to look backward without turning our heads, we could look at ourselves, it would be the end of the mirror. We could read comfortably in bed by merely running our hands over a book. And it would be marvelous for the doctors; the otolaryngologists, the gynecologists, the surgeons would all just stick a finger in."

I burst out laughing.

"Stop, Ricardo, please stop. You're absolutely crazy."

"Crazy? It's an extraordinary invention. Oh well, all great geniuses have been labeled crazy in their time."

"Aren't you the one who ranted and raved about the advances of microtechnology? Aren't you ashamed of taking advantage of the same progress you abhor?"

"Dear Lucía, once again you exhibit a total lack of understanding. The pitfall is believing there's only one possible form of progress, that's the pitfall. They tell us progress is an inevitable part of this society that we live in, and that is the lie. I am not against technological advances, I'm against the manner in which they are used."

"Just the same," I added jokingly, "your eye idea seems lunatic to me anyway."

He looked at me cheerfully.

"Joke about it if you want. My capitalist partners were extremely impressed yesterday."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"And the deal is practically sealed. It's only a matter of months now. Within a year we'll all have a third eye in our finger."

Suddenly I felt a shadow come over the day, a chilling foreboding of death.

"A year . . . a year is a long time, Ricardo. And if I'm not here?"

He gave me a startled look.

"But of course you won't be here! You will have abandoned this damn hospital, and we'll have taken off with our conveniently installed third eyes to visit Rosa in the French countryside."

He took me by the arm, protective and loving.

"Let's go inside, you're cold."

And I really was shivering, shivering from fear.

I hurried to lie down with a sigh of relief. With the months and maybe the weakness I've come to feel more protected in bed, especially during moments of uncertainty and sadness. Ricardo dragged his chair over and sat down at my side. He watched silently, surrounding me with his soft violet gaze.

"Ay, Lucía, Lucía," he said at last. "What are you afraid of?"

"Of everything," I answered quickly. And then in a low voice, "Of death."

He took my hand in his and stroked it slowly. His hands are wrinkled, covered with small age spots.

"Death doesn't exist anywhere except in ourselves, Lucía. When you die, everything ends – there is nothing. Death is but fear of the idea of death, because death doesn't exist, it only exists as an idea while you're alive. You aren't going to ruin your days with the fear of an idea, are you? Fear of the nonexistent."

"Your lectures don't mean a thing to me, Ricardo. Death exists, it exists – don't be absurd."

"It only exists in the death of others . . . Your own death is a lie. Once you're dead, everything's over. Therefore, only life exists, because later there's nothing."

I was disconsolate, on the verge of tears. I tried to joke.

"If you're trying to cheer me up with your talk, you're failing terribly."

He smiled to himself and stroked my cheek. I took his hand and squeezed it tightly. I would have liked to remain linked with him for centuries and centuries. I felt as though I could become eternal as long as I was touching his hand.

"I really missed you yesterday, Ricardo," I stammered.

"Me too."

He got up from his chair and sat down beside me on the bed, leaning against the headboard, his legs dangling from the considerable height of the hospital bed. He slipped an arm around my shoulders, pulled me against him, and looked at me with a sweetness I had never found in him before.

"You know something?" he murmured, "You look really beautiful, Lucía."

"Don't tease me."

"I'm not teasing. You've never been so beautiful in your life."

He slowly began to undo the ties on my gown.

"What are you doing?" I yelled, pushing his hand away. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Why not?" He caressed my face, my neck, my ear, with a careful, gentle hand. "Why ridiculous? You look lovely, Lucía. I'm very attracted to you. Let me touch you, caress you a little."

"No."

I sat up in bed and huddled against the headboard away from him, trembling with fright, feeling as though it was all dirty and shameful. Ricardo laughed, forced another hug on me, and began to kiss my neck . . . ay, my neck, my poor wrinkled neck. I was terrified of disappointing him.

"Let me be!"

"But, why? You'd think I was raping you. You're acting like a bashful adolescent."

I was indeed flushed, my cheeks were blazing, and my breath was choked.

"But the rosiness makes you look even lovelier, Lucía, you have no escape . . ."

He was holding me tightly with his left arm, and I felt his warmth against my body. His eyes sparkled with delight.

"Go on . . ." he said, faking a pleading tone. "Go on, let me get in bed with you for a moment."

"Are . . . are you crazy?" I choked in horror. "Do you want the nurse to catch us making such complete fools of ourselves?"

I tried to push him away and managed to get him off the bed, but to my horror he calmly began to take off his boots.

"Don't be silly, Lucía, dear. You know very well that no one is going to enter this room until lunchtime."

He let his boots fall carelessly, and they hit the floor with a dry thump that seemed ear-shattering to me.

"Don't make noise!" I wailed.

He began to take his bright-green wool socks off. Bent over as he was, I could see the bald spot on his head. I had the sudden urge to laugh.

"But dear God, Ricardo, have you looked at yourself? Don't be absurd, where are you going? You probably don't have strength left for anything anymore."

Ricardo was calmly lowering his pants zipper.

"What are you saying, Lucía . . . I'm right at the peak of life and vigor. Ever since they hospitalized you I've been taking ginseng in preparation for this very moment." He leaned against the headboard with one hand and with the other clumsily tried to get his pants off.

"But, Ricardo, don't tell me you believe the lies the laboratories invent, those pills don't . . ."

"Who said anything about pills? Of course the ginseng they sell at the pharmacy is simply a fraud, a substitute. But ginseng, my dear, was not invented in the laboratory. It is a marvelous Chinese root that for centuries has been used to truly enhance sexual potential."

He had gotten his pants off, and a pair of skinny white legs appeared beneath his shirt.

"Actually, that is only one of the many powers the root possesses, since it's magical. According to the Tao, ginseng projects the power of yang over yin, that is, the active principle over the passive." He was struggling with a button on his flannel shirt that refused to come undone. "The ginseng is a tuberous root with the shape of a small, whitish fetus, a human form. You have to let it marinate, whole, in a liter of liquor for three months. After the time is up, refill the container – use cognac whenever possible – and leave it for three more months without touching it. This done, you may use it. You cook it with poultry, careful now, only poultry, and you eat it." He was in his underwear, frail, his flesh drooping, his abdomen hanging a bit, and a few bristly gray hairs poking from his sunken sternum. "And what's more, ginseng has a passionate history . . . A Russian writer discovered it and introduced it to the Western world at the beginning of the last century, a certain

Ossendovsky, who was also a mountain engineer. They put him in charge of an expedition to southern Siberia, near China and Korea, and then . . . Come on, scoot over." He had his boxers off before I could blink ("alley oop!" he said, brandishing them in his right hand), and he slid into bed. He hugged me, and his skin was freezing. I began to rub his back; his slight body filled me with tenderness. "And then Ossendovsky came in contact with the ginseng hunters. It is an ancient profession; the hunters are both feared and respected, and it is assumed that they're part-wizard, that they possess certain powers. On the other hand, they're found to be totally out of their minds, and, as you know, madness and sorcery have always gone hand in hand through history." His brow was furrowed, and he was talking as though he were completely absorbed in his narration, but his hands had begun to caress my breasts underneath my nightshirt. I noticed that my whole body was coming alive, that it was expanding with a tingling pleasure. But I was ashamed of my sagging flesh.

"What are we doing, Ricardo, this is crazy, we're a couple of aging idiots."

"Quiet, silly . . . As I was telling you, the ginseng hunters catch the tundra fever and go mad. Maybe their madness is due to the months of isolation they have to endure, or maybe it's the excessive consumption of ginseng, which, as I told you, is a plant with magical powers that is best not abused. What's more, ginseng is highly valuable and difficult to find, so the hunters have to guard the roots in hidden depositories, and, even then, they always have to be alert so they won't be murdered by thieves. As you can see, these poor men lead difficult lives . . . There must be only a very few left out there, howling in their madness and solitude in the midst of the frozen tundra."

He helped me undress, and we hugged together tightly on the narrow bed. I understood then that it had been too long since I had last held or been held by a man, too long since I had last felt someone else's warmth encircling mine, someone else's sweat mixing with my own. I dove into the feeling and knew that this had to be something very close to happiness. His soft skin, his sharp,

somewhat cold knees, his thighs, belly, chest, shoulders, hands, all mine; I was surrounded with his body encircling me in a bubble of comfortable calm, and the warmth of his flesh reminded me of past dreams, that warm excitement, that anticipation of adventure that I sometimes experienced before making love when I was young. I discovered him hard against my thighs, and a disturbing, tumultuous joy came over me and almost stole my voice.

"So the ginseng works, eh?"

"It's not the ginseng, dear," he said softly. "The truth is it's only you."

I moved my face closer to his in order to erase the fog of my nearsightedness and see him more clearly. He was watching me quietly. How could I describe those eyes, those immense, fragile eyes? They were void of secrets, softened with tenderness, and underneath the wrinkles I discovered the same Ricardo of thirty years ago, still intact for me. He caressed and kissed my stomach, neck, hips. I ran a cautious, disbelieving finger down his back, not believing still that it was him, that it was me. His body was a pile of sharp bones covered by soft, pallid skin, and yet it was beautiful to me. I was happy.

"We're a couple of crazies. Have you taken a look at yourself?" I lied, patting his ribs in bliss. "You're a ruin, all skin and bones."

Ricardo laughed.

"Well, look at you, my dear . . ."

I felt my stomach shrink with a stab of fear and pain.

"Yes . . ." I stuttered anxiously. "Yes, I'm awful, aren't I? Ay, Ricardo, I'm sick, so sick."

He took my face in his hands and smiled to himself.

"No, Lucía, no. You're very beautiful, you're the most beautiful woman I know, my little Lucía, my dear."

And he began to cover my eyelids with light, delicate kisses. There, with my eyes closed, I felt him penetrating me sweetly, and I let him undo my fear between his lips.

Saturday

I had to admit it to myself that Saturday, the eve of the big day: I was nervous, very nervous about the premiere. I was surprised to discover this so late in the week, a week in which my work had apparently taken a back seat to the urgency of my emotions. It was an ambivalent discovery, given that while it filled me once more with anxiety, it also calmed my absurd lovesickness. It was a pleasure to find myself centered and dedicated to my work again. I felt as though the senseless, lovestruck Lucía were retreating to some corner of herself, grumbling and muttering, while the prudent Lucía emerged with a sigh of relief. I began to suspect that the sentimental attack I had lived days before was nothing but one of my typical reactions to fear of failure, taking refuge in love and loss of love in order to forget that the course of my life, my future

as a professional in the movie industry, would probably be decided during that week. With the day of the premiere rushing toward me, I was suddenly overwhelmed.

So it was still early when I phoned the producer. I didn't have anything special to say, but I wanted to feel I had some company in the face of this risk. The producer was an old fox on the national film scene, sly, uncultivated, and inflexible. He possessed a shrewd ability to do whatever was more profitable for the times, which is why he produced ardently religious movies during the years of national mysticism, historical movies with fictional plots when the state was subsidizing them, and canned American-style comedies when Doris Day came into fashion. Now he was producing marginal feminist themes because his finely tuned instinct had decided that the country was oozing dissatisfaction with established society. The producer, who had premiered many movies and was risking almost nothing with my movie (it cost very little to film), gave me some fatherly advice: "Don't take things so seriously, Lucía; you'll learn that in the movie world nothing really matters, neither success nor failure. I've never seen anything as forgetful as a moviegoer." And then he told me that the sound equipment on the premises didn't work well: "These little hassles always happen; I'm telling you now so you won't be disappointed," leaving me even more concerned.

As soon as I hung up, the telephone went crazy, ringing without a break. A reporter friend from *Cinestar* magazine called in search of a last bit of gossip to include in a section of news briefs, so I hurried to tell him about the horrible state of the sound equipment: "Yes, yes, you can't understand a thing, I've listened to it. Write that it's a shame movie theaters have such poor technical setups," I insisted.

Three or four friends and acquaintances called to check on the state of my nerves but in reality wanted to make sure they had tickets to the premiere. Then José-Joe called asking me what time, with whom, and how I was going. A movie critic phoned asking me to appear on his television program that was to be recorded live that afternoon. Ricardo, my dear Ricardo, called me from his

mother's house to calm and reassure me. My parents let me know they were back – how was I going to dress for the event and please don't dress as sloppily as usual. And finally Hipólito called too.

I can say with certainty that when Hipólito called I had momentarily forgotten his existence, so even though my stomach gave its habitual lurch at the sound of his voice, I felt strong and reasonably free of him.

"Say, Lucía . . ." he said doubtfully, "could we see each other for a moment?"

"Well, I don't know," I answered coolly, happy to have an actual engagement to turn him down with. "At one-thirty I have to be on television for an interview."

"Oh really? With whom?"

"The people who do the movie critiques."

"How strange; they haven't called me . . . well, in any case we could see each other before, no? Around noon, for a beer someplace."

I accepted. Our date was at an expensive, ridiculous pub that was always vacant at that early hour. When I arrived on the run, a few minutes late, Hipólito was already settled in a dark-brown couch, the only customer in the bar. He was glancing through a newspaper, looking annoyed. He was thin, worn out, and pale. I observed him dispassionately and was even pleased to find him looking terrible.

"Sorry to be late," I said. "How are you?"

He gave me a sad, misty look and sighed deeply.

"Awful."

"Oh, really?" I replied lightly, determined not to grant him even a minimal truce. I ordered a beer and lit a cigarette. Hipólito was silent as I went through my worldly-woman routine.

"We have to talk about your letter," he said pitifully.

