

The Shrouded Woman
(As she looks back at her life)
(La Amortajada)

By Maria Luisa Bombal

And after it had gotten dark, her eyes opened. But just a little, very little. It was as if she wanted to look, while she was hidden behind her long eyelashes.

At the flame of the tall candles that leaned over to keep watch on her, and to observe the cleanness and transparency of the border of the eye that death had not been able to cast a pall over. Respectfully dazzled, they leaned over, not knowing that She was able to see them.

Because, in fact, She could both see and feel.

And that is how she looked, motionless, lying face up on the spacious bed now covered with embroidered sheets that were scented with lavender—that were always kept under lock and key—and she is wrapped in that white satin robe that always made her look so graceful.

Her hands can be seen, gently crossed over her chest, pressing on a crucifix; hands that had acquired the frivolous delicacy of two peaceful doves.

And she is not bothered by the thick mat of hair under her neck that, during her illness, had become, minute by minute, more damp and more heavy.

They were finally able to disentangle it, smooth it out, and spread it over her forehead. However, they still had neglected to arrange it carefully.

But she does not forget that the dark mass of her hair spread out that way gives a woman, who is stretched out and sleeping with a look of mystery, an unusual charm.

And she suddenly feels that she is now without even a single wrinkle, more pale, and beautiful than ever.

It gives her a strong feeling of happiness that she can now be admired by those who only think of her devoured by futile worries, languished by sorrows and the biting air of the farm.

And now that they consider her dead they have all come to see her.

There is her daughter, that resilient young girl, proud of her twenty years, with her mocking smile when her mother, who likes to feel that she also is elegant and graceful, as she shows her some old portraits. There are her children who no longer seem to recognize her right to live, her children who were tired of her whims, her children who were embarrassed when they surprised her in the garden while she was sunbathing, her children who were standoffish at the slightest compliment, although they were secretly flattered when their young friends pretended to think she was their older sister.

Then there was Zoila, who knew her since she was born, to whom her mother gave her to raise after that moment. Zoila, who rocked her in her arms after her mother, about to get into the coach and travel to the city, detached her briskly from her overskirt which she clung to, crying.

Zoila, her confidant on bad days; gentle and discreetly forgotten on happy days! There she was, grey-haired, but still lean and fit, and without any discernable sign of old age, as

if the drop of Araucanian blood that flowed through her veins had the gift of maintaining her proud figure.

There were also some old friends, old friends who seemed to have forgotten that once she was slender and happy.

Savoring her childish vanity, she lies there rigid for a long time, submissive to all their looks, as if she was laid bare because of her lack of resistance.

The sound of rain on the trees and the house soon causes her very to surrender herself, body and soul, to that feeling of well-being and melancholy into which the sound of rain always filled her on those long autumn nights.

The rain keeps falling, stubborn, and tranquil. And she listens to it fall. It falls on the roofs, it falls until it bends over the shady umbrellas of the pine tree branches, and the wide branches of the cedars. It falls until it floods the clover, and covers the paths.

It lets up, and then she is able to hear the noise made by the rusty blades of the windmill that the wind is turning. And each flap of the blade comes to touch the delicate fiber inside her shrouded breast.

Thinking about it, she feels inside her the vibration of a sonorous and deep note that, until that day, she didn't know was there.

Then it starts to rain again. The rain is falling once more, stubborn and tranquil. She listens to it fall.

It falls, and splashes like tears on the glass panes of the windows; it falls, and enlarges the puddles all the way to the horizon. She feels it drench her heart, filling it with languor and sadness.

It stops falling again, and she can hear the windmill turn again, heavy and regular. But it no longer arouses a monotonous chord inside her. The sound now falls from up high, trembling like something tremendous that surrounds her and overwhelms her. Each crack of the blade feels like the tick-tock of a giant clock keeping the time under the clouds that hang over the fields...

She doesn't remember ever having enjoyed, or having been exhausted like that by any emotion.

So many people, so many preoccupations and small trivial obstacles inside her always stand in the way between her and the secret of one night. Now, however, she is not upset by any of those unwelcome thoughts. They have drawn a circle of silence around her and have stopped the pounding of that invisible artery that frequently beats strongly in her temple.

By morning it is no longer raining. A splash of light shines through the frame of the windows. In the candelabras hanging from the ceiling the flame flickers in the bead of wax. Someone is sleeping, their head leaning over their shoulder, and the diligent rosary beads are hanging motionlessly.

Nevertheless, very far away in the distance, a rhythmical sound rises up.

Only she notices it, and she guesses it is the sound of horse's hoofs that are galloping.

Sounds that now are springy and light, then strong and close by, suddenly uneven and muffled, as if the wind had broken them up. They are coming, they continue advancing, they don't stop moving and, nevertheless, she feels like they will never arrive.

Then a barrage of noise finally covers the gallop of the horses, By now everyone has awakened, and they are all talking at once. On the other side of the house she hears them undo the complicated latch and remove the two bars over the front door.

Soon after that she notices them straighten up her room, come over to the bed, replace the worn out candles, and remove a moth from her forehead.

It's him, him.

There he is, on his feet, looking at her. His presence suddenly erases the long, wasted years, the hours and days that destiny interjected between the two of them, slow, obscure, and persistent.

"I remember you, I remember when you were young. I remember your bright eyes, your blonde skin tanned by the sun out on the farm, your body that then was thin and nervous.

You reigned with terror over your five sisters, over Alicia, and over me, who considered ourselves cousins—we weren't, but our lands bordered and we used to call your parents Ant, or Uncle.

I remember you running behind our our bare legs to lash them with your whip.

We certainly sincerely hated you when you turned loose our birds, or hung the hair of our rag dolls on the higher branches of the banana tree.

One of your favorite jokes was to shout in our ear a savage: uh!, uh!, when we least expected it. You were never bothered by our fit of panic, or our tears. You never tired of surprising us by throwing every little bug you picked up in the woods on our back.

You were a frightening tormentor. And, nevertheless, you wielded on us a certain sense of fascination. I think that, in a way, we admired you.

At night you enthralled us, and you terrified us with the story of a man all dressed in black, who lived hidden in the attic.

It was something like that time when the Governor scared us in the forest.

That hidden man had his pockets full of bats and also had control over hairy spiders, centipedes, and caterpillars.

It was he who instilled life into some dry branches that rocked like crazy when they scraped us, transformed into terrifying "horses of hell," who during the night brightened the eyes of the owls, and who made the rats and mice come out.

That individual had, in addition, a special account: the exact census of the subjects of his revolting domain; and in his registry made of paper of nettles he wrote with the tail of a lizard smeared in the ink of the swamps where they drink.

For several years we could hardly sleep, fearful that he might come and visit us.

The harvest season brought us some days of enjoyment, days that we spent playfully trying to scale enormous mountains of hay piled on the edge of the pasture, jumping from one to the other unconscious of the danger, like we were drunken with sunlight.

It was at noon on one of those crazy days when my treacherous sister pushed me off the top of a sheaf, into a wagon full of hay where you were lying.

I had already been resigned to the worst bad treatment, or to the cruelest jokes brought on by your whim of the moment, when I realized that you were sleeping. You slept, and with unprecedented courage, I stretched out in the hay by your side while the oxen,

guided by the farmhand Aníbal slowly continued on their journey to someplace that was unknown to me.

Not long after that, behind us was the raucous sound made by the threshing machine, and soon after that the loud screech of the cicadas blotted out the creaking of the heavy wheels of our vehicle.

Next to your hip, I held my breath, trying not to wake you up. I watched you as you slept, filled with intense emotion, hardly believing what my eyes were seeing: our cruel tyrant was lying defenseless by my side!

Childlike, and vulnerable because of sleep, you suddenly seemed immensely fragile to me. To tell the truth, I never had even the slightest idea of vengeance.

You turned over sighing, and moving through the straw one of your bare feet became entangled with mine.

I don't know how the abandonment of that movement was able to arouse such a great amount of tenderness in me, nor why the warm contact of our feet seemed so sweet.

A wide, open passageway encircled your house. It was there where, one afternoon, you started a truly unusual game.

While the farmhands were raking the beams of the roof with long poles, you were firing bullets at the bats that had been driven out of their hiding places.

I remember the absurd fainting fit of aunt Isabel; I can still hear the shouts of the cook, and I am sorry for the intervention of your father.

A brisk order dispersed your henchmen, and he immediately obliged you to hand over your shotgun while, with those cold, hard eyes that are so much like yours, he stared you in the face. He immediately raised the whip that he always carries with him, and he lashed your face, one, two, three times.

In front of him, dazed by the unexpected punishment, you first remained motionless. Then you suddenly rose up and, raising your hands to your mouth, you trembled from head to foot.

"Get out of here!" your father muttered angrily under his breath.

Then, as if that interjection had been the last straw, you unleashed your fury in a howl, an outrageous howl of rage that lasted until you ran off to hide yourself in the forest.

You didn't come back at lunchtime.

"He is ashamed," we girls said to ourselves, feeling either shocked, or perversely satisfied. Then Alicia and I had to march off bearing the regret of not being able to witness your return.

The next morning, since we were still anxious for news, we learned that you hadn't come back all night.

"He has intentionally lost himself on the mountain, or he has thrown himself in the river. I know my son..." aunt Isabel sobbed.

"Enough!" her husband yelled, "he only wanted to upset us. I also know my son."

No one ate lunch that day. The manager, the foreman, all the men, searched the farm, and all the neighboring farms.

"It could be that he has climbed into the cart of one of the farmhands and is now in the city," they said.

All of us and the workers—who the event had freed from their usual jobs—imagined that any moment we would hear a coach arrive, along with the trot of horses. The whole time we imagined that they brought you back either tied up like a criminal, or lying white naked in a handbarrow—drowned.

Meanwhile, in the distance the alarm bell of the sawmill was ringing over and over, with a repetition of quick, sharp sounds.

It was getting dark when you finally burst into the dining room. I was reclining by myself on the divan, that horrible divan of black leather that was so wobbly, do you remember?

You came in with your torso half naked, your hair in disorder, and your face lit up by two red cheeks.

“Water,” you ordered. I wasn’t able to do more than look at you, terrified.

Then, you disdainfully went to the cupboard and grabbed a jar, without even looking for a glass. I moved close to you. Your entire body gave off heat, like hot coals.

Led by strange desire, I touched your arm with the tips of my fingers that were always cold. You suddenly stopped drinking and, seizing my hands, you forced me to flatten them over your chest. Your flesh was burning.

I thought about a time when I heard the buzzing of a bee on the ceiling of our room.

The noise of footsteps made you let go of me so violently that we both stumbled. I can still see your tense hands holding the glass of water that you had hurried to pick up.

Afterward...

Years later that was a sweet and terrible moment both of us continued to remember, like something that can never be forgotten.

It was an autumn when it rained almost all the time without stopping.

One afternoon, the leaden cloud that covered the sky broke apart and, from north to south, there were patches of bright light.

I remember. I was at the foot of the stairs next to the rain-soaked branches of a fir tree. I had just heard the splashing sound of horse’s hoofs when I felt myself grabbed by the waist, and yanked up from the ground.

It was you, Ricardo. You had just arrived after spending the entire summer preparing for exams in the city and had surprised me by lifting me up to the front of your saddle.

The sorrel champed at the bit, becoming excited..., and I suddenly felt the pressure of a strong arm, an unknown arm.

The horse began to travel. I began to feel an unexpected sense of wellbeing that I didn’t know whether to attribute to the measured rocking that pushed me against you, or the pressure of that arm that continued to hold me firmly.

The wind swayed the trees and blew against the skin of the horse viciously. And the two of us struggled against the wind as we advanced through it.

I turned my head to look at you. Your face stood out strangely over the background of the sky, where large clouds were also galloping, as if they were going crazy. I noticed that your hair and your eyebrows had darkened so that you looked like the older brother of Ricardo, who had left us a year ago.

That wind! The plaits of my hair were torn apart and began to curl around your neck. We had suddenly been swallowed up by the darkness and the silence, the eternal darkness and silence of the forest.

The horse slowed down a bit. Carefully and silently it avoided obstacles: bushes filled with thorns, and fallen trees whose wet trunks were covered with moss; it trampled on beds of pallid, odorless violets, and spongy funguses that released a venomous odor when split open.

But I was only thinking about that strong embrace of yours that captured me without faltering.

You could have taken me to the deepest part of the forest, to that cavern that you invented in order to terrify us, that dark cavern that was the source of the monstrous howl that we heard come and then move farther away during the long nights of a storm.

You could have done that. I would not have been afraid as long as you kept holding me in that embrace.

Mysterious clicks, like frightened wings, broke out as we passed through the foliage. Then a gentle murmur arose from the bottom of a hollow.

We rode down into it and skirted a narrow stream that was half hidden by the bracken. Suddenly, behind our backs we heard a gentle rustle of branches and the discrete sound of a body moving over the water. It was a deer that was running away.

Tongues of blue smoke rose through the fallen leaves. The coming of night meant that we were going to have to retrace our steps.

We slowly turned around to go back.

Oh, what a ridiculous temptation came over me! What a longing to sigh, to beg, and to kiss.

I looked at you. Your face looked the same as always; it looked taciturn, contradicting your strong embrace.

My cheek started to press against your breast.

It wasn't for a brother or a companion that I had this impulse; it was for that strong, sweet man that trembled in your mutual embrace. The wind from the fields came back again. Again we struggled against it, and advanced through it. The plaits of my hair fluttered, coming undone, and wrapped around your neck again.

Seconds later when you still had your arm wrapped around me in order to help me get off the horse, I realized that from the moment you first put your arm around my waist, I had felt the fear that you would stop holding me in your embrace.

Then, do you remember?, I clung to you desperately murmuring "Come," moaning "Don't leave me"; and then the words "Always," and "Never." That night I submitted myself to you just to feel you encircling me again around my waist.

During three holidays I was yours.

You found me cold because you never were able to share your frenzy because I was overwhelmed by the wild carnation odor of your kiss.

That abrupt, cowardly abandonment of yours, was it some peremptory order of your parents, or some rebelliousness of your impetuous character? I don't know.

I never knew. I only knew that the time that followed that abandonment was the most disordered and tragic time of my life.

Oh, the torture of a first love, of the first disillusion! When you struggle with the past, instead of forgetting it! That's the way I persisted before, by holding forth my soft heart to the same memories, the same angers, and the same sorrows.

I remember the large revolver I stole and kept hidden in my closet with the mouth of the barrel sunken in a small, flat shoe. One winter afternoon I went out in the forest. The dry leaves were stuck to the ground, rotting away. The foliage was hanging down, wet and lifeless, like a dry rag.

When I was very far away from the houses, I finally stopped. I took my arm out of the sleeve of my coat and felt it, suspiciously, like a tiny, frightened beast that could squirm and bite.

With great precaution I pointed the revolver against my head, and then my heart.

Then, abruptly, I fired a shot at a tree.

There was a crack, an insignificant crack, like sheet makes when it has been whipped by the wind. But, oh Ricardo, there on the trunk of the tree was a horrible, uneven hole that was filled with black with dust.

My heart was in tatters, my veins scattered... Oh dear, no, I would never have enough courage to do that!

Exhausted, I lay down and stretched out, I moaned, and I pounded the ground with my clenched fists. Oh dear, no, I would never enough courage to do that!

And, nevertheless, I wanted to die, I wanted to die, I swear it.

What day was it? I wasn't able to remember exactly when I began to have that mild weariness.

I thought, at first, that spring was responsible for making me languish. It was a spring that was still hidden beneath the winter soil, but that leaked out at times through the half open pores of the ground.

I remember. I felt weak, with no desires, my body and my spirit indifferent as though they were filled with passion and sorrow.

Thinking it was a moment of respite, I let myself sink into that unexpected tranquility. Wouldn't I have to deal with more unpleasant things tomorrow?

I stopped worrying and started to walk.

And that languish, that lethargy kept on increasing, enclosing me stealthy, day by day.

One day when I opened the shutters of my room, I noticed that a tremendous number of tiny buds no larger than the head of a match were growing on the extremities of all the many branches in the garden.

Behind my back Zoila was folding laundry, asking me if I would like to have a glass of milk. Pensive, and without answering, I continued looking out at the miracle.

It was strange; both my breasts were swelling, seeming like they were also ready to blossom with the coming of spring.

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

"I am... ah!..." I sighed, raising my hands to my chest, blushing to the root of my hair.

For many days I continued to be dazed by that happiness. You had made a mark on me that would last forever. Although you deny it, you continued to have possession of

my humble flesh, caressing it with your hands, and altering it, in spite of the fact you were not there.

I never thought, not even for a moment, about the consequences of all that. All I ever thought about was the joy of your presence inside my body. I felt your kiss, and I let it grow inside me.

Now that it was spring, I hung my hammock between two hazel nut trees. I laid there for hours and hours.

I did not know why the landscape, the things around me, all gave me so much pleasure, the enjoyment of feeling peaceful with the rising and falling dark mass of the forest quietly rising above the horizon like a monstrous wave about to rush forward, the flight of the doves whose coming and going made moving shadows on the book over my knees; the intermittent song of the sawmill—that sharp note, sharp and sweet like the buzzing of a beehive—that filled the air all the way to the houses while the afternoon was very translucent.

For no apparent reason absurd and frivolous desires suddenly besieged me so furiously that they became an oppressive need. For my breakfast I first wanted a cluster of pink grapes. I imagined the tight cluster of seeds, and the crystalline pulp.

Since I had to accept that it was an impossible desire—we didn't have any grape vines, and the town was two days away—I began to think about strawberries.

However, I didn't like the ones that the gardener picked for me in the forest. I liked them cold, ice cold, red, very red, when they tasted a little like raspberries.

But where had I ever eaten strawberries like that?

"...The little girl then went out into the garden and started to clear away the snow. Little by little the broom began to uncover a large quantity of fragrant, ripe strawberries that she took to her stepmother..."

That was it! Those were the strawberries that I liked! The magic strawberries of the story!

One impulse swallowed another. Soon I was longing to knit yellow wool and yearning for a field of sunflowers that I could enjoy looking at hour after hour.

Oh, to be able to sink my eyes into something yellow!

That is the way I was living, greedy for fragrances, for colors, for flavors.

"If your father ever knew that!" Trying to calm myself, I answered her:

"Tomorrow, tomorrow I will look for the herbs that... or maybe I will go and talk to the woman who lives in the ravine..."

"You should be sure to make a decision before your situation becomes impossible to change."

"Nah, tomorrow, tomorrow..."

Now I remember. I felt like I was protected by a network of laziness and indifference; invulnerable and calm about everything other than the small ordinary daily events, like subsisting, sleeping, and eating.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, I said. And then summer arrived.

The first week of summer filled me with an inexplicable feeling of anguish that grew along with the moon.

On the seventh night, unable to get to sleep, I got up, I went down to the living room, and I opened the door that led to the garden.

The cypress trees formed a motionless outline against the blue sky; the pond was like a sheet of blue metal; the house stretched out with a velvety blue shadow.

Motionless, the woods remained silent as though they were petrified under the spell of night, of that blue night of a full moon.

For a long time I remained standing in the threshold of the door without daring to enter that new unrecognizable world, that world that seemed like a sunken world.

Suddenly, one of the turrets of the house grew and began to flutter with a narrow string of feathers. It was a flock of owls.

They flew on. Their flight was soft and slow, as silent as the night.

And all of that was so harmonious that, suddenly, I broke into tears.

After that, I felt myself freed of all sorrow. It was as if the anxiety that tortured me had been struggling inside me until it was able to escape through the path of my tears.

However, the next morning I felt that anxiety again pressing on my heart; minute by minute its weight increased and oppressed me. And then, after many hours of struggling in order to escape it, it took the same path as the day before, disappearing again without revealing the unknown reason for being there.

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

Since then, I lived waiting for the arrival of my tears. I waited for them like one waits for a storm on the hottest days of summer. And harsh word, a look that was too sweet, was enough for me to open the floodgate of tears.

That's the way I lived, confined in my troubled world.

Summer was coming to an end. Storms speckled with bluish flashes of lightning often occurred all at once, copying the last shock of a firework.

One afternoon, when I went out on the road that leads to your farm, my heart began to beat and beat; to aim and push my blood violently against the walls of my body.

Some unknown force drew my steps from the horizon, from there where the dark black sky cleared, stabbed by the electric charges, mysterious signals launched against my encounter.

"Come on, come on," the storm seemed to shout at me frantically.

"Come," it murmured again, more softly and weak.

Then, as I moved forward I was stimulated by a gentle, increasing feeling of warmth.

And I kept on advancing, just to be able to let myself feel more full of life.

Almost running, I descended the path that goes down to the hollow where the houses were surrounded by clusters of honeysuckle, while the dogs came out and barked when they saw me.

I remember I that sat down, exhausted, on the chair that the wife of the butler offered me in the kitchen. The poor things was jabbering like crazy... "What weather!" "What humidity!" "Don Ricardo arrived this afternoon." "He is resting." "He asked us not to wake him up before supertime." "Maybe it would be better if the young lady would go back to her farm before the rainstorm begins..."

I was sipping the yerba mate, and I nodded my head meekly.

“Don Ricardo arrived this afternoon.” We are so linked to one another that my senses had already told me you were coming!

No, don’t worry about it. I knew you don’t like to be waked up. I started to go back right away, as the first drops of rain began to fall.

But as I was leaving you behind, sleeping half dressed and closed off in your room, I began to feel the fever that had been throbbing in my temples disappear.

My hands were stiff, shivering with cold, when I sat down at the table in front of my father who was fired up... “It was written that he would always hold me back. The gong had sounded three times. If Alicia and I hadn’t done more than ‘slacking off’, he and my brothers worked like peons... They needed to eat at the right time. Ah, if our mother was alive now!...”

I spent the following day waiting for you because I had the definite feeling that you were coming back to me.

Afternoon had come and I was lying in the hammock when I had the feeling that it was time. I got up and started walking, once again filled with that blossoming of life. And that physical happiness was stopping me, and also you, and was flourishing inside me. And there it was, flapping its wings just as soon as it stopped moving.

And that was how my heart—my actual physical heart—guided me toward the gate that opens to the north.

There in the distance, at the edge of a prairie full of clovers, under a vast sky full of red clouds, almost next to the disk of the setting sun, I saw the shadow of rider guiding a herd of horses.

It was you. I recognized you immediately. Leaning on the wire fence, I could follow you with my eyes during the length of a sigh. Because suddenly, along with the sun, you disappeared over the horizon.

Some time before dawn that same night I had a dream... An endless road where you and I were fleeing, closely linked together. A flash of lightning pursued us, rocking the poplars one by one—strange columns that supported the vault of stone; and the vault broke into fragments behind us, without being able to cover us in its collapse.

A blast drove me out of my bed. With my limbs trembling, I found myself awake in the middle of my room.

Then I finally heard the enormous, sustained howl of an angry wind.

The shutters trembled, the doors crackled, and I was struck by a flutter of invisible curtains. I felt like I was caught in the center of a monstrous whirlwind that was struggling to tear the house from its foundation and carry it away.

“Zoila,” I shouted, but the noise of the storm blocked my voice.

After that my thoughts seemed to waver, tiny and flickering, like the flame of a candle.

I wanted something. But what? I still don’t know.

I ran to the door and opened it. I hurried through the darkness laboriously with my arms extended like a sleepwalker, when the ground dropped under my feet into a strange emptiness.

Zoila came to pick me up at the foot of the stairs. I spent the rest of the night silent and tearful, wiping off the blood that your flesh dispersed, mixed with mine...

The next morning I found myself lying on the veranda with the intrepid eyes of a little girl, and my eyebrows arched naively, weaving and spinning with anger, as if my life depended on it.

The sudden, cowardly abandonment of her lover, was it the result of some urgent need, or perhaps the rebellious attitude of his impetuous character?

She doesn't know, nor does she want to go and drive herself mad, trying to decipher an enigma that tortured her so much during her early childhood.

The truth is that each of us, either from thoughtlessness or fear, took a different path.