"Yes, I suppose we should talk."

He gave me a troubled smile.

"When are you going to leave me for good?"

"Oh, shut up, don't start that again. I could easily leave you right this minute if you keep on like that," I answered harshly.

Hipólito sank his gaze into his glass of beer and ran a distracted finger around the edge.

"My wife arrived this morning."

"How nice."

"And she says she wants a separation."

I laughed, surprised.

"You don't say."

"Yes. She's absolutely sure about it."

I contemplated the amazing news for a moment as I calmly chewed on a fingernail.

"You know what I say?" I answered. "My opinion of your wife has improved considerably after hearing this."

"Don't laugh . . . or laugh if you want, you have the right." Hipólito smiled weakly, his lips trembling. "But I feel awful."

"But Hipólito, dear," I said cruelly. "Isn't this what you wanted so badly? Didn't you tell me over and over that you couldn't ask for a separation because you didn't want to hurt your wife?"

He looked shipwrecked, huddled there in his chair.

"I don't want to leave my house, I don't want to be separated from my wife. Do you know what it's like to have lived with someone for so many years? It's a whole life, understand? And my house, my office, my things, my children . . . I don't want to lose all that."

"In that order?" I mused.

"I . . . please don't get aggressive, I'm . . . I'm very fragile today, I . . . I don't know if I love her or not, but I don't want a separation. I don't. I don't."

I loathed and pitied him at the same time, but in the end, sympathy won. I took his hand, maternal in spite of myself.

"I understand, I do. But don't worry. The anguish only lasts the first few days. You're still young, you can rebuild your life."

I was young enough back then to still feel reasonably satisfied when I heard about the end of a marriage. During those years I believed that marriage was a perishable routine and that the only way to regain one's dignity was to separate. It was later, as I began to age, that separations began to sadden me: the failed relation-

ships, the years of living together, the destroyed efforts and illusions.

"Things have been rocky with you and your wife for a while, haven't they? You'll see how this is best for everyone. As soon as these first few days of stupor and anguish pass, you'll begin to feel free and happy."

"You're telling me exactly what my wife tells me."

I withdrew my hand from his and added acidly, "We must be soulmates."

We were silent for an instant. I tried to put my head in order, but before I could, Hipólito turned, cast his moist gaze upon me, and exclaimed melodramatically:

"I don't want to love you, Lucía."

It was, I believe, the first time he had ever called me by my name. In other circumstances that phrase could have hurt me very much, but that day it only provoked a certain feeling of indifference in me. I leaned back in the chair, folded my arms across my chest.

"Fine." I commented, unmoved.

Hipólito scrutinized me, without altering his air of gloomy transcendence.

"I think I'll leave," he added tragically. "I'm going to leave the country and go to the United States. I'll start from zero, I'll break with everything and everyone."

More than hurting me, his behavior began to irritate me – the scant attention he gave me and my possible sadness at his departure.

"I don't know if you realize," I said coldly, "that in saying these things you can hurt me."

He gave me his typical man-accustomed-to-suffering smile.

"How conventional you are deep inside, after all, dear," he responded.

I was indignant.

"You don't understand anything. It's a problem of caring, not of being conventional. But of course you have no idea of what caring is all about."

I sank into a vexed silence while the waiter changed the ashtray. When we were free of his invading ears, Hipólito repeated insistently.

"I don't want to love you."

I was feeling exasperated and hurt. I began to lose control of myself.

"But, why?"

"I think if I end it with my wife, I'm going to end it with you too, permanently."

My throat suddenly closed up.

"Do you know the pain you are causing me with all this?" I choked.

He gazed at me gravely, as if he were observing the wall through me, as if he were picturing heroic horizons.

"No, on the contrary, I'm doing you a favor, that's why I'm saying this. It's just that sometimes one has to row backward."

"Only when there is a waterfall ahead."

"But sometimes one has to row toward the waterfall," he insisted.

"Oh, shut up, and forget your stupid metaphors," I wailed desolately, stifling a sob.

He took my hand, gave me a weary look, and added,

"I'll write you a letter from America . . ."

I couldn't hold back the tears, though I tried to maintain a bit of composure for the regulars who were beginning to arrive for aperitifs. I observed him between hiccups, and he was calm, with a melancholic expression etched on his face and a complacent half-smile that gave him away. In a flash of realization, I contemplated the whole sequence from the outside. I observed myself crying disconsolately after having arrived happy for our date, and then I saw him, renewed and energetic, after his teary, staggering start. Finally I understood.

"You're satisfied, aren't you? You got what you were after," I snarled at him through a curtain of tears. "You have now tortured me sufficiently to confirm that I love you, enough to be sure that you can still make me cry, that you still have me wrapped around your finger . . ."

I had to pause for a hiccup. Hipólito was looking at me in surprise.

"Me? I didn't . . ." He reconsidered for a moment. "In any case it's curious, I do feel much better now than before, yes, maybe because of your insecurity."

And he smiled at me placidly, amicably. I crushed my tears with a paper napkin, gathered the cigarettes and lighter, stood up with cold resolution, and declared, "If I were you I wouldn't be so sure of myself."

It wasn't a very dignified phrase, but nothing better had occurred to me.

I drove off in a rage, furiously inventing a thousand secret revenges, running red lights, and startling defenseless pedestrians. I was approaching the television studio when I realized that the story had ended, that this time was the last. The certainty made me feel something close to liberation in spite of the sadness. At any rate I arrived at the studio later than the designated hour. They were waiting for me impatiently. There was no time for melancholy.

"Quick, run, fly to make-up! We're on the air in ten minutes. What a scare you gave us, we thought you were a no-show!"

When I sat down in front of the illuminated mirror I was horrified. My nose was red and runny, as were my swollen eyes. The make-up artist asphalted my face with a thick coat of flesh-colored cover-up and finished off with a whirl of his powder puff. I had to face the reflection of my thickened, aged features.

My head was buzzing and throbbing, and I felt incapable of any direct train of thought. But before I could even blink or ask for an aspirin, I found myself under the spotlights. Someone pushed me down into a rocking chair next to an artificial palm tree; I was facing a man in a tie whose face was vaguely familiar. Behind him the walls of the studio were decorated with big pictures of Hollywood legends. The heat from the spotlights was suffocating, and the man in the tie talked on and on, though nothing he was saying registered with me.

"Lucía Ramos," I heard him say finally, as though my name were

a magic spell, capable of returning my wits to me, "who tomorrow premieres her first movie. Good afternoon, Lucía, how are you doing?" he added, turning to me with a splendid smile, as if we had been lifelong friends.

"F-fine, thank you," I stuttered, caught by surprise.

"A little nervous about the premiere, I bet," he suggested knowingly.

"Well, yes . . ." I answered uncertainly. "Well, no . . ." I doubted. "Yes, yes, I am nervous," I concluded with unfortunate emphasis.

"And tell me, Lucía," added the man in the tie, as he raised his eyebrows with elaborate maneuvers, "have you faced any special difficulties as a movie director because of the fact that you are a woman?" And he pronounced the word "woman" with capital letters, bobbing the point of his chin at the spotlights.

"Well, my career as a director is beginning right now, I mean . . ." I lost my voice and then continued haltingly. "Up until now I've had the same difficulties as any person who wants to get involved in the movie world . . . and there are a lot of difficulties. I mean, there are a lot of people, too . . . people who want to dedicate themselves to cinema, I mean . . . but I was referring to the difficulties." I stopped for a moment, perplexed and lost in the jumble of my reasoning. The makeup was melting under the spotlights, and I felt the paste dripping down my cheeks. "Well, I have suffered through those usual difficulties, plus my own, which I have dragged along from the beginning precisely because I am a woman, because it is true that everything is more complicated when you are a . . ."

"What kind of work did you do before, Lucía?" He cut me off, formulating the question with intensity, as though he were very interested in the response.

"Advertising . . . I used to work, and, well, I still work in advertising. In the advertising field."

"Advertising," repeated the man pensively while he checked his notes. "The title of your movie is, if I remember correctly, *Crónicas del desamor*, isn't that right?"

"No . . . not exactly, it's *Crónica*, *Crónica* only."

"Ah," the man exclaimed with a tinge of exasperation. "Okay, Lucía," he said as though he were getting to the point, "what is your movie, *Crónica*, all about?"

"No, no, excuse me, I haven't been very clear," I hurried to say, horrified by my own blunder. "It's neither *Crónicas* nor *Crónica*, it's *Crónica del desamor*, I mean, without the plural, but with the 'desamor,' anyway . . . ahem . . . it's *Crónica del desamor*."

"Let's see if we can finally get this straight," commented the man, a bit annoyed. "The correct title, then, is *Crónica del desamor*, right?"

"Yesss," I croaked, my throat dry and tight.

"And what is your movie about?" Then he added provocatively, "The title makes it sound like a romantic theme, am I right?"

"Not exactly. It's about . . ." And I suddenly realized that I had completely forgotten the plot. "It's a . . . it's a movie about love and death," I finally said with a redeeming flash of memory.

"And those aren't romantic themes, dear Lucía, love and death?" The man postulated triumphantly while he smugly stroked his silk tie.

"Well, yes, they can be, but what I mean to say is that my movie is more of a chronicle of real life. That is why it's called 'crónica,' and love and death are dealt with in a realistic manner."

"Very well, Lucía, thank you very much for being with us here on the program today. We all wish you good luck, and we hope that your movie is the success we're all waiting for," he concluded with no sincerity whatsoever.

And while the man continued telling the camera something or other about a documentary on tropical butterflies, a kind, anonymous hand stealthily pulled me out of the rocking chair and guided me to the exit.

I stopped for a moment at the bar below my house to get something to eat before I went on up. I felt more rattled than Machín's maracas, to repeat one of Rosa's favorite phrases – Rosa was born in a working class neighborhood and at times she has spurts of brilliant colloquialisms. The bar included a small café with a ragged forties decor. Because of the late afternoon hour it was even emptier than usual.

The three women who looked after the place were finishing their dinner and glaring in my direction. They were three venerable old ladies, two of them short and plump and the third long and bony. They had never been known for their good humor or kind dispositions, and as soon as I entered they began to argue among themselves to see who would have to get up and wait on me. This was, strangely, one of the more comforting things about the café: no matter how much animosity the customers might feel was directed toward them, it was nothing compared to the tribal hate that the old women reserved for one another. In the end the oldest one lost and she hobbled toward me, cursing and scowling, while the others each leaned back and lit up a cigarette with visible, cruel satisfaction. I outdid myself with smiles and apologies, but I still couldn't get her to toast the bread for my sandwich, the excuse being that the grill was turned off. So I had to be content with a cold, wilted ham and cheese. Just as I was paying, our building caretaker entered the café. When he saw me he came straight over.

"Good afternoon, señorita, we just now saw you on TV."

I hurried to gather up the small change that the old woman had cunningly strewn out along the wet counter.

"So we were eating, and all of a sudden my old lady says, look, Pepe, it's the girl from second floor . . . you were a little nervous, weren't you?"

I made an attempt to escape, but the caretaker moved, blocking my passage with his body.

"The thing is, we ate late today because with Doña Maruja's mishap . . ."

"Doña Maruja?"

"Sure, haven't you heard?"

And he proceeded to describe the whole incident in full detail.

"It was around ten o'clock this morning. I was in the furnace room, but my wife heard the racket and came to get me, and so I came out, and there she was in the middle of the street, God help me, I said to myself, this lady's been killed. She was so spread out there, it was a shock to see her with blood on her head, right here,

on this side. And so we called the hospital, and they told us not to touch her, and when they got here they lifted her slowly. These two guys were, I'm not exaggerating, señorita, two meters tall. They lifted her as if she was a feather.

"And she hadn't passed out. She was lying on the sidewalk with her eyes open, understanding everything. Talk, she didn't, but she understood. I told her, don't move, the guys from the hospital are on their way to pick you up, and she looked at me and understood me. And since she doesn't have anyone, I went to the hospital with her, in case those kids she's got in Germany would have to be sent for, and the doctor told me it was a miracle, that though the second floor isn't very high, it's too high for someone her age, and it's a miracle she hadn't been killed. She broke I don't know how many bones, but she was alive and well when I left her. They were going to operate, and the doctor says that she'll come out fine, though she might have a bit of a limp because at that age bones don't heal like they did when we were young.

"Later they were asking me a lot about her, and I told them about the gas yesterday and, just imagine, they told me Doña Maruja had jumped from the balcony. I don't know what to think, maybe at that age you just lose your marbles. The doctor says she wanted to commit suicide and that the safest thing to do would be to send her to an old folks' home so that someone can watch her and she won't kill herself. And, like I said, I left her there alive and well; you can't tell me it isn't a miracle."

I climbed the stairs, nibbling wearily on the wilted sandwich. I looked at my watch and discovered it was barely four o'clock. I was surprised it was so early, since it seemed like centuries had passed since my disastrous encounter with Hipólito. Disastrous? I asked myself as I curled up on the sofa and lit a cigarette. Wasn't it perhaps the best possible encounter, the most useful? My initial indignation had cooled and condensed into a serene resolution. I was beginning to feel sure of myself, sure that the break with Hipólito was definite, and this created a state of melancholy in me that was not devoid of pleasure. I got up to play a record that was sad enough to let me relish my dispirited mood, and as I passed by

the veranda I couldn't help but step out and examine the ground below. There wasn't one sign left, not even a trace of her grotesque, brief death flight. Perhaps she jumped from one of the interior windows; I didn't ask about the exact spot. The sidewalk was its usual gray-blue, and a bright-colored candy wrapper was fluttering in front of the gate. I had expected to find some of the traditional traces that tragedies leave, an old woman crossing herself on the corner, a suspicious stain pitifully covered with sawdust. But the sidewalk was as neutral and anonymous as always. The pedestrians passed over it, deaf to the imminent sound of those poor bones crackling as they broke. I shuddered and went back into the apartment.