And that during our entire life we avoided each other, therefore, as though by mutual agreement.

But now, now that he is here, on foot, silent and moved; and now that he finally dared to look at her again face to face, and with the same laughable expression she had seen when he was a child whenever he was emotional, now she understands.

She understands that the love she thought was dead was still sleeping, curled up inside her. And that she and that man had never been totally separated.

And it was as if part of his blood had always been nourishing part of her that she didn't realize was there, and that this part of her had been growing without her knowing, along with the rest of her life.

And she understands that, without realizing it, she had been waiting, and she had been yearning, for this moment.

Was it necessary to die in order to know certain things? She now understands that in the heart and the feelings of that man she had also been linked to his roots; that in spite of the fact that she believed she was alone, she had never been really alone; and that, although she had usually thought so, she had never really been forgotten.

If she had known it before, many nights when she had been unable to sleep she would not have turned on the light to turn the pages of a book, trying to reach a group of memories. Nor would she have avoided certain locations in the park, certain solitary places, or certain pieces of music. And she would not have feared the first breeze of a springtime that was hotter than usual.

Ah, my God, my God! Do you have to die in order to find out?

"Let's go, let's go."

"Where?"

Someone, or something, took her by the hand and made her rise up.

As if she had suddenly moved into a group of opposite winds, she dances gently and steadily in a fixed position, like a snowflake.

"Let's go."

"Where?"

"Somewhere else."

She goes down the slope of a damp, shaded garden. She notices the sound of hidden water and hears the frozen rose bushes loose their leaves in the thicket.

And she keeps going down through grass covered pathways, struck by the damp wing of some invisible birds...

What force is this that wraps around her and carries her away? Suddenly and rapidly she feels herself come back to the surface.

She shivers there with cold, lying on her back in the large bed.

Above the bedhead she sees the oily spluttering of two candles.

Just then, she notices that a gauze bandage is supporting her chin. And she has the strange impression of not feeling it.

The day is burning hours, minutes, and seconds.

An old man comes to sit down next to her. He looks at her sadly for a long time and caresses her hair, telling her she is lovely.

The shrouded woman is not bothered by this striking tranquility. She knows her father well. He has already seen many people like that, stretched out, pale, bestowed with that same implacable immovability, while around them everyone is sad and upset.

“Ana Maria, do you remember your mother?” he used to ask her sometimes, almost in secret, when she was just a child.

And to please him, each time she closed her eyes and, concentrating fervently, she was able to capture for a moment the invasive image of other teasing black eyes that looked at her from behind the tulle bound to a light sombrero. Something like a perfume floating around a tender evocation.

“Of course I remember her, papa.”

“She was pretty, right? Did you love her?”

“Yes, I loved her.”

“And why did you love her?” he had insisted once.

Candidly, she had answered him:

“Because she always had a little veil tied around her sombrero, and she had such a nice odor.

Her father’s eyes had filled with tears. And when she hugged him instinctively, he had pushed her away for the first time.

“You are a fool,” he said to her, and then he had left the room, slamming the door.

But after that moment, for the rest of her life she suspected that her father had also had loved his wife for the same reason that she, the fool, had loved her...

Yes, he had loved her for her ephemeral scent, and her treacherous tulles... and her premature death as upsetting as the frivolous mystery of her eyes.

Now he raises his hand and traces the sign of the cross over the brow of his daughter. Wasn’t that exactly the same way he always said goodnight?

Later, after having closed all his doors, he would stretch out on his bed, turn his face to the wall, and then began to suffer. And he would suffer in secret, rejecting the slightest expression of comfort, or any gesture of sympathy, as if his pain was not within the reach of others.

And for days, months, and perhaps years, silent and resigned he would continue to comply with the pain that destiny had allotted him.

Since the beginning of night, without stopping, a woman had been watching over and looking after the dead woman. However, the shrouded woman notices her for the first

time; she is used to seeing her like that, serious and attentive, next to the bed of those who are sick.

“Alicia, my poor sister, it’s you! Say a prayer!”

Where do you think I am? Reporting to the terrible God to whom you offer every day the brutality of your husband, the burning of your sawmills, and even the loss of your only son, that laughing, disobedient child who was crushed by a tree when it fell on him, and whose body was broken when they lifted him out of the mud and fallen leaves?

Alicia, no. I am here, stuck to the ground. And I am asking myself if some day I will see the face of your God.

There in the convent where we were educated, when Sister Marta turned out the lights in the large bedroom, and while you tirelessly finished saying the rosary more than two dozen times with your head sunken into the pillow, I went on tiptoes to the window in the bathroom. I preferred to watch the newlyweds in the villa next door.

On the ground floor there was an illuminated balcony and two servants who spread out the tablecloth, and lit the silver candelabras above the table.

On the second floor there was another illuminated balcony. Behind the moving leaves of a willow tree, that was the balcony that attracted my most eager looks.

The husband was stretched out on the couch. She was sitting in front of the mirror, engrossed in the contemplation of her own image and, once in a while, raising her hand to her cheek as though she were trying to smooth an imaginary wrinkle. She was brushing her thick brown hair, shaking it like a flag, and perfuming it.

It was hard for me to lie down on my narrow bed under the oil lamp, whose fluttering butterfly distorted and spread the shadow of the crucifix over the walls.

Alicia, I never liked to look at the crucifix, you know that. If I used all my money in the vestry to buy pictures, it was because the white wings of the angels delighted me, and because the angels often reminded me of our older cousins, who had sweethearts, who went to dances, and who set diamonds in their hair.

Everyone was upset by the indifference with which I took my first communion.

I was never troubled by a retreat, nor a sermon. To me God seemed so distant, and so severe.

I’m talking about the God who imposed a religion on me, because another may exist: a God that is more secretive and more understanding, the God that Zoila often made me think of.

Because she, my mother, a despot, a nurse, a censor, never was able to explain to me His real meaning, but only the superstitions of His spirit, as powerful as it was simple.

“Child, the new moon! Greet it three times and ask for three things, and God will give them to you immediately... A spider running across the ceiling at this time of night! We’ll have something new... Jesus, you broke that mirror! Your life is going to be unlucky as long as you break white glass...”

And imagine, Alicia, those childish things you considered “Warnings of God,” without my knowing, are changing and being replaced by other more subtle things.

I don’t know how to explain it to you. Certain strange coincidences, certain vague anxieties, certain words or gestures of mine that my mind wouldn’t have been able to find by itself; and so many other little things that are difficult to grasp and even more difficult to describe, began to seem like signs of something, or someone, watching me secretly and interweaving part of their purpose into the adventure of my life.

Of course, the declarations of that “someone” were obscure, and often contradictory. Still, the fact that sometimes they made me ask myself fearfully if a very proud God, also wanting me to be aware of Him, search for Him, and worship him... was not perhaps existing invisibly nearby?

But, Alicia, you are well acquainted with this “valley of tears,” as you used to say, unshaken by the mocking smile of your husband; this valley, its tears and people, its trivial things and its joys, always formed the best part of my days and my feelings.

And it is possible, even more than possible, Alicia, that I do not have a soul.

Those who have souls must feel it bubble and speak inside them. Perhaps it is the men, as well as the plants; not everyone is fated to have one, and there are those that live in the arenas without thirst, because they lack hungry roots.

And therefore, it can be that all deaths are not the same. It can be that even after death all of us follow different paths.

But pray, Alicia, pray. I like to see people pray, you know that.

What I would not give, though, my poor Alicia, to have you be given here on earth at least a small part of the happiness that is waiting there for you in heaven. It hurts me to see your paleness, your and sadness. Even your hair seems to have been darkened by your sadness.

Remember your bright blonde hair when you were a child? And remember how I and your cousins envied you for that? We admired you because you were blonde, and we considered you more beautiful. Remember that?

Now the only one who remained next to her was the husband of Maria Griselda.

But how is it possible that she also considers her son: the husband of Maria Griselda!

Why? Because he hides his beautiful wife from the rest of the world! Because he keeps her isolated in a remote farm to the south!

All night long she has been surprised by the presence of her daughter-in-law, and the attitude of Alberto has annoyed her; the attitude of that son who has done nothing but wander around and spread his nervous looks around the room.

Now that he has finally sat down on a chair to rest, or perhaps to sleep, what is there about him that is new, or strange... or terrible?

His eyelids. It's his eyelids that change him and frighten her; those wrinkled, dry eyelids, that look as if, after being closed every night over a taciturn passion, they had become withered and blackened on the inside.

It is strange that now I notice it for the first time. Or is it only natural that in those who are already dead the ability to see any other sign of death has sharpened?

All at once those lowered eyelids begin to look at her fixedly, with the intensity that is only seen in the eyes of someone who is insane.

Oh, open your eyes, Alberto!

As though he were responding to that request, he opened them, in fact... to cast a new apprehensive glance around him. Now he approaches her, his shrouded mother, and he touches her on the forehead to convince himself that she is dead.

Satisfied, he starts walking determinedly toward the rear of the room. She hears him moving around in the darkness, searching through the furniture as if he was trying to find something. Now he retraces his steps, carrying a portrait in his hand.

Now he presses the portrait of Maria Griselda against one of the candles in order to burn it painstakingly, and his features relax calmly while beautiful image burns and turns into ashes.

Except for the dead woman, nobody knows, or will ever know, how the many images of his wife have made him suffer, something she keeps from thinking about, in spite of her attentiveness.

Isn't there perhaps a part of her beauty in each one of those portraits? Isn't there perhaps, in each one of them, a possibility of some communication?

Yes, but the fire destroyed the last one. Now there only remains one Maria Griselda, the one that he keeps hidden on the distant farm far to the south.

Oh, Alberto, my poor son!

Someone or something, takes her by the hand.

"Let's go, let's go..."

"Where?"

"Let's go."

And she leaves. Someone or something drags her away and leads her through a deserted city, coated with a dusty layer of ashes, as if a gruesome breeze had gently blown over it.

She walks. It's getting dark. She walks farther.

A park. In the heart of that accursed city is a park that was recently filled and now is phosphorescent, with insects.

She takes a step and crosses over a double ring of fog that surrounds her and passes through a cluster of fireflies, as though she were in a floating dust of gold.

Oh dear. What pressure is this that surrounds her and carries her away?

And there she is, once again immobile, stretched out face up on that large bed.

Lightweight. She feels lightweight. She tries to move but cannot do it. It is as if the most secret level, the deepest level of her body, was twisting around, caught inside other heavier levels she couldn't budge, and that kept her stuck there inside the oily sizzling of the candles.

The day was passing through hours, minutes, seconds.

"Let's go."

"No."

Tired out, she wants, however, to free herself from that particle of consciousness that keeps her in contact with life, and let herself move backward into the deep, open abyss she she feels down below.

But a feeling of worry forces her not to let go of that final connection.

Meanwhile, the day was passing through hours, minutes, seconds.

That lean, dark haired man whose anxiety makes his lips tremble as if he were talking. Make him go away! She doesn't want to listen to him.

"Ana Maria, get up!"

Get up to forbid me to enter your room one last time. Get up and shy away from me, or wound me and take away my life and happiness day by day. But get up, get up!

You, dead!

You, incorporated, for a short second, into that implacable race that watches us suffer, disdainful and immobile.

You, falling minute by minute further into the past. And the living substances from which you are made, falling away from you, slipping through different channels, like rivers that will never go back the way they came. Never!

“Ana Maria, if you knew how much I have loved you!”

That man! Why does even a shrouded woman stimulate his love!

It is strange that a humble love does nothing more than humiliate.

Fernando’s humble love always humiliated her. It made her feel less fortunate. It was not the sickness that stained his skin and embittered his character that bothered her, nor like for everyone, his arrogant, positive intelligence.

She despised him because he wasn’t happy, and because he had no luck.

But then how did he manage to impose himself on her so that he became a necessary evil? He knew it very well: by making himself become her confidant.

Yes, his confidences! What repentance she always felt afterward!

She became vaguely aware that Fernando fed on her anger, or her sadness; that while she was speaking, he analyzed, calculated, and enjoyed her disappointments, perhaps believing that it would help him take control of her and throw herself in his arms. She was aware that with his charges and his complaints he gained support for the secret envy that he felt for her husband. Because while he pretended to despise him, he envied him: he envied precisely the defects that were the cause of his disapproval.

Fernando! Because she was afraid to stay by herself, for many years, and many nights, she called him to her side so he could sit with her in front of the fire that began to burn the thick logs in the fireplace. She tried in vain to talk about unimportant things. As the time passed and the calls continued, the poison grew, it spread through her throat to her lips, and she began to talk.

She spoke and he listened. He never offered any consolation, or proposed a solution or expressed any doubt, never. But he listened, he listened attentively to what her children used to think was out of jealousy, or odd habits.

After her first revelation, the second and the third came naturally, and also those that followed, but almost always against her will.

Almost immediately it was impossible to put a stop to her verbal incontinence. She had started it during their intimacy, and she wasn’t strong enough to get rid of it.

But she didn’t know that she could hate him until that night when he also confided something in turn.

The coldness with which he told her about that night when he woke up next to the inert body of his wife, the coldness with which he spoke of the empty tube of Veronal found on the night table.!

For several hours he had slept next to a dead woman and her contact had not produced even the slightest tremble.

“Poor Inés,” he said. I still am not able to understand the reason for his attitude. He didn’t seem sad or depressed. Not surprised, either. Sometimes, however, I remember having caught him looking at me fixedly, as though he were seeing me for the first time. He left me. What did it matter if it wasn’t in order to follow a lover! He left me. Love had slipped away from me like it always does, like water slips out of your closed hands.”

“Oh, Ana Maria, neither of us has been born under a star that protects us...!” he said, and her face turned red as if he had treacherously slapped her in the face.

What right did he have to think that they were both the same?

In a brief recollection she had seen him, and had seen both him and her next to the fireplace. Two people on the edge of love, on the edge of life, holding hands and sighing, remembering, envying. Two poor souls. And like those who are poor console each other, perhaps some day, the two of them... Ah, no! Not that! Never that, not ever!

Since that night she had usually detested him. But she was never able to leave him.

She tried, yes, many times. But Fernando smiled indulgently at her sudden glacial receptions; he put up imperturbably with her ill-treatment, supposing that perhaps she was struggling in vain against a strange sentiment that was pushing her toward him, and supposing that she would again throw her arms around his neck, pulled there by new confidences.

His confidences! How many times he also tried to avoid them. Antonio, the children; the children and Antonio. Only they occupied the thoughts of that woman and deserved her tenderness, or her sorrow.

He must have loved her an awful lot to listen for so many years to her insidious words, and to let her easily and painstakingly break his heart.

And nevertheless, he never knew how to be weak and humble until the end.

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

Why not have accepted that innocent fabrication of yours if it flattered your self-esteem? No. He preferred to lose part of your affection, rather than let you think he was naïve.

More than my bad luck, Ana Maria, it was my stupidity that kept you from loving me.

I see you leaning in front of the fireplace, throwing ashes over the dying hot coals; I see you when you roll up the fabric, close the piano, and fold the newspapers spread on the furniture.

I see you come close to me, ruffled and sorrowful: “Good evening, Fernando. I am sorry for having talked to you about all that. The truth is that Antonio never loved me. So why protest, why struggle? Good night.” And your hand clutched mine in an endless goodbye, in spite of the fact that your eyes were questioning me, begging for a denial of your final words.

And there I was, envious, petty, and selfish, leaving without opening my lips more than to say “good night.”

Nevertheless, there is much that I should be pardoned for, since my love made me pardon you for many things.

Until I met you, when my pride was wounded, I automatically stopped loving, and I never pardoned. My wife could have told you, she who never received a reproach from me, nor a memory, not even a flower on her tomb.

For you, only for you, Ana Maria, have I known love that humbles, that resists offence and pardons offence.

For you, only for you!

Maybe I had dreamed the time of pity for me, the time when we became sympathetic toward the enemy called to suffer our own miserable destiny.

Perhaps in you I loved that pathetic beginning of destruction. No beauty ever moved me as much as yours when it was falling apart.

I loved your withered skin that had made the freshness of your lips stand out as well as the splendor of your wide eyebrows that were out of style, your smooth, brilliant eyebrows that were like a new strip of velvet. I loved your mature body on which the gracefulness of your neck and your ankles had, in contrast, a double, touching seduction. But I don't want to take away your merits. I was also seduced by your intelligence, because it was the voice of your sensibility, and your instinct.

How many times I obliged you to specify an exclamation, or a comment.

You would be silent and irritable, presuming that I was mocking you.

And no, Ana Maria, I always believed myself to be stronger than I was. I admired you. I admired your tranquil intelligence whose roots were sunken in the depths of your self.

"Do you know what makes this room nice and intimate? The reflection and the shadow of the tree outside of the window. Houses never should be higher than the trees," you said.

Or then "It doesn't move. Yes, what silence! The air seems like crystal. On afternoons like this it makes me afraid even to blink. Does one even know where his gestures stop? Perhaps if I raise my hand, it will shatter a star in other worlds."

Yes, I admired you and I understood you.

Oh, Ana Maria, if you had wanted, from your misfortune and my unhappiness, we could have created an affection, a life; and many would have been envious of our union, like they are of a true love, and of happiness.

If you had wanted! But you didn't even take into account my patience. You never thanked me for my kindness. Never.

You had a grudge against me because I appreciated you, and I knew more than anyone, me, the man you didn't love."

Poor Fernando, how he suffered! He can hardly stand up straight. He looks like he is going to faint!

A boy shares his fear of a shrouded woman. Fred, who is approaching, puts his hand on the shoulder of the sick man and speaks to him in a low voice. But Fernando shakes his head and must be refusing to leave the room.

Then she sees how Fred pushes him toward a chair and leans over solicitously. And the tender past that the presence of the boy inserts into her heart spills over the image of Fernando in the arms of Fred, her favorite son.

I remember that as a child Fred was afraid of mirrors, and in dreams he used to speak in some unknown language.

I remember the summer of the great drought, and that afternoon about three o'clock, Fernando had said to him: "Should we go to those lands that I purchased yesterday?"

The children climbed up to the place without hesitating.

As he always did, Antonio said it was bad to go out at this time of day.

But not wanting to disappoint Fernando and to be sure the children did not expose their heads to the sun, she had accepted the unwanted invitation.

“We’ll be back long before dinner,” she shouted to her husband as they were leaving. But Antonio, who was smoking in the rocking chair, didn’t bother to wave goodbye.

And, silent and offended, she had to endure the first ten minutes of traveling through the dusty landscape.

Fred’s dogs, that pack of hounds that included all the many dogs from the farm, followed the carriage for a moment. Then they stopped to drink in the water of a ditch.

The children kept moving incessantly, shouting, singing, asking questions. Overcome by the heat, she smiled without saying anything. The coach traveled through a double row of owls perched on the fence posts, watching them as they passed.

“Uncle Fernando, I want an owl. Here, take your shotgun and kill an owl for me. Why not? Why not, uncle Fernando? I want an owl. That one. No, that one, or that one...”

Fernando agreed like he always did, when Anita grabbed hold of his sleeve and looked him in the eye. Fearing to fall out of favor with the child, he always gratified her bad wishes. He called her Princess, and with her he threw stones at the little lizards that scurried horizontally over the garden walls.

Fernando stopped the horses, pressed the shotgun against his shoulder, and pointed at an owl that was perched on a fence post, watching them confidently, without moving. A loud detonation quickly stopped the chirping of the cicadas, and the bird fell to the ground. Anita ran to grab it, and the song of the cicadas raised up again like a screech. And they continued their journey.

Lying on the knees of the child, the owl still had its eyes open, round, yellow eyes staring fixedly, like a threat. But without flinching, the little girl accepted the way it looked at her. “It’s not completely dead. It sees me. Now it’s closing its eyes little by little... Mamma, mamma, its eyelids are raising from below.

But she was only half listening, looking at the dark violet cloud that was rising over the horizon, and coming to meet the carriage.

“Children, raise the canopy! A storm is coming over us.”

A moment later, a dark wind blew over them, carrying dry branches, gravel, and dead insects.

After they were able to lift it up, the old framework trembled, the sky was gray, and the silence was so complete that it made you want to remove it, like water that was too dense.

It felt like they suddenly descended into a different climate, a different time, a different world.

The horses ran frantically through a landscape they had no memory of ever seeing before. And they brought the coach toward a farm that was in ruins.

A man appeared to be waiting for them, standing on a threshold without a door.

“Where is the road to San Roberto, please?”

Wearing boots, with a whip in his hands, the farmhand—was he really a farmhand?—looked at them strangely, and after a moment he answered:

“Continue to the right. After you cross the bridge, turn to the left.”

“Thank you.”

Still nervous, the horses continued to travel again. And then, Fred cautiously leaned over to her and said in a low voice:

“Mama, did you notice that man’s eyes? They were just like those of the...”

Terrified, she turned to her daughter and shouted:

“Get rid of that owl. Get rid of it I said, it’s staining your dress.”

The bridge? How long had they been waiting to find it? She didn't know.

She only remembered that at a certain moment she had ordered: "Turn around."

Fernando obeyed without saying anything, and they began the lengthy return journey during which it started to get dark.

The prairie, a forest, again the prairie, and again a forest. And still a prairie.

"I'm hungry," Alberto murmured timidly.

Anita was sleeping, leaning against Fernando, and the happiness of Fernando was so evident that she tried not to look at him, feeling a strange sense of shame.

Suddenly, one of the horses stumbled, and fell down flat.

Inside the coach there was a brief silence. Then, as if they had suddenly revived, the children quickly jumped out of the coach, bursting out in shouts and sighs.

Fernando finally said: "Ana Maria, I have been completely lost for hours."

The children were running around in the darkness. "It must have rained here," Alberto screamed, sunken up to his knees in a quagmire.

Urged by Fernando, the fallen horse rose up, shaking, fell down again, then rose up once more, whinnying weakly.

"Ana Maria, it would be best if we didn't try to keep going. The horses are exhausted. The coach doesn't have any lamps. Let's wait until morning."

Instantly Fernando slapped his hands and shouted at the dispersed children:

"Let's go! Let's go! Where is Fred? Fred! Fred!"

"Ha ha!" a voice shouted in the distance, while a sparkle of light glowed and then went out.

"He's got an old lantern, and he's pretending he's a firefly," his brothers explained.

She remembers how she jumped out on the ground and angrily made her way through the brambles, not worrying about her high heels.

"Fred, let's go. What are you doing there?"

Motionless in front of a bush whose branches he was lifting, he made a mysterious sign as his only response. And as if he were telling a secret, he made a ring of light on the ground.

Then, fastened to the ground, she saw a large shape that looked like a funeral urn, a shape that was dark blue, wet, and lightly shaking.

For a second she and the child kept their eyes on the shape that seemed to breathe.

Then Fred shifted the light and the gloomy shape was lost in the shadows.

Why was she so fixed on that cold, blue image? Why did her body tremble while she went back toward the coach, leaning on Fred's shoulder? Why had she quietly said to Fernando, "You're right. It would be dangerous to continue traveling. Let's wait until morning.?"

As if they were following orders, the children spread out the blankets.

As though in a dream, she can still see her son Alberto who came over to cover her, give Fred a pat on the head, and then sleep next to her under the same blanket.

Never, no not ever, had she forgotten the terror that took them by surprise when they woke up the next morning.

One more step and they would have all disappeared that night. The coach had stopped right on the edge of an escarpment. And there, down below, under a thick fog caught between two steep slopes, they saw the dark ripples of a fast flowing river.

Since that memorable day she had kept an eye on Fred, worried, without knowing why. But the child didn't seem to be aware of that sixth sense that was watching him.

And even when he was an insolent and robust adolescent, she kept on taking care of him, like some delicate being. Only because suddenly, and at the least expected moment, he would look at her with the serious youthful eyes of the mysterious child of yesterday.

"Don't deny it," Antonio used to say to her, "he's your favorite, and you pardon him for everything." She would smile. It was true that she pardoned him for everything, even the rudeness with which he shook away from her when she bent over to kiss him.