When I returned to the sofa I noticed that I had smeared the backrest with the oily TV makeup. I went to the bathroom to wash and was scrubbing my face with considerable energy when I was caught by my own image in the mirror. "See, Lucía?" I told myself, "You're thirty years old, in the prime of life, young, intelligent, able, independent, attractive, and tomorrow your first movie premieres – what more could you ask for?" I gave myself an enthusiastic, conspiratorial wink. Tomorrow I'll wash my hair and braid it to make it wavy, I decided with resolve. I have to look stunning: the press, all my friends, and all my acquaintances will be there, plus everyone who is none of the above but who is someone in the cinema world. I'll ask Miguel to accompany me, my tender, dear Miguel. It will be the public show of my affection, of our unshakable relationship. Hipólito will see me with him and pale with the fear of losing me. It seemed as though I was viewing the sequence: I, splendid in my silk dress suit, with my hair waved and my cheeks rosy with emotion, introducing them in the hall of the theater, "Hipólito, do you know Miguel?" All very casual, but loaded with purpose. Or maybe another scene: Miguel passing his soft, comforting arm over my shoulders and me happily leaning up against him. The two of us are in a corner, away from the entrance, exchanging coos and sweet nothings. And in the background, zoom, enter the public: Hipólito contemplating our embrace, expressionless, with the tense, gray jawline of a destroyed lover.

It would be my night, my night of success and triumph. Because it was going to be a success, it had to be. There was no doubt that the movie was good, you could almost say very good, marvelously good, considering it was my first one to go to the screen. Or marvelously good even without taking that into consideration. Why be modest? I reviewed the plot mentally. A thirty-year-old woman, Ana Antón – how well Clara played the part, she was an amazing actress! – single, mother of a young boy, a woman who has had and does have a very difficult life, who works as a journalist in precarious conditions with a new, successful magazine. She is a woman in the middle of a crisis, with a painful sentimental past and a suffocatingly mundane present, scarred by years of insecurity. Under these conditions, Ana Antón decides to escape reality and fall in love with the most inaccessible and unlikely person: the editor of the magazine.

The editor, Soto Amón, is an ambitious, self-centered type who was suddenly and fortuitously touched by triumph during his early years (this was José-Joe's starring role). Nevertheless, Ana Antón puts all her efforts into loving and inventing him. She loves him from a distance; she imagines him sensitive and tender, coming to feel a passion for him which justifies her feelings and rescues her from her monotonous existence.

There is a crucial scene where José-Joe portrays the type of person he is. It is an interior shot of the editor's country home. José-Joe argues with his wife in a particularly vicious manner. After the fight, José-Joe shuts himself in his study, which is lined with wooden figures, mannequins he prefers to people because they are the only ones capable of admiring him in silence. From that point on, the plot unfolds with a rhythm I think is well conceived.

When Soto Amón's wife decides she wants a separation, he is terrified, feeling insecure, abandoned, and alone. In this state he bumps into Ana Antón at work, someone with whom he has barely exchanged two words since they met, and he invites her to dinner on a flirtatious whim. Ana accepts, thrilled, thinking her dreams are finally being fulfilled. But the true Soto Amón disappoints her

more with each passing minute of the evening. He reveals his real self: his despotism, his ignorance, his harshness. I think I remember . . . it's been so long since the filming that now I'm assailed by absurd doubts about . . . yes, after dinner he takes her to his country house with the intention of going to bed with her. But Ana is terrified, grieved, exhausted. Soto Amón has destroyed her most precious invention, her escape from the dreary life she leads. José-Joe wants to convert this act of love she had so idealized into a joint masturbation, a one-night stand. Both of them have drunk too much, and Ana feels dizzy and confused. He wants to drag her to bed, but she excuses herself, says she wants to go outside for a moment to clear her head. She circles the house in the cool night. She's pensive and overwhelmed; she ignores a sign, hops over a torn wire fence, and suddenly she feels the ground is no longer firm . . . her feet are sinking little by little into quicksand. She panics, struggles, tries to escape, but her movements only pull her down more and more. She screams for help, throws fistfuls of sand against the green windowsill, and finally gets Soto Amón to look out. "What are you doing there," he shouts, "didn't you see the signs?" Soto Amón is irritated; Ana's clumsiness has shaken his alcoholic stupor and interrupted his vulgar entertainment. "Don't move, I'm going to look for a rope."

Soon Soto Amón returns to the window and tosses out the end of a rope. Ana, already up to her waist in sand, grabs it with both hands. José-Joe begins to pull her in, but suddenly (close-up of her face with an expression that is finally serene, inscrutable) Ana Antón releases the rope, perhaps because she thinks it's too late to be rescued from the swamp, or more likely because she thinks it is too late for everything. José-Joe screams at her, begs her, "Please, hold on." He pleads, swears, and is horrified as Ana Antón silently, calmly lets herself sink bit by bit as she gazes at him fixedly. The quicksand covers her shoulders, her neck, her chin; the earth swallows her lips, hides her nose; the sands slowly blind those fierce, piercing eyes until the ground closes over her in the last frame. Was it like that? Yes, I think so, a final close-up of the surface of the quicksand, quivering with bubbles and finally smoothing over.

On second thought, I said to myself, the TV guy was right, it is a romantic movie. And that discovery disturbed me. I thought I had made a realistic work, a chronicle, and suddenly this didn't seem to be the case. There are scenes that don't come to mind, and I suddenly feel confused, as though a cold, dense mist were blocking my thoughts. I suspect there is something about the movie that is escaping me, there is something that is confounding and disconnecting my memory.

It was Saturday. The day before Easter, a Saturday afternoon thirty years ago, and the sound of the telephone brought me out of my meditation with a start.

"Hello, little one, how are you?"

When I heard his voice I felt a sweetness filling me, an intense well-being, as though the world had reclaimed its perfect order.

"Miguel, my love, it's so good to hear your voice . . ." And once more I knew that I loved him very much, that I longed for him, needed his presence urgently. My feelings were so strong I was surprised I hadn't realized it earlier and had been able to survive a whole week away from him.

"How was your week?"

"Uff . . ." I responded vaguely. At that moment my past anxieties seemed distant, unreal. "I'll tell you later. I've had a rather difficult time . . . and you? Did you finish the book?"

"Yes, yes, finally. We worked liked lions; I'm absolutely exhausted. But why difficult, Lucía?"

"I don't know. I've been awfully lonely . . . but I'll tell you in person, because I do want to see you, Miguel. I want to see you as soon as possible, I'm dying to hug you."

He laughed. "And me too, little one, me too."

"Do you want me to come over? Or are you really tired?" I added timidly. "Look, if you want, I'll be there in a half-hour, I'll make you tea, I'll give you a massage, I'll pamper you, I'll give you kisses, and I'll rock you to sleep."

I listened again to his delighted chuckles.

"No, no, Lucía. I'd rather come see you. One of my colleagues is with me, and he's going to stay here until tomorrow because he

lives in the North and it's just too far to travel in one day. Give me time to shower and organize my things a little, and I'll be there before seven."

I hung up feeling happy, nervous, and expectant, and I ran to put on perfume, comb my hair, and fix myself up. With sudden inspiration I took off my pants and inspected my legs carefully. The hair was dark and thick and unbearably obvious, so I decided to go over them quickly with the razor. The blades were new and my skin sensitive, so in spite of my caution I drew blood from three or four pores. I blocked the small wounds irritably and cursed the absurd social code that called for women to have legs as bald as a baby's bottom. I felt ridiculous as I contemplated my destroyed skin. I put on my pants, and, even with cream, my skin stung ferociously. I sat on the living room sofa to wait for Miguel, keeping my legs apart and perfectly immobile so that the jeans wouldn't rub against them and, I hoped, the burning would stop.

He arrived in less than twenty minutes. His curls were flattened and damp, and he looked like an overgrown boy, all slicked up for Sunday morning. He pulled me against his chest, and I sniffed at him contentedly while he ruffled my hair and laughed.

"But Lucía, little one, why the passionate eruption? What has gotten into you?"

But he held me tightly in his arms and gave no sign of letting go. When a neighbor came out into the hall, and I caught his annoyed eye from under Miguel's armpit, I separated myself and went to shut the door. I returned to the sofa with Miguel and put my hand in his, so big, so familiar.

"I wanted to see you so badly, Miguelito."

I looked him over slowly, as though it were for the first time. His light-chestnut eyes were large and melancholic, the smile lines etched into his face. The straight nose, a bit too wide; his thick lips peeking through the curls of his beard, temptingly, made him beautiful and absolutely irresistible. He gave me a soft, dry kiss that burned in my mouth. I felt excited, and I hugged myself to him.

"I missed you very, very much, my love," said Miguel, plastering his words and his lips against me. "I missed you every day."

"Me too."

As soon as it was out I felt guilty and sad. It wasn't true that I had missed Miguel; at first I was even happy he was going. I felt deceitful, unworthy of Miguel's never-ending tenderness, of his unlimited reserves of love. Amazed at myself, I thought of my stubborn whim for Hipólito, and it seemed like an incomprehensible blindness. I felt so satiated with love in Miguel's arms, and so undeserving. I felt I loved him more in those moments than I had loved anyone, with a love that warmed my legs and my chest and tickled the palms of my hands. This new, grave love brought me to tears.

"But, Lucía, little one, what's wrong?"

His voice was calm, inviting. I hugged him tighter, desolate.

"What's up, little one, what's on your mind?"

He tried to separate himself from me gently and take my face in his hands. But his sweetness made me feel even worse, even more wicked and guilty, and I stubbornly fought my way back into his arms, the tears already transformed into sobs.

"Lucía, my love, my little one . . ."

Miguel watched me cry and stroked my hair. We remained there in silence for a long while, and then he put his right hand on my cheek and began tracing the path of my tears with his thumb. I realized I was hurting him uselessly, that I was being shameful and cruel, and consequently my tears and hiccups doubled. I was in complete despair; it was an especially wet day for me.

"It's just that . . ." I finally blurted out in a horrible nasal sob, "It's . . . you know that other man I was seeing?"

Miguel stroked my hand encouragingly.

"Yes."

"Well, I've broken up with him for good and . . ."

I cried a bit more. Miguel took a wrinkled hankerchief out of his pocket and dried my tears carefully.

"And you miss him, his absence is hard for you, and you're crying about the breakup?" he offered calmly, in an attempt to facilitate my confession.

"Nooooo!" I howled, choking with anguish at his calm, gen-

erous affection, asphixiated with snot and tears. Miguel made me blow my nose and pushed my hair back awkwardly. I realized then that his hands were trembling.

"No, no, on the contrary . . ." I finally managed to say. "It's just that it's very difficult to explain . . . ay, forgive me, Miguel, forgive me."

"But what is there to forgive you for, boba?"

"For this whole act I'm putting on for you, for everything."

"But," he exclaimed, a bit exasperated, "what is everything?"

"I don't know . . . it's just that I love you so much, Miguel, I love you so," I said, aware I was sounding absolutely incoherent. "I know all this sounds ridiculous, but I feel guilty."

"Guilty of what, for God's sake, Lucía?"

"Guilty of . . . You're so wonderful, Miguel; I haven't met a man like you in all my life. And when you told me you missed me very much, and I answered me too, it was a kind of lie, understand? Because this week I've been absorbed with breaking up with the other man . . . I felt like I was deceiving you . . . you, the most human person I know, you, who I love so much, Miguel, how I love you."

I had hugged myself to him again, exhausted, set at ease by the confession, although it was, I knew, only a partial confession. My eyelids were swollen and irritated, and for a moment I felt only the rumble of his heart beneath my ear. Miguel then separated himself from me again, holding me by the shoulders. He gave me a cautious kiss on the lips and looked at me, sad and pensive.

"You should never make such repeated rash declarations of love," he said gently. "Because when you need to say you love me so many times out loud it means you doubt that love, it means you want to convince yourself, that things are beginning to fall apart. Verbal affirmations of love are always a lie, or almost always . . ."

A new anguish came over me, I was crushed, terrified.

"Please, Miguel, don't say that. I love you, really, I do . . ."

And realizing that I was again repeating the unrepeatable, I covered my mouth with my hand. Miguel laughed and pressed me against him.

"Come on, boba, you're just nervous and you've had a bad week, that's all, don't worry, nothing's wrong. Go on, wash that mourner's face while I make tea."

As I tried to relieve my swollen eyes with cold water I decided Miguel was right, the premiere was making me feel tense and panicky. Between splashes, I came to the conclusion that my movie was frightful, that it wasn't the least bit interesting, clumsy and unskillfully done, that not even my position as a newcomer to the trade could save it from failure. During those moments I would have liked to halt time, disown the movie, keep it from premiering the next day, burn the copies one by one. I returned to the living room, submerged in my defeatist attitude. The teakettle was steaming, and Miguel had even found the box of cookies. We sat in a close embrace on the sofa.

"And so you were going to make me some tea, pamper and cuddle me, huh?" he commented cheerfully. "It seems to me that if I didn't pamper you . . . What a face you've got, darling."

He tickled me and kissed me on the nose.

"I must look horrible . . ."

"You do look horrible, but I like you this way, too."