And how could she forget that small hand that clung to hers without letting go, for three days and nights in the room of a clinic? For three days she hadn't eaten, and for three nights she hadn't slept, sitting on the edge of the bed, tortured by that avid hand of Fred that transmitted his suffering, and obliged her to, along with him, sink into that nightmare and that feeling of distress.

Without realizing it, little by little, she had grown accustomed to his fastidious oversensitive presence.

She detested the desire that shined in Fernando's eyes, but that rash daily homage flattered her.

Like in a final confidentiality, she now remembers Beatriz, the intimate friend of her daughter. She remembers her pathetic contralto voice. She hardly knew how to sing, but when the piano accompanied her, she was able to overcome her lack of skill. In her throat there was a true velvet note, serious and tender at the same time, that her willpower was able to prolong, amplify, and then smother gently. She remembers this past autumn and the moonless nights, strident and clear.

"After we got up from the table you, Fernando, hurried to leave with with a cigarette in your mouth, expecting me to follow you, to lean at your side against the balustrade of the terrace. But I ran to sit down in front of the piano. And Beatriz began to sing.

During one, two, then three songs, you stood there waiting for me, then you sat down on the steel bench, your back leaning against the vines on the wall.

Until the room was filled with the smoke from the cigarettes you lighted one after the other, without thinking about your health.

I didn't worry about what you did, or the moisture that the honeysuckles dripped on your shoulders. Tomorrow you would be sick, for sure, but was it my fault that you insisted, taciturnly, on waiting for me in the cold, or my fault that the music pleased me a hundred times more than your company?

Many times, right after the final chord, I snuck off to my room without waiting for you to come back, denying you the comfort of saying good night.

It never occurred to me to think that was a useless cruelty; I thought that neither your presence, or your absence, mattered to me.

One night, though, between songs, I looked out on the terrace.

I didn't find anyone sitting on the steel bench.

Why had you gone off without saying anything? And when did you do that? I didn't even hear the gallop of your horses in the distance.

I remember my uncertainty. I took a few steps, I breathed strongly and raised my eyes.

In the sky there was such a mass of stars that I lowered them immediately. feeling dizzy. Then I saw the garden with the plants bluntly covered with a stream of light, and I was cold.

When I sat down in front of the piano once again, I was filled with a strong feeling of discouragement.

I was no longer interested in the music, nor the songs of Beatriz. I no longer saw any reason to continue what I was doing.

Oh, Fernando, you had trapped me in your net. Ever since then, in order to live I had to feel the presence of your constant suffering.

How many times during my sickness I lay down in bed and listened to you with delight, as you walked by the door they had forbidden you to enter.

Poor Fernando! Now he walked over to timidly touch her long hair; her hair that had grown even longer during that night.

Suddenly, the shutters open. In comes a grey light, is it at dawn, or at dusk?

No longer is any shadow possible in the room because of the glow of that ugly light. Things stand out with harshness. Something flutters around among the flowers and then lands on the sheet, something wretched... a fly.

Fernando has now raised his head. Finally, he will be able to do what he wanted to so much to do.

But then, why does he hesitate and stop his impulse, now that he is able to kiss her?

Why does he look at her fixedly and still does not kiss her? Why?

Soon after that, she sees her own feet. She sees them strangely raised up and placed there at the extremity of the bedspread, like two things that didn't belong to her body.

And because, during her life she has seen many dead people, the shrouded woman is able to understand. She understands that in the space of an elusive minute, her being has changed. That when he raised his eyes, Fernando had found a wax statue in the place where his beloved woman was lying.

All those who have entered the room now move around calmly, indifferent to the body of the woman, pallid and remote, whose flesh seems to be made from a different material than theirs.

Only Fernando continues to have his eyes fixed on her; and his trembling lips almost seem to show what he is thinking.

"Ana Maria, it's possible! Your death lets me rest!

Your death has removed the cause of the desire that has lured me, a fifty-year-old man, day and night, to chase after your smile and your attraction as a woman.

On these cold winter nights my poor horses will no longer drag that sulky between your farm and mine with a sick man inside, shivering with cold and bad humor. I will no longer have to fight the anxiety into which the words of your reproach, or a petty attitude of mine, has plunged me.

I needed to rest so badly, Ana Maria. Now your death makes that possible.

From now on I will no longer have to worry about your problems, only the work on the farm, and my political interests. Without any fear of your sarcasm or my thoughts, I will be able to lie down to rest several hours a day, as my health demands. I will be able to take interest in a book, or the conversation with a friend; for the first time I will be able to smoke my pipe, with a new tobacco.

Yes, I will now be able to enjoy the humble pleasures that life still has not taken away, and that my love for you had poisoned in their source.

I will be able to sleep again, Ana Maria, to sleep until the next day, like those, who are not worried about anyone or anything, are able to do. No happiness, but no bitterness.

Yes, I am content. I will no longer have to defend myself against a new feeling of pain every day.

You knew I was egotistical, right? But you didn't know how far my egotism was able to go. Perhaps I wanted your death, Ana Maria.

The day is burning away the hours, the minutes, the seconds. Very late that afternoon, the man she was waiting for finally arrives.

The empty space around her bed prevents him from wanting to enter the house and then, perhaps wait in an adjacent room.

During an amount of time that seems interminable, nothing changes the silence.

But then, she suddenly recognizes her husband leaning against the doorframe.

It has left him, the owner and master of this death, all alone. And there he remains, motionless, gathering his strength to walk over and face her with dignity.

She then begins to remove the ashes and move backward to another very distant time, to a vast city, silent and sad, to a house where she had arrived one night.

What time was it? She couldn't say.

Then on the train, exhausted by the long trip, her head had rested on the shoulder of Antonio. The bouquet of orange blossoms pressing against her sleeve, raised a sweet fragrance that made her feel slightly dizzy, keeping her from paying attention to what her young husband was saying.

But did it matter? Wasn't he probably saying something that he had already said to her before, maybe one, two, or three times.

"...That she was knitting, that all she did was knit on the glass veranda that looked out over the garden... and that as luck would have it his farm, that dark uncultivated jungle, didn't have a single traversable road, so that when he went by it on a neighboring road he could admire it, day after day, all year long... that a thick knot of black hairs was pulling her small, pale forehead toward the back of her head. That spring, like it wanted to touch her cheek, a tree had stuck its branches filled with flowers and bees into her room... and it was easy for him to watch her then; he didn't even have to get off of his horse... that as soon as winter shortened the days he had the audacity to press his forehead against the window and, for a long time during the dark night, he was able to lose himself in the contemplation of the lamp, the fire in the fireplace, and that silent girl who was knitting, stretched out in a large rocking chair. Once in a while, as though she was aware of him hiding there in the darkness, she would raise her eyes and smile absent-mindedly by chance. His eyes were the color of honey, with the same lazy and sweet look. Once the snow fell over the shoulders of this intruder; without changing anything, it spread over the wing of his sombrero and stuck to his eyebrows. Filled with love, he continued in spite of everything, enjoying the smile that was not directed at him..."

The bouquet of orange blossoms pressing against her sleeve, with its sick odor that made her sleepy, removed the strength to react violently and shout: "You're mistaken. My apparent laziness was deceptive. If you had just pulled out the line of my knitting, if you had, line by line, pulled apart the mesh of my knitting... you would have seen that each one was entangled in a blustery thought and a name that I will not forget."

How many times, as she woke up after the first dream in that cold, nuptial bedroom, had she tried to penetrate the thick veil of darkness that covered her eyes.

Her heart was filled with frustration. That darkness was so deep! Could it be she was blind?

She stretched out her arms and nervously felt around herself; she was ready to jump out of bed, when a burning hand pressed on her bosom and pushed her back down. And, as if the hand of a wounded person had come to touch her, the feeling of that urgent hand made her weak and weepy each time.

She remembers that she remained immobile, wanting to stop and discourage that amorous assault, with her passivity. She stayed motionless until the final kiss.

But one night something unexpected happened, something that she did not understand.

It was as if, in the center of her heart there was a slow, scalding shiver that, with each caress began to rise, and grow, to wrap her in rings to the root of her hair, clutch her by the throat until it was difficult to breathe, to shake her, and finally throw her, exhausted and sobered, into the unmade bed.

The pleasure. So this was what pleasure was! This shock, this immense flap of the wing, this mutual relapse into the same shame!

Poor Antonio, and what a surprise for him to face this almost immediate rejection! He never, ever, knew the point to which I hated all the nights like that.

He never knew that, night after night, the crazy girl that he held in his arms, biting her teeth with anger, was trying to ward off an urgent chill. That she was not only struggling against the caresses, but also against the tremor that, night after night, these caresses were able to make, inexorably, in the depths of her flesh.

It must be daybreak, she had thought, when the maid opened the curtains on her first morning as a married woman, and the dim light entered the cold room.

Nevertheless, her husband told her from outside: "Get up."

She remembers, as if it was today, the narrow garden without flowers and covered with dark moss, and the pond where the surface reflected her own body wrapped in a long white dressing gown.

Poor Antonio. What was he shouting? "It's a mirror, a large mirror so that you can comb your hair from the balcony."

Ah, so she can comb her hair forever in that somber light at dawn!

Distressed, she looked at the inverted landscape that was reflected at her feet. Some very high walls. A house of green stone. She and her husband looking like they were suspended between two abysses: the sky, and the sky in the water.

"Pretty, right? Look, you break it, and it loads again..."

Always laughing, Antonio lifted his arm in order to violently throw down a pebble that went to hit his newly-wed right in the face.

Thousands of phosphorescent snakes broke out in the pond and the scene that appeared inside it twisted and broke apart.

"The end of the world. That's the way it must be. Now I've seen it."

The new house; that lavish, annoying house where the parents of Antonio had died, and where Antonio himself was born. His new house that she recalled she hated from the

moment she entered the front door. How different it was from the pavilion of fragrant wood whose bright interior made you want to spy on it through the windows.

Maybe it had some similarity to the old house of her grandmother in the provincial city where she had spent most of her infancy, and where she had lived during the winter and entered society.

But, where is the billiard room, the sewing room, and the garden that smelled like lemon balm?

Here, there wasn't a single fireplace and—horror of horrors, the mirror in the vestibule was broken from top to bottom—; and there were large rooms whose furniture seemed like it was definitely covered with denim.

She remembers that she went from room to room trying in vain to find a spot she liked. She wandered through different corridors. On stairways that were nicely carpeted, her foot collided with the bronze bar on each step.

She wasn't able to find her way around it, and she wasn't able to get used to it.

Without fail, by the end of the afternoon Antonio had his wife get in the coupe and covered her knees with leather before sitting down by her side.

However, they never arrived at the house of the paralytic godmother sitting next to a silver brazier. And the old survivor of that diminished family waited for them in vain, afternoon after afternoon, next to a pot of tea—and then went down to sleep with her family without knowing the person that could make it keep on existing.

“We'll go tomorrow,” her loving husband sighed as soon as the car left the gate; “today just let me love you.” And they wandered around at random.

That way the newlywed got to know that large, quiet, dismal city.

At the end of its narrow streets, they were always able to see the rugged mountains. The town was surrounded by granite, like it was sunken into a pit in the tall mountain range, cut off from the wind.

And she, accustomed to the constant rustle of the wheat and the forest, to the noise of the river splashing against the stones that were raised up against the current, began to be afraid of the total and absolute silence she often woke up to during the nights.

She was pursued by the shattered image of the world that she saw in the pond on that first day. The silence seemed like a portent of doom.

Perhaps a volcano, unknown by everyone, was lurking nearby and waiting for the moment to explode and annihilate.

Then she had wanted to find a refuge in something that was familiar, like a gesture, or a memory.

When she saw her body dressed up in new clothes, with her uncombed hair, she didn't recognize herself. But why had Zoila raised her so lethargic? Why hadn't she taught her to arrange her thick head of hair?

Every day she had the desire to open her suitcases to look for portraits, objects, a warm garment. An unusual coldness was making her faint-hearted, without initiative, and her nervous fingers were not even able to tie the knot of a ribbon.

She tried to think about the things she had left behind only a couple of months ago. She closed her eyes trying to imagine a warm room, and she only saw it disturbed by the precipitation coming in through the open door; a grand hall of fiestas where the crystal tears of spiders trembled and where, with her hair combed properly, she danced for the first time until dawn, and the next gloomy afternoon her father had told her “Daughter, kiss your fiancé.”

Then she had obediently approached that man, so arrogant and so rich... and she had raised up to kiss his cheek.

She remembered that when she had moved away, she had noticed the grave expression of her grandmother, and her father’s shaky hands. She remembered having thought about Zoila and the cousins, who she became aware of when she pressed her ear against the door. She also remembered the obligations that had surrounded her for so many years.

And no; she was no longer able to do anything but remember the fear that had taken control of her ever since that moment, the anxiety that grew stronger every day, and the stubborn silence of Ricardo.

But, how to remember things based on a lie? How could she say that she had married out of spite?

If Antonio... But Antonio wasn’t a tyrant, or the dull person she might have expected for a husband. He was an enamored man, but also an energetic and discrete person whom no one could dislike.

Finally, one day, as if he was awakening from his rapture of love, her husband had looked at her for a long time with a tender, inquisitive look.

“Ana Maria, tell me, someday will you ever be able to love me as much as I love you?”

My God, that humility that was so dignified and honorable. And she felt a flood of tears fill her eyes.

“I love you , Antonio, but I am sad.”

Then he had continued to look at her in the same reasonable, sweet, way.

“What should I do so that you won’t be sad? If the house doesn’t please you, I will change it however you want. If you are bored alone with me, tomorrow we can see some people. We’ll have a great fiesta; I have a lot of friends here.”

But she turned her head from one side to the other saying:

“No, no...”

Now the tone of Antonio’s voice seemed unpleasant, now a feeling of distress rose up in her. What was he proposing? To organize an entire existence there, in this bottom of the sea, without a family, among brand-new friends and unknown people?

“Maybe certain diversions surprise you. I will bring a pair of sorrel horses from the farm and we will go to the park in the mornings. Ana Maria, say something: what do you want?”

She had grasped the arm of her husband wanting to say something, to explain; and it was then where her rebellious panic rose over every other reasoning:

“I want to leave.”

He looked at her intensely. She had never seen anyone turn pale before. From that moment she knew what it was: an unusual whiteness covering the cheeks, a motionless face where only the eyes were alive, bright and fixed.

And it was as though Antonio had turned into his father for a while.

Sigh, one does not sleep with impunity for so many nights by the side of an enamored young man.

A feeling of dejection had come over her when she thought about her old way of life. It seemed to remind her of things that, before, she would have lost all interest in.

From the house at the sawmill she rambled through the woods to her house, surprised not to have already found the life that she desired so much. It is possible that in some weeks our dreams and our customs that always seemed to be part of ourselves, can turn into something strange and unknown! Under the tulle of the mosquito net her bed now seemed narrow and cold; as stupid—with bad taste that humiliated her—as the paper scattered with forget-me-nots that filled the room. How could she have lived there so long without hating it?

One night she dreamed that she loved her husband. With a love that was a feeling strangely and desperately sweet, a heartrending tenderness that filled her heart with sighs, and that made her limp and fervent, like she was burning.

She woke up crying. Then, in the darkness, her head pressed against the pillow, she called out softly, “Antonio!”

If at that moment she had had the courage to not say that name, perhaps her destiny would have been different.

But she called out: “Antonio,” and in her there was a strange revelation.

“One doesn’t seep with impunity for so many nights by the side of an enamored young man.” She needed his strength, his embrace, and the tedious love that she had rejected.

She remembered a large bed, that was disordered and warm.

She longed for the moment when, holding onto her hair like he was trying to stop her, Antonio prepared to sleep. Some very soft bumps against her hip let her know that her husband was letting go of life, little by little, and was slipping into unconsciousness. Then, the temple pressed against her bad wife shoulder began to beat strongly, as if all the sensitivity of that body was coming to touch her there.

A strong emotion and a strong respect moved her then, thinking that, with generosity and without limits, he was lending her his dreams.

She felt like kissing the trusting temple of Antonio that, at night, was the most vulnerable part of his self.

Month after month the absence—he ignored the persistent invitation of his family because he wanted to use the time to heal his wound—and his thirst for love was augmenting his regret.

Autumn had arrived, and in the house of his grandmother the first braziers were lit when Antonio finally deigned to come.

She remembers. She arrived at the farm exhausted and didn’t even manage to comb her ruffled hair, her face full of fatigue. She went directly to the desk where Antonio was smoking as he waited for her.

“Antonio!”

“How are you?” a strange, calm voice replied.

She was able to resurrect very few things after that meeting, that she now knows was so definitive.

She reconsiders and realizes that in her entire life there was only one memory, like a sign of identification, the tone of voice or the gesture of a hand, that brings into place the dark will of destiny.

How absurd, and how distant, the passion of the girl, who was now sighing at his feet, tousled and weak, with her arms wrapped around his waist, must seem to Antonio.

With her face sunken into the jacket of an indifferent man, she searched for the aroma and the warmth of the passionate man of yesterday.

She remembers, and on her neck, she can still feel a forgiving hand that gently drew away from her...

And that's the way it was then and always, always.

They lived where she wanted, on the farm which her father had offered as her dowry. But Antonio held onto his black forest, and he kept his house, and his interests in the city.

He had a friendly, kind tone of voice, but never the hint, or the attitude that would permit her to rehabilitate herself. Without any effort she detached herself from the past that made her a slave. And at night his embrace was still strong, tender, but yes, distant.

After that she had known the worst of solitudes; one which in a large bed took control of a body intimately united with another body beloved and distracted.

Her firstborn was never able to give her back the love, or the spirit, of Antonio.

Neither sickness or death were able to create a tie of love between them.

But she had learned to take refuge in a family, in a sorrow, to combat the anxiety of being surrounded by children, and housework.

And maybe that was what saved her from new, distressful passions. Was it that? No.

It was that, in spite of everything, during her entire youth she was never able to exhaust the jealousy, the love, and the sadness, of the passion that Antonio had inspired in her.

And, in exchange, he had deceived her so many times!

His gallant life came to her in a wave of anonymities and denunciations. There was a time when, disdainful, although sorrowful, she fled from confidences, satisfied with her category of legitimate wife, certain that it all represented a choice, a point of definite honor, in the distant heart of her husband.

Until that day...

It was a morning. Delayed by the time she needed to comb her long hair, from the bathroom she looked through the half closed door at the disorder in the bedroom when Antonio appeared unexpectedly, coming back after he had been hunting. Thinking that he was alone, he kept his hat on and chewed on a piece of boxwood. Seconds after that, as he was approaching the night table to set down his cartridge belt, his foot stumbled against a blue leather slipper.

And then, yes then—she saw, and could not forget it—he brutally, and angrily, kicked it far away from himself.

And in a second, in that short second she was confronted with the brutal recognition of a truth, a truth she had perhaps carried within herself while shying away from looking at it carefully. She understood that she was not, and had never been, more than one of the many passions of Antonio, a passion that circumstances had fastened to his life. He tolerated her and that was all; he accepted her, champing at the bit, as the consequence of an irremediable gesture.

She remembers. He had slowly backed up, desperately wanting to remain unnoticed. She heard a sigh, and then the creak of the bed under the weight of Antonio's body.

It was a morning of bright sunshine and the day looked like it would be splendid. A swarm of dragonflies were buzzing against the window. Shouts came from the garden where the children were chasing each other with a watering hose.

An entire day of warmth was waiting. To comb her hair, to speak, to tidy herself and smile. “The lady is sad, with such nice weather?...” “Mama, come and play with us...” “What’s wrong? Why are you always in such a bad mood, Ana Maria?”

To have to comb her hair, to speak, to tidy up and smile. To have to face the crisis of a long summer with that kick in the middle of her heart. She had leaned against the wall, suddenly feeling horribly depressed.

Her eyes had filled with tears that she immediately wiped away, but more kept coming, and still more, and more... She doesn’t ever remember having cried so much.

Years passed. Years in which she withdrew herself and was becoming every day more unsatisfied, and more miserable.

Why, why did the nature of a woman have to be made so there is always a man in the eye of her life?

Men, they always manage to place their passion in other things. But the destiny of women is to remove the pain of love in an orderly house, before an unfinished tapestry.

In vain she had used all the unconscious methods of passion to reconquer Antonio; tenderness, violence, criticism, silence, an amorous siege. He avoided her affectionately, and fearfully, or he pretended to ignore her gloomy moods.

But sometimes, when she was morally emaciated, a moment of indifference made her turn toward sympathy, and confidence in her husband broke out spontaneously. Then he invited her to the city, he took her to the theater, and he even went with her when she was shopping. And he talked with her about her, and himself, and the children, and life “that was so sad in spite of everything,” so he said, he, who was happiness turned into a person...

“You are the most enchanting woman I have ever known. It’s a pity you are my wife, Ana Maria,” he used to tell her sometimes; and when he smiled his white teeth seemed so frank; his deeply brown eyes covered her with teasing and tenderness and, in order not to divert him from the path of that distant caress, she resisted the urge to throw her arms around his neck and kiss the handsome face of that virile man.

It was strange that she had had to behave like that with the people she love the most! With Antonio, and her children.

“One must be judicious in love,” she used to tell herself.

And in fact she had quite often managed to be judicious. She had managed to adjust her own intense love to the mediocre love of others. Trembling with tenderness and sincerity, she often managed to smile frivolously so as not to frighten away the small amount of love that came her way. Because not loving someone too much was perhaps the best proof of love that one could give to certain people, on certain occasions.

Is it that all those who were born to love acted like she did, hiding, minute by minute, what was most vital inside one’s self?

She still remembers that absurd trip, and how it was like a nightmare when she had to constantly get up and wander around through the train in order to calm her nervousness.

Oh, the train that traveled less rapidly than her thoughts, toward the city where she was hoping to surprise Antonio.

Everything! She was ready for everything, to avoid feeling sorry, or falling into any kind of indulgence. Surges of anger took hold of her sometimes with so much violence that she choked with a spasm of pain.

She still sees herself arriving at an isolated train station at dawn.

Then there was the humiliating waiting room in the private residence of the lawyer she had the audacity to wake up. She remembers, as if it was yesterday, his disapproving silence when he listened to her, and the delicate slowness with which he measured his reply:

“No, you shouldn’t do that, Ana Maria, remember that Antonio is the father of your children; remember that there are things that a lady cannot do without lowering herself. Perhaps your own children would criticize you for it later. And besides, what do you care about that unfortunate woman who, in a short time, is surely going to regret the mistake she is making...” Then he suddenly asked her to wait a moment. “Just a moment,” he had added hesitantly, then he had rushed out of the room.

No, even if she never in her life met him again, in her heart she never felt any anger for the man who, knowing her since she was a child, had betrayed her with his awkward, kind-hearted plans as if he had become her own father.

The fact was that when the door opened again it was Antonio himself who walked into the room, looking stern and pale.

Always being accustomed to winning battles with other women who were afraid of the damage that a single word could inflict on them, she had already assumed a look of haughtiness when, trembling with anger, she began to insult him for the first time during their long married life. And the insults spurted out at first pointed and clever, and then so absurd and unjust that she suddenly shut up, ashamed, and ready beforehand to defend herself against any reprisal.

But no.

He had continued to look at her attentively, like he had done during the whole time of her vehement rebuke. Then:

“Nevertheless you still love me!” he had finally exclaimed with an aggrieved voice. “And you love me a lot! Tell me, why, why?”

Their unwonted reconciliation had lasted only for a very short time. And very soon he had returned to his polite indifference and she to a dislike as strong as the love which she had felt for him again for the space of three short weeks.

“I’m suffering, I am suffering from you like from a wound that is constantly open.”

For years she had repeated those same words, because he had a mysterious gift of making her break out in tears. That was the only way she was able to stop for a moment, the effect of the burning needle that was lacerating her heart. For years, until she was exhausted, and completely worn out.