I felt incapable of facing his gaze with my ugly swollen face, so I untucked his T-shirt from his pants with a trembly hand and stuck my head underneath, my cheek against his belly. There inside it was warm and dark.

"You're going to stretch out the only turtleneck I have left . . . Where are you going, fat worm?"

I was climbing upward inside my tight enclosure. I ran my fingers through the curls on his chest and began to lick slowly, swallowing up the loose fuzz from his turtleneck.

"I'm in search of the treasure." I responded in a smothered voice. I began to descend, tracing a path from his ribs to his belly button with the tip of my tongue.

"Aha!" I exclaimed triumphantly, emerging from the enclosure. Between my fingers I held a light tangle of wool that I had extracted from the small hollow in his belly.

"Oh no!" he said mockingly, "Today again?"

"Again."

I paused a moment, gravely rolling the little wool fuzz I had captured into a ball between my fingers.

"And if it's a frightful failure?" I finally asked, hesitantly.

"Don't be silly," he answered, atuned, as always, to my train of thought. "It'll be a success."

"The movie is horrible, Miguel," I mumbled with genuine modesty.

"It's normal for you to be dying of fright before the opening. But the movie is fine."

"You're saying that because you love me," I flirted.

"I'm saying it because it's the truth. It may not be a success. But I can assure you that it will not be a failure. It is a very worthwhile piece of work."

I sighed, somewhat relieved. I observed him mischievously for an instant, then suddenly pulled his sweater off and paused for a moment, savoring the sight of his wide, firm chest. I undid his belt and then began taking off his pants, socks, underwear. He remained passive and smiling. Finally he was totally nude, watching me with silent expectation. I kneeled beside him and ran the tips of my fingers over his neck, his shoulders, his powerful chest, his sides, his warm stomach, his hips, his inner thighs. I caressed his sex, and with the contact of my hands Miguel's whole body contracted, and he sat up.

"Ay, you're killing me, sorceress. What tricks do you use to charm me like this? Come here, it doesn't seem fair for you to still be dressed and proper . . ."

I sat on his knees and we murmured to each other while I got undressed. We embraced silently for a moment, excited, absorbed in the pleasure of feeling each other's humidity, joined by flesh and heartbeats. I pressed against him in order to eliminate all the hollows and empty spaces and to maximize, as much as possible, all surface contact. Our bodies had edges that fit together perfectly. I stayed there, stitched to him, squeezed in the embrace, wishing I could dissolve, penetrate through all the pores of his skin.

"Little one," he murmured in my ear, "let's go slowly, very slowly, all right? Let's love each other for hours."

"Yes, yes," I answered softly. "You know something, Miguelito? I've always had the feeling that I've never reached more than a minute portion of what love really is, that beyond the sex we know is an infinite sea of games and pleasures." I recapitulated for a moment and concluded with an academic, lyrical tone: "A magnificent ocean yet to be discovered."

"Let's go explore, then . . . Let's adventure through the mysterious wild . . ."

With that he ventured a curious finger through my curly pubic hairs. I sighed with pleasure.

"It's as though . . . mmm . . . Miguel, it's as though we resign ourselves to the mechanics too soon, understand?" I insisted, feeling suddenly lucid. "And it happens to us all at once, doesn't it? I feel as though we are prisoners, limited by a code of conventional love. I don't know if I'm being very clear . . . The obligatory foreplay, penetration, the orgasm that must be reached . . . I feel like we're missing the fun, the play, as though making love were a kind of test, a challenge to oneself rather than a partnership and a pleasure."

He stopped and smiled at me.

"Let's play, chiquita. But you have to teach me, you have to help me discover you. Tell me how you want me to kiss and caress you, love you."

"And you must show me, too."

Miguel had an inviting neck, supple and solid, with fuzzy curls at the nape that were irresistible. I began to kiss it, run my lips over that warm, sweet territory. I lingered for a moment in the hollow of his throat to drink in the resin of his fragrance that had gathered there. Miguel was caressing me all over. His hands were so big that they covered my body in a moment.

"Why are your legs so red and irritated?"

I blushed.

"If I tell you the truth, you're going to laugh at me, Miguel, I'm an idiot."

"Come on, tell me."

"Never, I'm too embarassed."

"Go on, boba, tell me, I won't laugh."

"Well . . . I shaved my legs before you came, and as you can see, I butchered myself."

He burst out laughing, and I shook with him, glued together as we were.

"But, chiquita, the things you do."

He scrutinized my shins anxiously.

"Do they sting, am I hurting you?"

"No, no, don't worry."

"Are you sure?"

He began to move his caresses up my leg, up my sensitive inner thighs.

"I'm sure." I answered faintly.

Miguel's fingers explored my curves with delicate progress.

"Do you like that?" he murmured, "Teach me, teach me how to love you, my little one."

"Yes," I sighed. "I love it, I love it when you caress the tip of my . . . of my . . ."

He smiled to himself calmly.

"When I stroke the tip of your wonderful sex, like a smooth flower of flesh, of pure silk . . ."

The strength was flowing from my limbs, I lost all notion of my arms and legs, I felt spongy and volatile, all a fiery well. In my flight I reached the edge of the precipice, the void was golden and terrifying, it hid promises of explosions, and I jumped, jumped into the fresh air, filled with radiance and wonder, I catapulted into the infinite after opening my own floodgates. I overflowed with love into his hands, and in the distance I heard myself cry or sing with joy. Miguel hugged me against him tightly.

"I can't love you any more than this, little one. I'm giving you all I can."

And while he kissed my eyelids with a gesture of surrender, I dove into the sweetness of his gaze and was possessed by an intense peace.

December 2

María de Día said good-bye yesterday. No, it couldn't have been then. It was still November. It was Saturday, I think it was Saturday. The video of that dramatic series, "Classics from the Industrial Age," was showing. I still haven't gotten used to the new classification of the ages. It seems absolutely unjust that they have moved the Modern Age forward; it is infuriating to see myself and my years converted into a remnant of another era. I know it's only a literary convention, but nevertheless it depresses me to think that the Modern Age, which I believed I was living, began only ten years ago, and that my world and my youth are something stale and aged, filed under the label of an Industrial Age they've suddenly invented. The scientists and historians keep agreeing on shorter and shorter ages; soon they will span only one generation.

But that I won't witness, for I will have left this world long before. I don't really know what's happening to me lately, what a strange anguish I feel. Suddenly it's as though I have no understanding of what death is, as though I don't understand the meaning of the concept. I talk about dying, but I don't know what it is, and my mind is often shadowed by an unyielding cloud of fear.

One afternoon, while I was reading a novel, I suddenly panicked. It terrified me to realize the author of the book was dead. There, on the pages, were his thoughts, his doubts; a man who had disappeared long before still pulsed between my fingers. I felt nauseated. I felt as though I had a cadaver's brain in my hands. It was gloomy and morbid. I must be crazy; I don't understand myself. Since then I have been incapable of reading even one work of a deceased author, and I can't even entertain myself watching videos, because movies have become an obsessive recollection of the deceased for me. That one has already died, I say to myself, and him too, and her too. It's all a necrological aberration, a fright, a putrid dread. I imagine them in their graves, all powdery bones surrounded by worms. I imagine them writing their novels, or filming their movies, unaware of their protagonism in their own death, ignorant still of what their suffering will be. Ricardo brings me the latest best-sellers now, those novels by aspiring young authors who have their whole lives ahead of them, and I am able to breeze through them as easily as a chat. At times I don't understand myself.

María de Día. I still can't remember when she went away. There are times when I feel as if all my neurons have stuck together, leaving me incapacitated, unable to think or remember. I don't know what's happening, what's wrong with me, but lately I tend to fall into a kind of stupor, into some cloudy, obscure moment of confusion. My memory is escaping me; what I do remember is mixed and full of voids. I'm afraid. Could it be the virus, that damn virus again? But in the volume on pathologies it didn't say anything about such problems. It may have nothing to do with the dizzy spells. It could just be old age. Degenerative senility, I think they call it. A premature degenerative senility that is beginning to

destroy my life and my mind. My God, maybe I'll fade away like this over the years, become a crazy old woman, dying inside a little each day. In that case I'll kill myself, I'll finish once and for all with all this. I prefer a quick, dignified end, just as Doña Maruja did. It's better to commit suicide than to live dying. I know that I am sick, very sick. It isn't true what they tell me: they all deceive me, reassure me with useless words. My God, it's the fear, the dizziness, the void, I feel myself dying already. The back of my neck is becoming stiff and cold, cold. This must be what dying is like. My heart is suffocating me; it is galloping away at an incredible pace.

Calm down, calm down. It's only your nerves, Lucía; it's your fear that makes you fantasize. Keep writing. Concentrate on how the felt pen glides over the paper. It is a pleasure to trace the curve of the *j*. The paper is satiny, and the pen writes very well. Breathe deeply. Relax your muscles, dry the cold sweat on your forehead. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. That's better. The heart returns to its calm rhythm. You see, it's only your nerves. Panic must be overcome; you must manage to reduce it to simple fear, which is always controllable. Write. Think about something else. María de Día has gone, she came yesterday to say good-bye. I have to divert my thoughts. I'm hysterical. Sometimes I think I'm mad. They couldn't be anything but threads of madness, these crises of terror that invade me from time to time. Without warning or transition: suddenly I am filled with horror, and I feel the ground giving away at my feet. Don't think about it. María de Día came to say good-bye, she's so affectionate, I don't remember exactly what day it was. Calm, Lucía, calm.

I would like to smoke a cigarette, even though it has been years since I last smoked. I could have asked Ricardo for one, what a pity. You must realize this is ridiculous; since you've been here you have believed you were suffering from a million different illnesses: cancer, meningitis, and now a degenerative senility. Don't be an idiot. This is it! I don't want to go over this anymore. I have to force myself to think about something else. The sky is clear, and since the sun is so low already, it enters through the window at a slant and leaves a gold patch on the wall. And the part about the

books, my aversion to dead authors . . . I'm mad. Concentrate on anything else. What will I get for dinner? The worst they can do is bring liver again. I'm going to ask María de Noche for some ice cream. Strawberry-vanilla. So good. Delicious. Before long, María de Noche will come, she'll turn on the lights and bring you your dinner and the ice cream. You'll see how the fear will completely disappear.

María de Día came to say good-bye the other day. It was sad, really. She came in dressed in her street clothes, without her white gown, and she seemed like a different person. So tiny, so thin; such a little girl. She seemed in good spirits, joking away the whole time, but at the end she grabbed my hand, and tears came to her eyes. I was saying good-bye to my only friend in this place where I may be for life. I felt as though I were saying my last good-byes after being given a life sentence. "I want you to be happy," I told her. And she answered me, "But Lucía, I'm going to see you again real soon. I'll visit you when I come to see my cardiologist, and you know that has to be very soon." Her leaving was very hard for me, I will miss her very much. The new daytime nurse is a towering young fellow who walks with a forward lean, as if there were a perpetual hurricane pulling him along. He has a crooked nose and tiny eyes, which give him a half-rascal, half-boyish air. He is timid, silent, and unfriendly. I think his name is Paolo and that he's Italian, but Ricardo has decided to name him Al Capone in honor of his dislocated nose and his apprentice-gangster look. Ricardo brought in a paper cone of roasted chestnuts this morning – who knows how he managed it – and we ate them with greedy pleasure.

"These are soooo good," I gloated nostalgically. Chestnuts taste like winter to me, like scratchy wool school socks, like the old man on the corner who sold penny candy from a wicker basket, like the tugging at my head each morning when my mother brushed my hair. They remind me of so many things . . . There was a lady who sold chestnuts at the corner by my house . . . my parents' house . . . That was so long ago . . .

"Lucía's chestnut," Ricardo was mumbling with his mouth full.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Instead of Proust's madeleine, Lucía's chestnut." Ricardo repeated his nonsense, distractedly spitting out bits of skin and peel with each word. "By the way, how are your memoirs coming along? You must be almost finished, right? What are you going to write next?"

I shrugged my shoulders wearily.

"I haven't started Easter Sunday yet . . . I haven't written any more than what you've already read. I just . . . I don't feel too good; I get very tired. I don't know, suddenly my mind goes blank, and I can't concentrate. It's as if I felt a sort of dizziness without being dizzy, do you know what I mean? It's not just my head that spins now; more than anything it's my thoughts, my memories that spin."

"I'm not the least bit surprised. You're sick and tired of being here. You're exhausted from the everyday routine. Let's just say it's an existential vertigo. It happens to me sometimes, in spite of the fact that I don't have to bear conditions as unfavorable as yours. The doctors know about it. I think they even have a technical term for it, some kind of syndrome; after a prolonged stay at a hospital it always surfaces: the exhaustion, the apathy, the mental confusion."

"It does, doesn't it?" I saw that Ricardo put his finger on it. "It's true, being in the hospital for so many months really breaks one down."

"Of course, dear, everyone knows it. People enter hospital wards perfectly healthy and come out destroyed and sickly. That's why I stay away."

We laughed together, and I took his hand.

"By the way, Ricardo, you haven't told me what you thought about what you read last."

"Yes, I did. I told you that I liked it, that you had managed to plunge me into the action, and that I was dying to see how the story ended."

"But you haven't said anything critical," I insisted. "Now that I think about it," I added, suddenly suspicious, "you haven't criticized anything I've written for a long time. How come?"

"That's not exactly true, dear, but it is true that you have been behaving better lately. What I mean is that you are listening to me, a very judicious attitude on your part, by the way, and you're following all my literary advice. And with such a dedicated student, what more can one say?"