“I’m suffering, I am suffering from you...” she started to say on day when, suddenly, she closed her lips and stopped speaking. filled with shame. Why keep on hiding from herself the fact that, for a long time, she was making *herself* cry?

It was true that she suffered; but she was no longer sorry about the indifference of her husband, and she was no longer soothed by her own misfortune. A feeling of irritation and a sense of resentment grew, distorting her suffering.

Then the time was increasing that irritation, until it became anger, changed her timid resentment into a determined desire for revenge.

And then hate began to strengthen the tie that bound her to Antonio.

Yes, hate, a silent hate that, instead of consuming her, fortified her. A hate that made her plan grand projects that almost always collapsed into petty revenges.

The hate, yes the hate under whose shadow she breathed, she slept, and she laughed. The hate that became her purpose in life, her most important task. A hate that was not calmed by victories, as though she was infuriated by such little resistance.

And that hate still affects her, even now when she hears her husband finally approach her and kneel beside her.

He hasn’t looked at her. Almost immediately he sinks his face into his hands, and his body topples over the shroud that covers her.

For a long time he stayed motionless, separated from his dead wife, and he seems to be thinking about a sad yesterday, as well as many other things.

With revulsion she feels that loathed head pressing on her hip, pressing there when her children had pressed so gently and sweetly. With anger, she looks for the last time at that carefully combed head of brown hair, that neck, and those shoulders.

Suddenly, she is shocked by an unusual sight. Very close to his ear, she notices a wrinkle, a single wrinkle, very thin, as thin as spider web, but a wrinkle, a real wrinkle, his first one.

My God, is that possible? Antonio is not inviolable?

No, Antonio is not inviolable. That one imperceptible wrinkle will eventually spread out toward his cheek, where it will soon open and become two, and then four; it will eventually cover his whole face. Then, slowly, that beauty, that beauty that nothing has been able to change will begin to corrode and, together with that, the same thing will happen to his arrogance, his charm, and the possible actions of that cruel and unfortunate person.

Like a string that breaks, like an energy that loses its purpose, the implacable and venomous urge to bite him has suddenly faded away. And now her hate has become passive, almost forgiving.

When he raises his head she notices with astonishment that he is weeping. His tears, the first ones she sees leak out of his eyes, spread over his cheeks, without him trying to wipe them, surprised by the effect of his own sadness.

He’s crying, finally he’s crying! Or, maybe he is only crying for the loss of his youth, which he feel has departed with this dead woman, or maybe he’s only crying about the memory of his failures that, for a long time, he has forgotten, and that now are returning without being able to ignore them. But she knows that the first tears are an open channel for all those that follow, that his sorrow, and perhaps also his regret, have been able to

open a breach in that hardened heart, a breach through which, in the future, there will be a continuing flood of mysterious rules that filter through, to strike, to gnaw, and to destroy.

From this day forward he will know what it is to have a death in his past. And never, never be able to really enjoy anything. In each joy, even the simplest—a winter moon, the night of a fiesta—there will be a feeling of emptiness, and a certain strange feeling of solitude.

And while the tears flow out and drop off, she feels her hate withdraw and disappear. No, no more hate. Could she really hate a poor man who, like her, was destined to old age, and sadness?

No, she didn't hate him. But neither did she love him. And strangely enough, as she ceases to love and hate him, she feels the last knot of her vital framework fall apart. No, nothing matters now. It seems as though neither she, nor her past, has a reason to exist. A great weariness surrounds her, and she feels herself falling backward. Oh, this sudden defiance! This tormenting desire that makes her feel like she wants to rise up moaning: "I want to live. Give it back, give me back my hate!"

"Let's go..."

From a road, gleaming under the sun, an immense cloud of dust comes to meet her. And here she is covered with impalpable sheets of fire.

"Let's go, let's go."

"Where?"

"A little farther."

Resigned, she rests her cheek on the empty shoulder of the dead woman.

And some one, or something, pushes her down the road to a humid place near a forest. That little light in the distance, what is it? That quiet little light? It is Maria Griselda who is preparing to eat supper. When dusk came she asked for a lamp and arranged the cover over the wicker table on the terrace. Also at dusk, the servants opened the water gate, to water the grass and the three clumps of carnations. And wave of fragrance rose out of the submerged garden toward the solitary woman.

The moths fluttered around the illuminated lampshade, then half scorched they brushed the white tablecloth.

Oh, Maria Griselda, don't be afraid if the dogs climb up the stairs with their hairs bristled, it's me.

Carried away and sad, I see you there, my sweet daughter-in-law. I see your admirable rather heavy body, supported by heron legs. I see your dark hair, your pale skin, your proud profile. And I see your eyes, your narrow dark green eyes just like those clusters of floating moss in the stagnated forest ponds.

Maria Griselda, only I have been able to love you. Because I, and only I, have been able to forgive you for having such wonderful, such an unusual, beauty.

Now I am blowing out lamp. Don't be afraid, I only want to caress your shoulder as I pass by.

Why have you jumped out of your seat? Don't tremble that way. I'm leaving, Maria Griselda, I'm leaving.

A current pushes her, pushing her down the road through a tropic whose vegetation is fading out as the ground is divided into thousand and thousands of closely grouped little

islands. Under the pale, transparent foliage, nothing more than a fields of begonias. Oh, the begonias with watery pulp! Here, all of nature breaths and feeds on water, nothing more than water. And the current always pushes it slowly, and along with it, enormous clusters of plants whose roots are joined together like gentle snakes.

And above this world through which the dead woman is slipping, the livid glow of a lightening flash seems to have circled and stopped permanently.

The sky, however, is filled with stars; and the star she is looking at begins to move and then, and as if it were answering a call, falls rapidly.

“Don’t leave, you, you...!”

Whose voice is that? Whose lips look for and then caress her hands, her neck, and her forehead?

It ought to be forbidden for living people to touch the mysterious flesh of those who are dead.

The lips of her daughter caressing her body have stopped the slight tingling of her deepest cells, and have suddenly brought her back so lucidly, and so linked to everything that surrounds her, as though she had never died.

“My poor daughter, I have seen your outbursts of anger, but never a chaotic expression of pain like the one that now makes you moan, pressing against me with this hysterical passion. “She’s cold, she treats her mother with coldness,” all used to say. And no, you’re not cold; you are young, just young. Your tenderness to me is a seed that has always been inside you, and my death has made it mature in one single night.

Nothing I have done has ever caused what my death finally has. You see, death is also a function of life.

Don’t cry, don’t cry, if you knew! I will continue glowing inside you, evolving and changing, as if I were still alive; you will love me, you will reject me, and then you will love me again. And maybe you yourself will die before I wear out and die inside you. So don’t cry...”

They are coming, they raise her out of bed with extreme precaution, they place her in a large wooden box. A branch of carnations rolls on the carpet. They pick it up and place it at her feet. Then they start heaping the rest of the flowers over her as if they were covering her with a sheet.

How well her body adapts itself to the coffin!

She hasn’t the slightest desire to rise up. She didn’t know she could ever be so tired!

She sees the sky fluctuate; it slides; her half-open eyes almost immediately can see another, whitened a short time ago; it’s her dressing room.

A huge tear, caused by the last shake, made her realize she was in the guest room. Many other rooms can be seen in other directions and angles, with familiar outlines, and rafters. There was a brief stop in front of each door, and she assumed it was because of the narrowness of the door that prevented those who were carrying her from entering.

And then came the sacrilege when they trampled on the blue carpet. Who would have dared to bring her into the vestibule? And what for? The lustrous floor was a thousand times better than the style of the rest of the house.

There, exposed to the sun and the constant hustle and bustle was the place that, until a short time ago, was her refuge on winter days. Only by spending the rest of the time in another room that was almost always closed, was she able to preserve the blueness of the blue carpet.

When there was a bad storm, her children used give her a strange invitation that always surprised strangers.

They said: "Let's go to the beach." The beach was that square of soft blue carpet; that was where the children would go to sit down with their toys and, when they were older, with their books.

And it really seemed that the cold, and the bad weather, always stopped on the edge of that blue piece of wool whose intense, happy color cleared the eyes and the mood, and that the hours spent in that separated room were the most warm, and the most intimate.

She would never have let them take the blue rug to the vestibule. Who had dared to take advantage of her sickness that way?

My God, the waters had not yet closed over her head, and things had already changed; life was moving on in spite of her, and without her.

Suddenly she saw the sky above her.

Then she realizes that it is while going down the steps to the garden. There the stop is longer. Perhaps they are recovering their strength before going on.

The sky! A grey sky where birds fly low. In a few hours it would start to rain again.

What a beautiful evening, in spite of being dreary and damp. She never loved them like that but, nevertheless, this time she discovers its gloomy beauty and even enjoys the soft breath of air that seems to come and slip through the seams of her coffin.

Now she feels herself shaken and carried down. Then she is resting on the last step.

Yes, it was here that she curled up to enjoy the sun. For a long time she stayed there leaning back, with her cheek pressed against the last stair, in order to steal some of its warmth. When her children were young they also used to glue their ear to it in order to hear that something was moving inside it, and that the stone was palpitating like a clock, or a heart. Moistened, it gave off the particular odor that blackboards emit when they are wiped with a sponge after their last task.

Once again the sky passes over her head.

Goodbye, goodbye my old stone! I never realized how something like this step could have such a strong effect on our feelings.

The funeral cortege had begun to walk over the grass. She feels herself impelled into a strange rocking; it was like they were slowly rocking the coffin back and forth. And then she knew the strong arms of her two sons were supporting it on the right side, and she guesses that the feet on the left side are slightly weaker, because it is supported by her father. She can tell that Ricardo is giving the energy of his support to the right.

She is sure that many people are still close by her, and that many others are following her. And it is infinitely sweet to feel herself transported like that, with her hands over her breast, like something very fragile, and very beloved.

For the first time she feels herself enter with majesty into the great street of the trees. She is no longer aggravated by the haughty bearing of the poplar; for the first time she notices that its foliage is undulating and reflects the moving water.

Then they come in contact with the gorgeous eucalyptus trees. On their trunks, narrow strips of bark are hanging loosely, uncovering a heavenly, milky bareness in the cracks.

Touched, she thinks: “It’s strange. I never noticed it before. They loose their bark, just like snakes loose their skin in the spring...”

The wind blows up clusters of dry leaves that strike her coffin as strong as little pebbles. Little by little the sky becomes clear. She makes out the pale disk of the waxing moon.

Now the funeral procession enters the forest.

And she is filled with the desire to press, and crunch under her feet, the thick layers of pine needles that cover the ground with the color of damp metal, and also the desire to bend over and see, for one last time, that large silver net of fabric made by the nocturnal tracks of the slugs.

Now she is wrapped, as though with another shroud, by the acrid perfume of the plants that live in the shade.

By now they have reached the border of the park. And then they are carrying her cross country.

Farther on beyond the stubble, there is a stretch of marshy terrain. A thick fog floats almost at ground level and hovers over the reeds

The funeral procession now moves slower, and difficultly, finally with the cadence of a funeral march.

Someone sinks into the mud up to their knees, and the coffin rocks violently, until one side touches the ground.

She is affected by strange anxieties. Oh, if they would only leave her here, out in the open! She yearns to be left in the heart of the swamps in order to hear until dawn the croaking of the frogs in the water under the moonlight; and to hear the velvety crackle of the thousands of bubbles in the mud. And, listening carefully, still be able to perceive the sinister buzzing of the electric wires along the side of the distant highway. And before dawn, the first flapping wings of the flamencos over the sugar-cane plantation. Yes, if only it were possible!

But no, it’s not possible. They have now lifted her up and they are advancing again.

Suddenly a wall that blocks the horizon makes her remember the town cemetery and the spacious family vault.

And that is where the procession is headed.

She is filled with a great sense of tranquility.

There are poor women who are buried in cemeteries as large as cities, even with paved roads. And in the bed of some rivers there are suicide victims that the current constantly presses, gnaws and disfigures. There are recently buried girls whose relatives, anxious to find free space in a dark, narrow crypt, whose desires are reduced until they are almost erased from the world of flesh and bones. And there are also young adulterers who are drawn to unwise meetings in remote suburbs and who are caught by surprise and then shot by some unknown person while lying on the body of the lover, and whose bodies are defiled by autopsies, and then are abandoned for days in the ignominy of a morgue.

Oh, my God, there are fools who say that once we are dead we shouldn't worry about our bodies! She feels extremely fortunate to rest among the cypress trees, in the same chapel where her mother and several sisters are laid to rest; fortunate that her body will be able to deteriorate peacefully, and honorably, under a tombstone with her name on it.

Teresa, Ana Maria, Cecilia...

Her name, all the names, even of those of people she had disapproved. And under those names, two dates separated by a hyphen.

As the funeral procession finally reaches its destination, a final gust of wind suddenly shuts down the gurgling of a fountain. Inside the vault the night is beginning to block out the colors of the stained-glass windows. In front of the altar, Father Carlos, wearing an Alb and a stole, moves his lips and sprinkles incense.

May peace be with you, Ana Maria, obstinate child, willful, and good. May God accept you and receive you. The God you persisted in ignoring.

"But I do not have a soul, Father. Didn't you know that? I can still hear you sigh with feigned sadness so you don't have to continue my reprimands."

And I remember the way you were before: petite and boisterous, but always the first in Biblical History.

Those "end of the year" exams to which I was invited by the Mother Superior, and which I was not able to keep from attending, showed me year after year an Ana Maria who was filled with religious enthusiasm, very different from her usual idiosyncrasy.

How lively and how passionately you were able to describe events and images!

And that great wonder: the burning bush that kept on burning and was never destroyed, and in the middle of which there was a voice that called out: Moses, Moses!

And the miraculous ladder filled with angels and Archangels that God gave to Jacob during a dream.

And the Red Sea with its raging waters, gently opening to make way for the chosen people.

And that mysterious hand writing, during a sacrilegious festival, the three words that warned Baltazar of the imminent destruction of his kingdom...

"Of course, the Mother Superior always will be the leader of Biblical History, because that kind of thing entertains her. But just try and ask her the simplest question about the Catechism!"

"Leave her alone, Reverend Mother, leave her alone, I insinuated cautiously, because there is no road, no matter how narrow it is, that does not lead to God.

I still remember that day when your father, feeling upset, came to speak with me."

"A letter from the Sacred Heart, Father Carlos. The Mother Superior wants to have a serious discussion with me about Ana Maria... You can't imagine, Father Carlos, how grateful I would be if you were to go in my place to find out what it's all about. I never knew..."

"But what could this be about, Don Gonzalo? Tell me, what complaints do they have about Ana Maria."

“Well, it seems that the child said...”

“During a sewing class, while we were embroidering and Mother Carmela was telling us in a lecture what heaven was like... I said I didn’t have the slightest interest in going to heaven, because it seemed to me like a boring place.”

I had to restrain a smile after the confused expression of Mother Carmela, who was almost as young as her students and, holding back the urge to tell her not to mention a topic as delicate as that during a sewing class, I leaned over to you.”

“All right, child, and tell me then; what would you want heaven to be like?”

For a moment you thought about it, and then said:

“I would like it to be the same as earth is. I would like it to be like the farm in the spring, when all the rose bushes are flowering, and all the fields are green, and you can hear the cooing of doves during the afternoon... And I would especially like something there wasn’t on the farm: ...I would like it if there were little deer that were not afraid and would come to eat out of my hand... And I would also like it if my cousin Ricardo was always with me, and they would give us permission to spend the night in the woods, there where the grass is as soft as velvet, right on the edge of the stream...”

Then there was a moment of silence.

“But what you are describing to me is the Earthly Paradise...!” I finally told you, quite upset.

“In fact, Father Carlos, the Earthly Paradise from which Adam and Eve were banished was the result of their disobedience,” the Mother Superior intervened at that point, “and I must add that this child is also the worst example of disobedience there has been since the two Rozas girls. You remember them, Father...”

“The Earthly Paradise, Ana Maria! Your entire life was nothing more than the urgent search for that garden which was already irretrievably forbidden to man by the cherub with the flaming sword.

I remember you as an adolescent and, nevertheless, already dedicated to the devil of anger and of flesh. Your fright on that day when I surprised you kneeling in the corner of our country church, a humble little church where that soul of yours, which you disowned, was still guiding your steps, when you felt you were really unhappy.”

“No, Father Carlos, please, don’t talk to me about novenas or anything pious... If I am here it’s because it’s nice and fresh at this time of day, and also because no one is here looking me in the face, or asking me what I think, or don’t think... No Father, but I don’t have any intention of observing lent... Why? Because I’m angry with God, that’s all”.

“I remember I asked you, ‘and can you tell me why it is that you are angry with God?’ as a joke, while we were walking toward my parish sitting room, very relieved that you had not gone to the extreme of denying His existence.”

“Why am I angry? Because your God never listens to me and gives nothing of what I ask Him for.”

“Maybe it’s because you ask him for something that is not good for you.”

“Good for me, good for me...” you grumbled.

Oh, your sad eyes, your defiant looks, all summer long. Eyes and looks you flaunted, even under your lovely crown of orange blossoms on that day when I blessed your wedding.

However, you found a way to slip off to the sacristy immediately after the ceremony. “Goodbye, Father, pray for me,” you sighed almost in my ear, and then hugged me.

And of course I did pray for you. All my life I prayed for you, for your happiness, and above all, for you to find the words that would succeed in bringing you back to God.

“Ana Maria, I am seriously worried about your attitude.”

“But, Father, what attitude are you talking about? On Sundays I never fail to attend Mass, and every Friday I also take my children to communion! And if I didn’t attend the Confirmation of Anita last Thursday, it was because I wasn’t feeling well, I swear it...”

“That’s not what I am referring to, Ana Maria, and you know that. I was speaking of the Retreat you promised me you would do this summer.”

“Yes, Father, but don’t remind me of that promise. Please believe me, a Retreat would be impossible at this time. I have too much to do. You don’t realize how much there is to do in a house like mine, with Alicia, Luis and his guests, all coming and going as if my farm was some seaside resort. And to make matters worse, all the time Zoila is furious, and everyday she is more overbearing. And Antonio... Oh, Father, if you only knew how much Antonio is making me suffer...! Because of that, believe me if I tell you that at this moment I would not be able to pray, or recognize myself, or even think...”

“Of course, it’s clear that you only can take shelter and think when it’s a question of the miserable duties and preoccupations of this sad world...”

“And it’s because God made them that way, Father! And are you going to try and tell me to ignore what he has done?”

“Ana Maria, that’s enough!” I exclaimed adamantly, then struck by a sudden feeling of distress I said: “Child, in truth I no longer know what to do with you.”

“Yes but I know, Father!” You started to laugh with one of those unexpected changes of humor that is part of your charm, and you came to sit down on the arm of my chair, turning to me with your wicked smile... “Ask your God for a very special favor for me. A miracle, for example.”

“Well, that is certainly arrogant! So, you want God to come to you without you taking a single step toward Him?”

“Why not?”

“Frankly, child, frankly...” I was about to forget about it when little Anita came and innocently tried to cut off our discussion.”

“Papa wants me to say that we are waiting for the bowling game, Father Carlos,” the child said. “Fred and I are going to play with Papa. And Alberto and Doro (that was the boy who helped in the vegetable garden), will play with you.”

“And I can still hear you saying impetuously: ‘What do you think I am...! The fifth wheel of the cart? No, I also play. I can take turns with Fred. And I can assure you, my dear Anita, that neither Alberto or Doro are going to play the same tricks on me as the last time.’”

“Oh, Mama!” the child mumbled with resignation, while we were traveling toward the ‘bowling alley’; when you don’t win, you always think it’s because we played a trick on you.

How different that young, troubled Ana Maria who wouldn't accept losing in games was from the other one I had to visit for only a few days in her sick bed!

"Child, would you like to have me bring you the Holy Eucharist when you are feeling a little better? Perhaps it would help you heal sooner," I suggested discretely.

"Yes, why not!" you answered immediately to my surprise, "why not, Father, if that would please you?"

"In that case, child, don't you think it would be a good idea to have a confession right now?" I hurried to say, pretending not to have noticed the last expression you made.

"I would prefer tomorrow, Father... The doctor will be here in half an hour."

"A half an hour would be enough."

"I don't think so, Father. I should warn you that, until now you have never had to listen to a list of moral and venial sins as long as mine would be."

"I can see that the sin of vanity increased to a state of bragging about your sins, could be your greatest sin," I replied, trying to answer you with the same tone of voice.

I remember you wanted to laugh, but you stifled it with a sort of a moan while you fell back on the sheets looking pale. And, suddenly terrified, I realized how bad you had been feeling for a long time; worn out and struggling with a false smile against a state of health that was getting worse and worse, without stopping.

"Please, Father, don't look at me like that... I'm still not dead, you know." You still had the courage to make a joke, and then you added:

"But come back tomorrow, Father, be sure to come back, okay?"

"She's suffering," Alicia murmured as she left the room with me. "However, the doctor says that there's nothing serious to fear at the moment; on the contrary, he has even noticed a slight improvement. But you will be sure to come tomorrow, won't you Father? It was such a relief to hear her agree to have a confession. If you only knew how much I have prayed for that. And didn't you notice the expression, and her sweet voice when she asked you to return?"

Yes, my poor Ana Maria, how could I have not noticed the look, and the timid voice with which you said: "Come and see this humble servant of God."

The coach from the farm came for me the next morning, much earlier than the time we had agreed.

"She's had a sudden attack... her heart is failing... they are afraid she won't regain consciousness," Doro told me, breathlessly.

Yes, how far advanced you already were in the path of our final journey when I leaned over your vacant eyes that seemed to contemplate something deeply inside yourself!

"She made her act of contrition yesterday when she agreed to confess, isn't that true, Father?" Alicia said, her face covered with tears.

I gave you absolution.

Alicia fell on the shoulder of her husband who, for once, was compassionate with her.

I administered extreme unction.

Then I stayed by your side, praying, during those three interminable hours that your struggle lasted.

I say your "struggle," because with that sustained death-rattle in the throat of those who are agonizing, I have always tried to follow the determined march of the soul on its difficult journey through the body, to the door behind which You, Lord, are found, waiting for us with your kindness, and infinite mercy.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, may peace be with you, Ana Maria, goodbye...

And then, sunken into profound darkness, she felt herself descending dizzily for a long time, as if they had dug through the bottom of a crypt and were intending to bury her in the actual depths of the earth.

And someone, or something placed the shrouded woman to the autumnal ground. And that was when she began to descend, through the mud, and between the curled roots of the trees. Through the burrows where tiny, timid animals were nestled. Falling, at times, through smooth holes of devil's spittle.

She descended slowly, very slowly, avoiding clusters of bones and strange creatures with slimy bodies that looked through the narrow cracks filled with dew. Bumping into marvelously white and intact human skeletons, whose edges were shrunken like they were in the mother's womb.

She touched bottom in an old sea bed and rested there for a long time, among nuggets of gold and ancient shells.

Underground slopes let her keep on falling further, in her journey under immense vaults of petrified forests.

Certain emanations dragged her toward a central location, and others pushed her back violently toward the areas of climate favorable to her substance.

Oh, if people knew what things were beneath them, they wouldn't find it so simple to drink water from fountains! Because everything is sleeping in the ground, and everything wakes up from the ground.

One more time the shrouded woman returned to the surface of life

In the darkness of the crypt, she had the impression that she could finally move. And, in fact, that she could push open the lid of the coffin, then rise up, and return upright and cool, through the roads to the threshold of her house.

But, born from her body, she felt an immense number of roots sink down and spread out in the earth like a powerful spider web through which the constant palpitation of the universe was rising, toward her.

And now she only wanted to remain connected to the earth, suffering and enjoying the coming and going of distant tides; feeling the grass grow, new islands emerge, and on another continent the unknown flower that only lives during an eclipse. And still feeling suns rise and move, and fling down, who knows where, gigantic mountains of sand.

It's true. The shrouded woman did not have the least desire to sit up. All she could do, in the end, was rest and die.

She had already suffered the death of the living. Now she wanted total immersion, the second death: the death of those who are dead.