"You're as conceited as ever, Ricardo."

He leaned over and touched my forehead. "I envied Miguel, did you know that? I envied him terribly in the last part that you wrote. I would have liked to have occupied the place he has in your memoirs."

"Don't you worry, silly. The next thing I write will be a diary about my stay in the hospital. I have been taking some notes for it, and you can be sure, I am saving the starring role for you.

"At last!" he exclaimed with exaggerated nonsense. "I had tried everything, I didn't know what else to do to deserve the honor . . ."

His candid jealousy of Miguel, so out of context, touched me. It has been seven years since Miguel died, and it's hard to believe that I've been able to adjust to living without him. The first attack came while he was teaching. He fell to the floor unconscious, and when they called me he was already in the hospital. I remember seeing him for the first time in that small bed that barely fit him. He, who had never been sick, who was my fortress and my refuge, had suddenly been transformed into a large broken doll, into a fragile, frightened being. He was about to turn sixty-four, the same age as Ricardo is now. But he was younger and healthier, although that, now that I think about it, is ridiculous to say about someone who is dead. True, he was a little stout, for over the years he had acquired a soft, mature belly that I grew to love dearly. But he was always tall, erect, and agile . . . so handsome with his premature and gloriously white curly hair, his silver beard, and his lively face, imprinted with a maze of fine wrinkles. And those chubby, healthy cheeks that puffed out delightfully when he laughed. He was as handsome as ever; women turned in the street to look at him, and his female students sent him passionate letters, which he read with a wry, tender expression on his round face.

But when I arrived at the hospital that day, I saw that he had

turned into an old man. He was ashen, a wax face stained only by the swollen eyebrow he had split on the table when he fell. Half his face was paralyzed, and the mouth was twisted downward in a strange, pained grin. His left cheek had lost its fullness, and the eye was half-closed. When he saw me arrive he moaned quietly, and his fear broke my heart. I put my hand in his, as always, but he couldn't even squeeze it. So I caressed him and told him meaningless stories. I dried the sweat on his forehead, pampered him as a mother would pamper a frightened child, and managed to diminish somewhat the panic brimming in his eyes. Two days later there was another attack, and the doctors told me there was no hope. I cried so much that I thought I would go blind, and when I ran out of tears the worst was yet to come. Because he was strong and healthy. He fought it for the six weeks it took him to die, six weeks and two days.

At first the condemnation to death of someone so close to you produces a cataclysm in your own life. Everything normal clouds over and disappears, routines fall apart; you quit eating and sleeping; the hours lose their meaning, and you can barely tell the difference between night and day. But when the agony continues, there comes a time when you acquire a sinister familiarity with death: you resume the small daily chores, and you discover that you are strangely capable of continuing to live normally, in spite of the uneasiness. That is why, when he finally died, he did it without waiting for me, he died alone. They told me when I arrived at the hospital. It was the same nurse who must have communicated so many other deaths – the same nurse with a professionally sorrowful expression. The only thing I could do was to go in and see him. See his consumed body, so strange, so different from the Miguel I knew. He had been unconscious for quite a few days, and they assured me that he hadn't regained consciousness, that he was unable to feel anything. But not having been with him during his last moments filled me with a deep bitterness. Miguel, my much-loved Miguel, my sweet Miguel, how I've missed you since then.

I suppose I must have been thinking about all this in Ricardo's presence, my memory having been sharpened by his comments,

because my expression apparently saddened without my knowing it.

"Eh, what is it, my dear, that has given you such a sorrowful face?"

With nostalgia I talked to him about Miguel, I talked about Miguel for a long time, maybe tactlessly, and Ricardo listened patiently. Afterward, he began to make sly insinuations in his soft, innocent manner.

"Dear Lucía, I am the first to acknowledge that Miguel was an extraordinary man. Generous, affectionate, and, yes, he did possess a certain charm. Nevertheless . . ." he doubted, "nevertheless, Lucía, I'm afraid you are idealizing his memory."

"Idealizing?"

"Yes . . . you seem to have forgotten the true relationship you had with him. I remember, I remember perfectly some of the conversations we had during those years. I remember when you used to tell me that you got bored with Miguel. I remember that on occasions when you were living together you became desperate."

"That's absurd, don't talk nonsense."

"You came very close to separating a couple of times."

"Only once. And that's normal. Listen, when you live more than twenty years with someone you go through crises, crises that at times don't stem from the relationship itself, but from outside problems. That time it was my fault. I had been looking for a producer for five years, and I felt depressed, desperate . . . besides, living together isn't easy . . . suddenly I felt like I was losing touch with myself . . . I don't know, it was an unlucky streak, a bad period . . . but things improved, and we went on, even closer than before."

"And you were often unfaithful to him."

"That isn't true. I was never unfaithful to him. What I call unfaithful. When you live with the same person for so long, what difference does it make if you have other fleeting relationships? He had them, too, and it never altered the relationship a bit."

"Miguel loved you very much."

"And I loved him enormously," I responded irritably. "What are you trying to insinuate?"

He gazed thoughtfully at me for a moment.

"All right, dear Lucía, let's drop the subject. We aren't going to argue about this right now . . . maybe you are right, and anyway it doesn't matter now."

I realized that he was a little hurt, marvelously jealous of Miguel, and with pleasure I agreed to change the subject. Dear Ricardo, as transparent as glass.

"Besides," he smiled mysteriously, "I have something to tell you that you might find quite amusing."

"Really? What is it?"

He leaned back in his chair with a satisfied smile of anticipation.

"Come on, Ricardo, don't be a pest. What is it?"

"I saw Hipólito."

"You're kidding. Did you talk to him? Where?"

"No, no, no, I didn't talk to him. Either he didn't recognize me, or he didn't care to recognize me, or he simply didn't see me. He's as blind as a mole, his glasses are this thick," and he marked off an impossible three inches in the air with his thumb and index finger.

"But, where did you see him?"

"It was crazy, you'll see. After I left here yesterday I went into one of the neighborhood coffee shops to get a bite to eat. I began listening to an absurd conversation behind me, and so, you know how curious I am, I turned discreetly to see who it was. You can imagine my surprise when I saw it was Hipólito."

"You're sure it was him?"

"Positive. He was right by me, at the next table, and, besides, I've seen him on television too many times. I recognized him immediately."

"Was he alone?"

"No. Didn't I tell you I heard a conversation? That was the mystery: he was with a really young woman whose expression told me she was either frightened or immensely bored. Hipólito was sprawled across the table, the front of his shirt hanging in his

coffee, either in order to see her clearly without the help of his glasses or propelled by the energy he was burning in his effort to win her, I'm not sure which."

"But, was he winning her?"

"What do you think? He was saying in a thundering whisper, 'Baby . . .'"

"It isn't possible."

"Shh, listen for a minute. He was murmuring, 'Baby, I can take control of your mind.'"

"It isn't possible."

"And there's more still. He was saying, 'My name is Hipólito, baby, from Hipolitus-Hipoliti, but I think of you as an intimate friend, baby, and my friends call me H.'"

"And his friends call him what?"

"H."

"It isn't possible."

"And he kept murmuring stupidities. 'Baby, I don't want to deceive you, I'm married,' and 'Baby, you inspire me. You know I'm a very well-known writer,' and 'Baby, you aren't listening.'"

"And the girl?"

"Well, just that, she looked distracted, or, better said, bewildered and dying to escape."

"I can't believe it, Ricardo, you're lying. Hipólito was much more intelligent than that," I commented, suspicious but delighted.

"Well, that's how it was. And through it all, between whispers, Hipólito would gasp, half-asphixiated, and draw on his asthmatic spray bottle."

"So he's still wheezing . . . what a nightmare . . . then what happened?"

"Nothing. The girl muttered 'Excuse me' at a choice moment, the only thing I heard her say the whole time, sprang to her feet, and threw herself into the arms of a boy who had just entered the coffee shop."

"And what did Hipólito do?"

"He gasped a bit, inhaled once or twice from the bottle, groped around the table for his glasses, put them on, and left."

"But, why didn't you talk to him?"

"What for?"

I thought back for a moment.

"Ricardo, it's a lie," I finally said. "It's a lie. I've seen Hipólito on television many times, and he doesn't wear glasses, he sees perfectly well."

"That's because he's vain, dear, and in order to present his successful writer image to the public, he takes them off . . . He's myopic and vain."

I burst out laughing; I was surprised to still feel a small, evil pleasure in the face of Hipólito's weaknesses. I hadn't thought about him for years. I believe writing my memoirs has refreshed my memories and emotions.

"Poor Hipólito," I bubbled.

Ricardo scrutinized me maliciously.

"And so you still gain some pleasure from his decay," he said. "You are surprising, Lucía, so many years have passed . . . and if I tell you that everything I've told you is a lie? That it was only a trap to demonstrate the irrationality and persistence of your resentments?"

I felt angry and irritated at having fallen once again into one of his traps.

"I already told you I didn't think it was true, that you were inventing it all . . . you are incorrigible, I don't know what you get out of lying about such absurd things . . ."

He laughed.

"Well, your intuition has failed you once again, my dear, because the anecdote is the strict truth."

And he looked at me with a teasing spark of conspiracy dancing in his eyes. I am so fond of Ricardo! I don't know why it was so difficult for us to get to know each other. How could we have spent more than thirty years being so indifferent? This difficult time in the hospital has at least served for something, for reacquainting myself with Ricardo, for caring for each other in a good way. When I leave here I don't want to live alone. I am going to suggest to him that we live together. The possibility of beginning a new

life, at my age, seems miraculous to me, a gift of destiny: it fills me with energy and strength. I haven't felt so alive since Miguel died. When I think about my fears, they seem ridiculous and stupid; they weaken and fade away.

Al Capone just came in to give me my shot, and I found it strange that I didn't have to go to my radiation session first. He told me that we aren't going, that they aren't going to give me any more rays, and that it looks as if they are going to change my treatment. I got scared. It's absurd, I know, but one little alteration of the hospital routine frightens me. Al Capone says it must be that I'm better, but he doesn't know anything. That poor idiot never knows what's going on, that's certain. Tomorrow the doctor will come to see me, the doctor in person, he told me, and she will explain everything. But all that just frightens me. A change in treatment must mean the illness has also changed. Is it a positive or negative development? Maybe they are dropping the radiation because they can't manage to finish off the damn virus. Maybe my illness is incurable. The new treatment could be painful. What's more, I'm beginning to fear the worst, I'm beginning to suspect that they'll have to operate. Drill into my head . . . cut through the cranium with a laser. I reread the notes that I took from the medical book: "Treatment for grave cases of Ménière's disease, the most intense form of which consists of an incapacitating disorder, must be surgical. There are various techniques for destroying the labyrinth, but there exists the inherent danger of damaging the auditory system. An intracranial incision of the vestibular component of the eighth pair is recommended." Intracranial. They cut through the cranium with a laser. They'll leave me deaf. There isn't anything more ridiculous or exasperating than a deaf old lady. Operations scare me. They cut through the cranium, rassss, with a laser. I'll never leave here, ever. My God, it's unbearable to think of being in doubt until tomorrow. And Al Capone can't tell me a thing, or he won't. Al Capone, by the way, is the new day nurse. With these upheavals I almost forgot to talk about María de Día's farewell. She finally went away. She came to tell me good-bye, dressed in her street clothes. It's strange how people

change with their clothes; without her white smock she seemed even more a little girl. She was chattering away like a little parrot, flustered and nervous, and later she took my hand to say goodbye. I was touched. I envied her freedom, her youth. I'm sure I'll never see her again. And so I told her, "Be happy," and she paled and mumbled I don't know what excuses as she slid out the door. How difficult, how agonizing all this is.

December 9

I was walking in the garden, and for a moment I managed to forget everything. The weather is beautiful and clear. A bright, crisp winter sun is shining, and the breeze stings my cheeks. The ground is parched from the frost, but underneath it stores new seeds, seeds for the young lawn that will be born next spring. The morning was so beautiful that it took my breath away, and I was almost happy. I tried to open every pore and trap the morning air. I would have liked to have melted under the weak sun – grasp the moment between my teeth. But since my legs fail me and these days I get exhausted, I had to return to bed. In spite of it all I feel such a greed for life; I am amazed that before I wasn't able to treasure the infinite joy of what it means to have an unlimited future. If I could recapture all the time that I've been numb and

unaware of life, if I had saved all the days I squandered away in tedium, I would have many years of hope ahead of me. But that is impossible because I am dying.

I write that I am dying, and I feel nothing, or almost nothing. The capacity human beings have for anesthetizing themselves is incredible. I talk about my death as though it didn't exist, as though it weren't mine – emptying my mind of any comprehension. But then, of course, there is the horror, that horror that is continually lurking in the background, the dark wells of fear into which I fall whenever I do comprehend my death. It's strange, but when the doctor first told me, I couldn't believe it. My brain understood the words, but my body rejected them. At that instant I felt suspended in midair, frozen, as though I were trapped by a bad dream. I could have sworn my heart stopped, that all the cells in my body ceased their activities for a few seconds. And later I started to understand . . . to understand that I am dying. That there is something strange in my head that is devouring me little by little. In my head, here inside. I touch it, I notice the ears are smooth and warm. The hair, a little rough. The cranium, hard. Underneath the cranium is my brain, alive, ALIVE, thinking, pulsating. And that monster is crouched somewhere, devouring me. Me. Here inside. It is killing me. Killing. Me. It is me. Terror. Trembling. Darkness. I can't. It is the fear, my fear, my death . . . me dying alone, me completely alone and facing my death.

It's over now. My hands are trembling, and my pen is shaking. But it's over now. The apprehension, the black well has passed. And it really is black, because fear is a dark color. When panic drowns me everything becomes unreal, and I am unable to make out my surroundings. It is as though the room has become shadowed, as though I were blinded by terror. During those anguishing moments my body trembles violently, as though it were trying to escape from me and my destiny. This poor body of mine, this damn body that is killing me.

It is already four-fifteen. Already. The morning, so beautiful and sunny, is over. It passed. It escaped through my hands. This flight of time makes me crazy. It is four-twenty. I've lost five

minutes. Five more minutes. Four twenty-two. I will go crazy if I keep on like this. Think about something else. Write about something else. Please.

Ricardo has known about the tumor for a long time. But he didn't know how fast things were happening until recently. How fast. Ricardo advised that they tell me everything. At times I manage to accept his decision as the right thing, but usually I curse him. My life has been so different since I found out. I look back, and this last week seems never-ending. And yet time is speeding by, escaping me. Four twenty-seven. Lucía, Lucía. I suppose I prefer knowing the truth, because it gives me the opportunity to learn to die well. It's a lie, one never learns that. Death is an aberration, an injustice.

Ricardo stayed at my side for days. We were quiet for hours, holding hands, and only the intensity of my grasp could communicate my waves of terror. Later I recovered my speech and some vitality: we are all much stronger than we think. Ricardo comes every day, he sits at my side, tells me funny stories and jokes; he muddles my thinking with his chatter. At times I forget. And later, in the middle of a phrase, it comes back to me, like a pinch, the reality of my death.

"Lucía, my dear, don't suffocate yourself with terror. Relax, death isn't such a horrible thing, it can't be," says Ricardo. "We all die, Lucía, all of us, since the beginning of life. Billions and billions of human beings have had to die, thousands of people are dying every day, at this moment. Death is a natural thing, so familiar to us, so everyday that it can't be terrible, Lucía, it isn't. Try and search through the corners of your body. Surely you'll find the simplicity somewhere, the acceptance of death. You have to stay calm, Lucía, forget that you are going to die as I myself forget that I, too, will die. Try and live every day without fear, because death is a natural occurrence, and you will prepare for it naturally."

At times his words relieve me, they console me, make me feel something that resembles acceptance. But on other occasions everything he tells me seems absurd and useless. At times I look at him and think: "He talks like that because he doesn't have it. He

doesn't have the tumor in his head. Not in his." It is already a quarter to five.

At least, thanks to the injections, it will be a death without pain. The doctor promised me, she swore to it. It will be a soft darkening, a mist, a progressive confusion, a slow loss of contact with the world. In reality I am lucky. Like Ricardo says, I should feel more calm and serene than other people. Because I know my death, I am in control of it, and they are left to fate.

"You already know that I believe knowledge provides power," says Ricardo. "And that's why you should never tell everything you know."

How absurd life seems when I look at it now. Why have I made the effort, why have I felt, loved, hated, suffered? Where will all my memories, everything I know, all the life I have in my head come to rest? The books I have read, the movies I have seen, the knowledge I so eagerly acquired, the maturity, the experience. It took me so many years to build the person I am, and now all that will disappear, it will disintegrate without a trace. Where will all the instants that only I lived and only I remember go to rest? And my emotions, my weaknesses, my loves? At death not only do I die but my whole life disappears. The teddy bear I loved so much when I was little disappears. My memories of Miguel's tenderness disappear. The house I was born in and which now survives only in my memories disappears. And in a few years, when Ricardo and Rosa and the others die, no one will know of my existence. It will be as though I was never even born. The stupid injustice of life. I have to finish writing my memoirs, I have to do it. So that something of me is left to save part of me from the nothingness. To engrave in time those days during which I existed intensely, those acute moments of my Delta Function. I must finish my memoirs, I must outlive myself. Although, in reality, why does it matter? It is useless to write pages that won't exist for me when I no longer exist.

Evening is coming, and the sun is slipping away from me. Soon María de Noche will enter with my dinner. I don't know why, but I have a craving for *chanquetes*, those tiny salted, charred fish. They

should serve me my favorite dishes, they should ask me what my wishes are, as they do for those who are condemned to capital punishment. Strawberries. I'll never eat strawberries again. I won't make it to the season. Red strawberries, juicy strawberries, fresh strawberries, with whipped cream. With orange juice and lots of sugar. My God, I would give anything to be able to eat strawberries. I always bought the first little baskets when they arrived at the market. They would appear unexpectedly one morning, adorning the fruit stands on the street with a splotch of bright red. Damn this life, damn everyone.

If I were courageous I would have committed suicide. Where did Doña Maruja get such strength, such spirit? I'm incapable. Suicide means you know the very minute you are living is your last. Your last. The most horrible thing is this feeling of saying good-bye to yourself. It would be better if someone killed me and I didn't know anything about it. Someone to kill me while I am sleeping. I go to bed today, and someone smothers me during the night. No, not smother. Someone gives me an injection. It would be best if they mixed the evening sedative with a slow, painless poison. I go to sleep thinking I'll wake up, and everything ends right there. But no, I don't want – I don't want them to kill me, I want to live tomorrow, I want to go on living.

I hate them. How I hate them. They are healthy, they aren't condemned to death like I am. Had I only known! Why didn't anyone warn me about this when I was young? What I just wrote is absurd, I know. My mind feels foggy, and I think another headache is beginning. But I didn't know I was going to die. When I was young I believed I was immortal.

If someone had told me what all this was like! I would have escaped. Fled to an internal island, fled from the fear and myself. If they had told me I was going to die I would have lived differently. Lucía, poor Lucía, my poor little Lucía!

The worst, the truly horrible part was when they stopped all of my treatment. What desolation. What cruelty. The cruelty of healthy beings. They took away the radiation, the medicine. It was to admit openly that all was lost, finished. Why didn't they lie to

me, why didn't they pretend there was still hope? They have abandoned me, everyone has. They have left me alone on a sinking boat in a shark-filled ocean. Now it is just a question of time. Will the shark's bite hurt much? Or will I drown before the monster swallows me? They shouldn't have told me the truth. They think I am strong and adult. Why do I have to be strong? I am weak . . . I feel so weak. Fragile, fragile. Sinking into the ocean. No one can help me, and I'm scared. I feel the same as I did the first night I stayed home alone. My parents had gone to the movies, or to dinner. I awakened suddenly to the darkness; everything around me is full of whispers. I know I'm alone and that no one will come to save me. I sit up in bed and open my eyes wide, trying to pierce the darkness. It is a dense, terrifying darkness, loaded with creaking and other suspicious noises. I am so afraid that I run from my room and stumble into my parents'. I turn on the reading lamp . . . a small lamp with a bronze stand and a chiffon shade. It gives off a warm rosy light. My feet are freezing. I have small, smooth white feet. When I play dress-up in my mother's high heels my tiny feet swim in the enormous boat-sized shoes. But tonight I don't want to play, tonight I am afraid, and my feet are completely frozen. I am seated on the bed, next to the lamp, my back to the wall, watching the darkness that is lurking at the other side of the frail circle of light. I don't know why, but I extend a hand and grab my mother's bottle of perfume, a bottle of Woods of the Orient that has always seemed magical and beautiful to me. I open the box and take out the small flask. It is half-full of a caramel-colored liquid, and floating inside there are two tiny pieces of wood, two small chips, attached by a red string. I take off the rectangular crystal top, and the aroma, a delicious, sweet aroma, calms me somewhat. I remain there for hours, precariously shielded by the delicate maternal smell, peering with terror at the horribly dark opening that is the door. I don't dare move, I don't dare breathe, I keep my eyes wide open. But, nevertheless, I have fallen asleep, and suddenly there are shadows bending over me. I am startled, the little bottle of perfume shatters against the floor. I scream, someone hugs me, caresses me, and I recognize

my mother; she smells wonderful, like lipstick, cologne, and warm skin, and her silk suit rustles against me. Between her arms the world calms, the shadows are no longer shadows, and fears crumble. They don't even scold me for having broken the flask of perfume, and my father gives me the chips of wood attached with string that smell so much like her. Such a profound calmness, such an intense relief.

December 11

December eleventh. I am reading my last entry in my journal and am terrified to see that two days have passed since I wrote this. I remember how I drew the letters on the paper, "such an intense relief." Period. And almost two days have already passed. Or more precisely, since then I have lost forty hours, because now it is 11:00 A.M., and I feel well, calm, clear, sharp. I don't feel concern or fear, only rage. Dying infuriates me; I am indignant, exasperated. I can't stand the idea that the world will go on without me, the idea that I won't see Ricardo ever again. This is crazy, it is Ricardo who won't see me again. Get it, Lucía? You are the one who is dying. The problem is that I can't picture not being, the nothingness, the complete end. I think about death as if it were a negation of myself, I see myself floating in a black void, blind and mute. But I

know it won't be like that; I know that I won't exist, that nothing will be nothing. Impossible, incomprehensible.

Fortunately, my fear of reading works by deceased authors has passed. I think that fear was dictated by my body; my body knew I was dying, and that was how it was warning me. Now that everything is out in the open and the tears have been shed, I am greedily rereading my favorite books. I see myself in their pages, and I rub elbows with the renowned who have passed on. At times I search their words for the key to their agonies, for their resources, their fortitude, their potential strategy for dying . . . because I have to learn to die, and I don't have much time left to do so.

It's strange, but during the last few days I have developed a morbid pleasure in the sinister, asking myself gloomy questions and imagining my agony. Sometimes I hold my breath and watch my hands, my thighs, my little finger. My smallest finger is pale and pink; it is covered with fine wrinkles and has fuzz on the first joint. My little finger moves, it is warm, it bends, it twists, it scratches my ear, it throbs, it has muscles, it straightens. My little finger will be worm food very shortly. Green worms will cross this pale-pink flesh that I am watching and touching now. The skin will split, rot, all of me will decompose in the midst of nauseating odors. And my fingernails? Will those hungry worms eat fingernails also? Or will they drop to the bottom of the coffin and lie there next to my fleshless bones?

Al Capone is terrified. He is too young, and he can't stand the thought of a dead woman who still speaks, who still insists on moving, eating, and grumbling as I do. He enters the room trembling and moves about like a ghost, avoiding my gaze. I suppose I must seem immodest and indecent to him. From time to time I allow myself some type of revenge against his insipid health, against his clumsy youth, against the horror I cause him and the irritation he causes me. Yesterday, as I contemplated the rain through the window, I said to him: "Do you think it'll clear up? I would like to die on a sunny day, and if it doesn't clear up soon I won't be able to." The poor imbecile came to a halt, gaped at me for a moment, and disappeared from the room in a terrified rush.

I have requested that they let me go home. I can't stand the idea of never leaving here again, of never again seeing the walls that have kept me company for years and years – the trinkets, the souvenirs. It isn't the usual medical routine, but then my case isn't a routine one, and in the end they agreed. Ricardo has promised to give me the injections, to watch over me. I told him yesterday, after a somewhat calm, painless afternoon.

"I don't want to die alone, Ricardo."

He squeezed my hand with that calm smile he always manages to maintain.

"I'll be with you."

"Promise me you aren't going to grow accustomed to my dying," I insisted. "That even if this lasts months you won't leave me alone, like I left Miguel."

"Don't you worry, Lucía, my dear."

But when I saw his confidence, I understood.

"You know it's going to be quick, is that it?" My throat tightened, and the fear came.

I think they are finally letting me go tomorrow. Tomorrow morning. Seeing the city again and reacquainting myself with my apartment fills me with an inexplicable happiness. It's a shame I never repainted the living room; it would be prettier, homier. I won't have time to do it now, nor will I be able to order the new shelving. What will happen to my furniture, my clothes, and my things? I am going to sign all my books, all my records and cassettes, all the videos I have, and I am going to give them away, signed, so that when they watch them, hear them, or read them they'll remember me. At times it brings me to tears when I remember there was a time when I was young. I think that is why it has been so long since I have written about the past, because it hurts to see myself in my thirties again, full of illusions, so vulnerable in my passion for life, so ignorant of the pain to come. In these moments of sadness I love myself as I know no one else has ever come to care for me. How absurd, I feel as though I were saying good-bye to myself, and I just discovered that I am my own best friend. I have this ridiculous feeling that I am going miss myself very much.

But cheer up, Lucía. Tomorrow you'll be able to sit on your couch again and step out on the balcony to watch the old elevated bridge once more. I am going to throw away my card from Friends of the Resistance, that club of old people who promise to accompany each other in death. I signed up during a moment of weakness and anguish, after Miguel was gone, but I was never capable of attending an anonymous person's vigil the three or four times the Friends called me.

The club was only a buffer against fear, and now there's Ricardo. Ricardo will come to live with me, and it will be as though everything were starting anew, a brief, wonderful domestic life, a full life, last as it will.

Last night I had another attack of terror. Nights are awful, ominous. I rolled about in bed, penned in, and I think I even screamed. Suddenly the light came on and startled me with the vision of a world that was still in place, of a room that had kept its same solid order. It was María de Noche who had turned on the light, who was calmly and quickly coming toward me. She leaned her aged face over me and dried my forehead with a soft caress, with a sweet, protective, maternal hand.

"Peace, Lucía, peace."

Her words were a gentle murmur, and her calm gaze silenced my anxiety: that deep, knowing gaze, hardened from having seen many deaths, many fears.

"Calm, Lucía . . . You know, I have taken care of many people in your same situation," she mused. "Men and women, young and old . . . And you know, I was always struck by the fact that the older the patients, the more fear they experience. Young people, barely in their twenties, have died in my arms; it was I who closed their eyes. Kids who came to accept the end calmly, who resign themselves to death. But what anguish, what terror I have seen in old people, even in those who have already lived a long, full life. Calm, Lucía, calm. It is only a question of reclaiming your innocence, that naturalness of youth. We old people accumulate artificial fears that we have to cast aside. In reality, Lucía, dying is very simple . . ."

Her fingers caressed my forehead like a cool breeze. I remembered my old feelings toward her, how distant she had always seemed, and I realized that I had finally come to know her. And I cried. I cried, relieved by my defeat, protected by the wisdom of her hands, understanding that before I wouldn't have been capable of knowing her. Understanding, finally, that María de Noche is really María of the Final Moment.

Sunday

I barely got any sleep that night. I had spent hours contemplating Miguel's back and admiring his peaceful sleep without feeling, surprisingly enough, any irritation. I am referring to that irrational aggressiveness that we usually suffer when condemned to insomnia while the person at our side sleeps, ignorant of our torture. That night, however, I relished Miguel's presence, and when it began to thunder at dawn I snuggled up to his side and enjoyed the clumsy caresses and sleepy kisses that he offered me from the depths of his slumber. The alarm rang at eight because Miguel had to be home early to see his mathematician guest off. I literally had to throw him out of bed and carry him with his sleepy, swollen eyes to the shower for revival. Still wrapped in a somnolent fog, Miguel could only repeat that I should go back to bed,

but I was sick of those sleepless sheets, and I opted to stay on my feet. I went to the door to say good-bye to him, observed him bumping into walls as he disappeared down the stairwell, and at eight-thirty I found myself alone in my house, with a mug of coffee in my hands, as agitated as a fish out of water.

The day had dawned cold and rainy; it was clear that the weather had changed just in time for the night of my opening. I wouldn't be able to wear the thin gauze dress I had planned on, much less the sandals. I was irritated with the weather, but on the whole I felt content and reasonably enthusiastic, anticipating marvelous surprises: I was blessed with an immense, solid future, that, nevertheless, was vanishing rapidly. I was soothing my sleepless stomach with the hot coffee when the telephone shrilled. It was Hipólito. I recognized his voice without surprise, and I waited, proud of my cool indifference.

"I didn't wake you . . ?" he asked cautiously.

"No."

"I was afraid you'd leave and I wouldn't be able to talk to you. The people from the production company called me yesterday, and they said that they had been trying to reach you too but you didn't answer . . ."

I thought of the night before with Miguel, his sweet kisses, the insistent ringing of the phone, and I smiled to myself.

"No, I wasn't home."

"Well, they told me to get a hold of you. We have to be at the theater an hour early because they are going to interview us for the television reviews, and also for some program on the radio. Anyway, they have made an appointment with a bunch of reporters for an hour before the movie, and so I'm calling you so you'll be there."

"Fine. Anything else?"

Hipólito was silent for a moment on the other end of the line, perhaps discouraged by my businesslike tone.

"Oh . . . of course," he finally added. "I . . . I made up with my wife, we've given ourselves a three-month period to try again . . ."

"Perfect. Congratulations," I commented, verifying that the news had left me indifferent.

"Listen . . . I'm sorry about yesterday, Lucía. I was thinking about it later, and I really did not behave brilliantly. I'm sorry, it's just that I felt so badly."

"Don't worry. Until tonight, then."

"Soooo . . . do you want to go to the interview together?"

"And your wife?" I asked maliciously.

"She has to give the kids their dinner. She'll go later, when the movie begins."

"I can tell you're off to a roaring start with this three-month truce."

"Lucía . . ."

"No, Hipólito, I can't. I have a date with a friend, and I'm going with him."

"Fine then, I guess there's nothing else," he hurried to add. "See you later, Lucía."

"See you later."

I hung up and sat looking out the window. The first vacationers were beginning to return from their exodus, and the traffic, a little heavier than before, was crossing the bridge, splashing through the big muddy puddles that covered its surface whenever it rained. The bridge was poorly constructed, even admirably defective, because it is admirable to be able to make water puddle on a surface that is not plane. Now, with the passage of years and the deterioration of the city, the bridge is a ruin. The railing is broken, and the asphalt is cracked so that through its wounds, pieces of the inner steel structure are visible. No one dares to take a stroll on it anymore. Poor bridge, I have the feeling you aren't going to outlive me by much, that you will crumble any day. You will be yet another ruin in this urban ruin, a victim of an ill-funded city hall that lacks the personnel and the means to maintain the large wounded body of this dying city. The municipal budget is barely adequate to keep the old downtown section and a few historical buildings decent enough to maintain the tourist trade. Little by little the city is dying, and its agony is so palpable that since my

return I have been able to detect the deterioration that took place during my months in the hospital. Ricardo drove me around for hours, we toured all the old spots, the streets I love so much.

I returned and saw the brown hedges, the abandoned gardens, the beaten trees, the asphalt crumbling beneath our feet. It was a particularly stormy day, and the wind howled through the deserted streets, carrying papers, twigs, and trash. The doorknockers pounded at the entrances of abandoned houses, and the wind slipped through the broken glass of the storefronts. From time to time we could hear the crash of a piece of molding as it hit the pavement and scattered the street with fragments of mortar. The few pedestrians hurried to reach the middle of the street, obeying the city safety regulations. This poor medieval city is caving in, falling apart, and I am almost relieved to know that she is going to die with me.

The doorbell rang, and it was Rosa, Rosa with a bunch of carnations, more freckled than ever, and tan from her trip.

"Advanced congratulations, Lucía. Since I'm sure it's going to be a success, I've brought you the victory flowers."

I was really happy to see her. Her flowers cheered me, and I appreciated the timidness that always caused her to shelter her presence with gifts. Her smile cheered me . . . her pleasantness, her warmth. When I saw her again, all flustered, with her usual solicitous concern for me, I realized that I didn't deserve her, that my relationship with her was one-sided, and that I never returned the same loving care she had given me. I felt selfish and guilty, and I hurried to ask her about the breakup with José-Joe in an effort to soothe my conscience.

"Yes, Lucía, this time I've definitely decided. I did a lot of thinking while I was alone with all that free time. I am going to break up with him because the relationship is a disaster. It's ridiculous, like having another child in addition to Clara, an especially self-centered child."

"I think it's marvelous," I commented enthusiastically. "You don't know how happy I am about it. Sometimes companionship

can be a thousand times worse than solitude, and, what's more, solitude isn't so terrible."

"It isn't?" she asked doubtfully.

"Look at it this way, solitude is something that none of us likes, but it is there, it has to be confronted, and you have to learn to live with it."

Rosa scratched her cheek thoughtfully while she listened to me talk. She had beautiful hands, large, bony hands that didn't match her round body.

"No, Lucía, don't believe I have it all figured out," she added. "The solitude part, I mean. I am horrified by this society where each day more people are living alone, where each day we are becoming more isolated. I want to stop living with José-Joe and stop fooling myself with those types of absurd relationships, but I don't plan on being alone. There has to be another way to relate to people, Lucía, other ways of living that are better. I don't want to live alone, and I won't do it."

I was astonished; it was one of the longest and most energetic speeches I had ever heard from Rosa.

"But . . . and so?" I asked, confused.

"I don't know . . . what do I know?" she said irritably. "For now I think I'm going to move and get a bigger apartment with Olga. You know Olga," she said with a timid, apologetic smile. "She's one of the girls from our 'harem', as you like to call it."

"All right," I sighed. "You are crazy. You're going to share an apartment with a friend, as though the two of you were adolescent students? That's crazy, now that you can finally enjoy your own house, your own space . . ."

"I don't know . . ." Rosa's firmness had dissolved, and once again she was hesitant and stumbling. "I . . . it's probably cowardly, running away from things, but I don't want to live alone. Besides, I don't think it's necessary."

"But, Rosa, I can't believe that you actually like living with a mob of people . . . are you really happy at that farm, surrounded by so many women and with scarcely enough time for yourself?"

"Yes, Lucía, I'm quite happy."

What does it mean to be quite happy? Being healthy, being accompanied, being free, living life on your own terms? I envy her happiness, and her ill-timed letter has hurt me.

Dear Lucía,

You don't know how happy I am that you are feeling better and that you haven't suffered those bothersome dizzy spells for a long time. And your headaches? How are they? You must get well very soon. We are all waiting for you here. Carolina wants to make a delicious apple cake for you (do you still have a sweet tooth?) . . . It's a German recipe, her specialty, and she wants to prepare it to celebrate your arrival. Carolina says hospitals are horrible and that with her care you would be on your feet again, and I am sure she is right.

There is snow on the ground now, and it is cold but beautiful. At night we build a big fire, and the whole house smells like pine and sap. Fix everything so you can come in the spring, and if they won't let you leave the hospital, escape. Beginning in April it is marvelous, just taking walks around here and getting some air would cure you completely, I'm sure of it. What you wrote about Ricardo amazed me. He is very tender, Ricardo is. I really appreciate him. He is a strange, difficult man, but I think we are all strange and difficult. We'll have to try the ginseng idea, anyway, even though we know how many stories Ricardo tells. It has been a while since I have practiced "the pleasures of the flesh," but don't go thinking it has been that long, either. It is quiet around here, but friends are always visiting. Take good care of Ricardo, and tell him I said to take good care of you, although it seems he is already doing so. Tell him to come with you – it would be splendid, and there is room for everyone in the house. Yes, Lucía, I am quite happy. Life here is very simple, and I feel surrounded and protected by my people. Of course, we have our discussions, our differences, our moments when we seem to hate one another, our low times. Sometimes, on an especially beautiful evening, a kind of longing overcomes me, the melancholy of not having a man at my side, of not having aged next to a companion I could identify with and who knew me to the very core. You know, that was the ideal future I always wished for. But that, Lucía, is only a dream.

I'll leave you for now. Alain twisted his ankle (nothing serious, don't

worry) playing in the loft, and he gets awfully bored in bed. He has been screaming at me for hours to come tell him a story. The inconveniences of having a grandson. Keep writing me, I love your letters. And get your suitcases ready for spring. A kiss from Clara, and an especially big one from me.

Love,

Rosa.

I also have been happy, happy at times. That trip I made with Hipólito, when our love was fresh, when it still hadn't been ruined by bitterness and the magic floated between us. It was summer, we were in search of locations for my movie, and I was overcome with enthusiasm about the filming project. The scorched August countryside was plastered with dry wheat. We had started at daybreak to avoid the crushing heat, and a fresh breeze that smelled of summer and mint fields entered through the open windows. I was driving, and we glided silently over the pavement, a silver pavement that was still warm from the previous day's sun. The sky was bright blue and the air had that cool, shadowy density of early August mornings. Violet, rose, and golden landscapes ran by us, the excitement from the night before lingered over our bodies, and we shivered with pleasure at the fresh breeze blowing through the car. Hipólito was silent, we loved each other, and as we glided freely through the sleeping countryside I felt blessed by its richness.

I won't ever see that countryside or its sunrises again. I won't feel the languor or the crushing heat of summer. August is an eternity away.

I remember one day, when I was still very young, I sensed the terrifying dimensions of the eternal for the first time. I don't know where I was, but it was definitely a mountainous place . . . it could have been fall or spring. There was a lookout that teetered on a precipice, and I approached the barrier alone, an immense wall of rock and limestone that I could barely see over. At the lookout there was a fountain, a jet of water spouting from the rocks and

sprinkling the basin with sparkles of light. I dipped my hand in, and the water seemed colder and wetter than any I had ever felt. The sun was high, and it was shining directly down on me, but its heat didn't lessen the biting coolness of the breeze. The immense sierra stretched out threateningly with its gigantic peaks and valleys, like a huge, jagged wall. Beyond the cold sound of the water I couldn't hear a thing, only the silence of the mountains, which is a silence that has a special sound, a sound of snowstorms and silent echoes. I was looking at the enormous cliffs, which were hiding even more relentless peaks of granite beyond them, and suddenly I saw it. I saw the immensity of the mountain range, and beyond it the earth's, and, farther still, the endless expanse of the universe. It was then that I touched eternity, and, during that flash of ecstasy, I was the earth, I was the frozen mountain range. At that moment I felt an inexplicable dizziness, a terror that twisted my thoughts, I felt I was collapsing inward. I grabbed the rocky edge to keep from falling; its touch was cool and rough, and without stopping to think I stuck my tongue out and licked the limestone. The earthy flavor calmed me; I returned again to my own dimension and forgot the fear. Nevertheless, from that point on I was different; I couldn't return to being the same young girl as before. The sun shone above me, and I understood myself differently.

Rosa was watching me silently, listening to me think. Rosa could always listen with religious attention, not only to confessions but also to reflections.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked softly.

"Mountains, dry countrysides, and eternities."

I looked at her. She was all roundness, her skin soft and her perky freckles scattered across pudgy cheeks. I admired her . . . I admired her for the first time in my life. I admired her sweetness and her silences.

"You know something?" I said. "I think you're right."

"I'm right?" she repeated, amazed. "About solitude? About living with other people?"

"Well . . ." I reconsidered. "Not exactly, because . . . it seems to me, it still seems to me that solitude is always there, and there's no

choice but to live with it, that not knowing how to face it forces you to make too many concessions. But I think you were right about many things . . . about how you formed friendships, about your cluster of friends that I have laughed at so many times. I believe that you, yes, you, have learned how to really care for people, how to listen to them and know them. As you know me. I never gave you the kind of special attention you gave me. I lost you. It was my fault that we grew apart."

Rosa blushed through her freckles and gave me a troubled smile.

"Don't be silly, Lucía. Why would you remember that now, after so many years?" She hurried to change the subject, flustered but pleased, and asked me about my latest romantic misadventures while she squeezed her lower lip between her fingers. I gave her a rundown on the latest happenings, told her about my talk with Hipólito in the bar, about my guilty tears with Miguel.

"Miguel is a wonderful man," she commented, perhaps knowing it was exactly what I wanted to hear.

"Yes, he is." I responded, spilling over with gratitude for her, for Miguel, for the world in general. "I've come to a decision: it's definitely over with Hipólito. I think . . . I think tonight I'm going to propose to Miguel that we live together."

I said it without thinking, and when I heard my own words, fear and desire made me falter. Desire to share and live with someone mixed with the fear of losing my territory, the fragile freedom I have found locked inside the four walls of my home.

My house is absolutely silent. Ricardo has gone to buy food, and I feel suffocated when he is absent. At my side, on the quilt, lies the phone, that magic box that can put me in immediate touch with the supermarket, in search of Ricardo, or with Berta, old Berta, my only neighbor, because now there are only two of us left in this old abandoned building. Berta is much older than I, much older, and nevertheless she is healthy, she is alive. How ironic that it was she who convinced me to join the Friends of the Resistance, and now I am dying while she, wrinkled and solid, stubbornly survives me.

I, however, am being eaten by this sickness. The tumor is growing in my head, eating everything that I am. I've begun to have trouble with my speech. It's peculiar: the words are clear in my mind, yet they get tangled somehow on their way to my mouth. And my eyes, I'm having problems again with my sight: dark spots, fleeting blind areas . . . at times everything around me takes on the color of chrome. I'll end up completely blind, maybe completely deaf, maybe completely immobile, paralyzed in my agony. It doesn't matter. I want to go on living however I can. Lame, paralyzed, useless. I want to go on living. Now I am the Doña Maruja of this abandoned building. That ruin that I used to contemplate with horror from a distance when I was young is now me. Now I am Doña Maruja, but I don't have the strength to be her. I don't understand her desire to die. I don't understand how anyone could commit suicide. I want to live, I want to go on living. Even if I go blind. Even if I become an invalid. Even if it is painful.

It is difficult for me to write and concentrate. Reality is jumbled and confused. But I have to continue, I have to finish these memoirs, I have to finalize this account of my life. Night is falling quickly, hardly any light is coming through the windows, and it seems as if everything is darkening inside of me. Maybe death is like this, the world fading little by little. My feet are freezing, but the idea of getting up to fetch the blanket on the chair makes me weary. I don't even have the energy to turn on the light on the nightstand. It's strange, I suddenly feel like sleeping, or, better said, I feel as though I were already sleeping and all this were a dream. But I must fight the sleepiness, I have to rescue that week from the oblivion of death. My death. Yesterday, or maybe this morning, I don't know when, I was happy. I was listening to music and closing my eyes from time to time in order to prepare myself for the blindness. I was listening to Schubert, and even though it was a cloudy day the room glowed with a golden-gray light, maybe because the sun was shining through the clouds or maybe because my tumor helped me see hues that didn't exist. Sometimes I think that the tumor must be fond of me, after nourishing itself on my body for so long. I listened to Schubert and remembered how I

cried when my first boyfriend broke up with me. I never felt such a clear, intense pain again. I remembered Miguel's timeless embrace that rescued me so many times, and the summer smells of mint and horseflies, and the jet of water from the fountain, shining in the sun like a frozen crystal, and the smell of cinnamon enveloping my mother, and her warm, stable lap, where she lulled me to sleep. I remember when I passed the last exams in high school. I read the results on the board and ran out of the building, jumping for joy in my first pair of high-heeled shoes. The breeze that spring was ecstasy, and I felt very grown up, absolutely in charge of my life. I remembered my first pains of adolescence; my old body was leaving me and changing into something unfamiliar, my chest swelled and pressed against my dress, my hips thickened day by day, and with the physical changes came an indescribable longing for something I had not yet lived, disconsolate, anguishing moods I didn't understand and that I now know were just a human hunger, a hunger for skin, a hunger for love, for death.

And that distant trip to Holland, we were all frighteningly young, when we spent the nights in sleeping bags in the middle of a park, surrounded by greenery and canals, and when we awoke, another shaggy adolescent passed us a joint of hashish and a smile; we felt undivided, strong, capable of creating a beautiful, different world. And the parties, those strange teen encounters where I danced my first dances pressed against boys whom I no longer remember while sweet ballads of the Byrds, Moody Blues, and Leonard Cohen spun on the record player. I felt the warmth of the young body next to mine and shivered with joy and sorrow, sensing I was at the threshold of a marvelous life. I remembered the silent sound of the mountains, and my father telling stories from his childhood at Christmas (my lips tasting of marzipan and sour-cherry candies), and that perfect afternoon I spent in Hipólito's arms after we made love for the first time; it was raining, and we listened to the sound of the water from the peaceful refuge of my bed. I remember the flavor of strawberry ice cream and the crunch of the cone and the first kiss that surprised my lips and the wonderful magic kit they gave me when I was a little girl and diving into

cold blue water in the middle of August and the humid, breezeless nights that the fireflies seemed to swim through. I relived all of this listening to Schubert, and a bittersweet surge of melancholy brought calming tears to my eyes, and I knew that, yes, it was all worth the pain of living and dying. I believe that if death had reached me at that moment, I would have been able to accept the end calmly.

But not today. I still need some time, an extension. At least a week more of my life with all my senses still intact, even if it's only a week: seven days would seem an endless horizon. I have so many things to do, so much to think and write, so much to contemplate and discover. Write, Lucía, finish your memoirs. I feel confused, and I am tired, so tired this evening, this Sunday evening, the sixteenth of December, this cold Easter evening. It is still raining, and the wind is whistling at my window. Miguel should arrive at any moment, and I need to decide what suit I am going to wear, what jewelry. This night has to be my night, my triumph. Tonight will be the beginning of everything. I'll say to Miguel when we get back, let's live together, and I'll hug his lean, bony body. I am young and beautiful, I am in control of my own destiny. And yet I feel so drained, such an unusual exhaustion holds me back. I know there will arrive a moment in which my life will end, in which each day, each hour I steal from death will seem infinite. But right now I am young, I have the whole world ahead of me. Lucía, poor Lucía, they never loved you as much as you wanted them to.

Ricardo is taking a long time, and the wait is beginning to suffocate me; the air is dense and overwhelming, and I feel the drowsiness weighing on my eyelids. The summer sun blinds me, and I feel my taut, dry skin burning . . . my skin like warm bread . . . and the waves splash me, and the air smells deliciously of cool, salty breezes. I need to hurry, I need to keep writing because time is running out, and Miguel will arrive before I've finished getting ready. We shouldn't have made the date for so early because later his wife will be waiting for him at the premiere, and I want to be shockingly beautiful in order to compete with her. I brush my hair, get dressed, and carefully put on my makeup.

When I was young I put on my mother's lipstick and later washed it off with soap . . . but you can still see a stain the color of blood, and my lips sting and swell. I think I hear the elevator, yes, the elevator is coming up, it stops, I hear the doors open and close, it is Ricardo, Ricardo is coming to pick me up. I better hurry, or we won't make it to the opening. But I'm still not ready, I have to finish writing, I still have to put on my best suit, rub in the blush, line my eyes, but the lipstick stain is still making my lips swell, and I can't get it off. I hear the key in the door, Ricardo opens and calls to me. I am so tired the pen slips through my fingers. It's better if I leave my work for tomorrow. I'll call Ricardo in and tell him I want to make love before we go, that I want to search for fuzz in his belly button one more time. But he is taking a long time, I hear him rattling around in the distance, I hear his rasping, asthmatic breathing, his lame, rheumatic steps in the hallway. I don't know what is keeping him. He is taking so long, and I am so alone that I'm going to call him, I'll yell at him to come. Come here, I'll tell him, come here, my friend, my love, hurry, because nightfall is beginning to frighten me.

Afterword

Rosa Montero, born in Madrid in 1951, studied journalism and psychology and, since 1971, has worked in the media, mainly for the Spanish national newspaper *El País*, where she is employed today. Well known in Spain both as a journalist and novelist, Montero won the Premio Mundo for journalistic interviews in 1978 and the Premio Nacional de Periodismo in 1981 for literary articles and documentaries.

Two collections of Montero's interviews, covering everything from internationally known political figures and movie stars to famous Spanish matadors, were published in 1976 (*España para ti siempre*) and 1982 (*Cinco años de país*). Montero has continually maintained strong connections with the literary world through her own writing and her collaboration with theater groups. In

1979 she emerged on the literary scene with *Crónica del desamor* (*Absent Love: A Chronicle*), her first novel to be published in English. Spanish demand for *Crónica del desamor* prompted publication of thirteen editions in four and a half years, and Montero's next two novels, *La función delta* (1981) and *Te trataré como a una reina (I Will Treat You Like a Queen*; 1983) also went through numerous editions. *Te trataré como a una reina* has been translated into Italian and German. In 1988, Montero returned with *Amado amo* (*Loved, I Love*) and most recently, *Temblor* (*Tremor*; 1990).

Controversial issues fill Montero's journalistic work. Her writing includes domestic concerns ranging from commentary on national political scandals or condemnation of the thousands of *madrileños* who strangely abandoned their dogs before going on vacation one summer, to analysis of international issues such as women's rights or euthanasia. But even more difficult questions, or, better said, questions of an unanswerable nature, make up Montero's short narrative pieces. Struggles with aging, death, aloneness, and love are typical of her more contemplative themes. Death is, for Montero, the fundamental theme of both life and literature. She sees life as a "precipice toward death." "The theme of the passage of time has obsessed me since I was very young," she explains, ". . . humans are human against death; we live against death" (letter to the translators, November 8, 1990). Regardless of the topic, Montero seeks the extreme viewpoint that motivates her readers to confront and rethink their own version of the world around them.

In *La función delta*, Montero applies creativity and imagination as she interweaves universal doubts and questions. The use of the double diary – a journal recording the sixty-year-old Lucía's stay in the hospital and a memoir evoking the memory of a crucial week in her life thirty years earlier – brings a futuristic setting to the novel: the memoirs describe events that took place in 1980, so the sixty-year-old woman is keeping her journal in the year 2010. The story of the protagonist as a young woman unfolds during the Easter holiday, a much-celebrated week in Spain, while the narrator-protagonist's story is told over a period of months in the

hospital. Ricardo, her faithful visitor, offers a running commentary of the writing in progress and adds yet another perspective to the "objective" personal commentary of the double diary. Consequently, an important dimension of the story becomes the question of the narrator-protagonist's own reality and how she chooses to remember and record it. Montero herself calls her second novel "an effort to take a step forward in the apprenticeship of narrative." This "apprenticeship" consisted of working with a more complex structure and creating characters who would be "less linear" than those in her first novel, *Crónica del desamor*. Montero's familiarity with the experimental narrative techniques of her time and, more importantly, her willingness to use them are evident in *La función delta*.

Montero wrote her first novels in the late 1970's, when Spain was emerging from Francisco Franco's thirty-year dictatorship. In 1977 Spain held its first general elections in forty-one years, and all aspects of Spanish life that had been so strictly controlled by the conservative national regime were infused with a feeling of openness and modernity. The creation of the constitution, the decriminalization of divorce and homosexuality, the growth of women's rights, and the abolition of censorship opened the way for a rapidly expanding, pluralistic society. Artists and writers were the first to deal openly with many of the social and political issues that had affected their daily lives through the sometimes disorienting transition from a suppressed to a free society. In these years of transition a general feeling of "catching up" has permeated all areas of Spanish life. Rosa Montero's experience as a journalist, and consequently her unique connection with the Spanish political and social scene, makes her fictional accounts of these times especially pertinent.

La función delta was written in the middle of this social, cultural, and artistic movement, coined "la movida" by the Spanish people. Nowhere was "la movida" more evident than in Madrid, where Montero was born and raised. To dismiss Madrid as merely a backdrop in *La función delta* is to miss its significance entirely. The changing city takes on a personality of its own as it becomes

intertwined with the other characters and their development. Like an old lover, this city has obviously become an intimate and active part of the author's real life.

Just as Madrid acts as a springboard for Montero's account of her changing world, so too do the political and social issues that were evolving as the book was being written. In *La función delta* Montero explores many old taboos – homosexuality, women's and older people's sexual pleasure, and death by choice – and at the same time frames the novel with a few all-encompassing human concerns: aloneness, aging, and death. She is part of a new, outspoken group of women writers who deal openly with the conflicts and doubts that many Spaniards, especially women, have faced during the period of transition from dictatorship to democracy. The variety and number of questions posed during this transition, many of a feminist nature, are underscored in *La función delta*. Montero, however, asserts that she does not purposefully write about feminist themes, though she does write, as she says, "from my condition as a woman, and as a feminist in my daily life." Montero explains that her goal is not to write feminist novels but rather "novels that profoundly reflect the human condition."

The reader who enters this author's richly textured world cannot help but be influenced by her fresh presentation of these themes. Montero is not only a talented "chronicler" of her own rapidly changing world, but also a thought-provoking writer who repeatedly challenges her readers with their own reality.

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