

La Última Niebla
(The Final Moment of Fog)

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The previous night's storm had removed the shingles from the roof of the old country house. When we arrived the rain was dripping into all of the rooms.

"The roofs are not prepared for a winter like this," the servant said as he led us into the living room, and since he looked at me with an expression of surprise, Daniel quickly explained:

"My cousin and I were married this morning."

I felt a moment of perplexity.

"In spite of the small importance he has given to our sudden marriage, Daniel certainly should have warned his family," I thought, feeling scandalized.

As a matter of fact, ever since the car had crossed the boundary of the farm Daniel had become nervous, and almost hostile.

It was to be expected.

Hardly a year ago, he had made the same journey with his first wife; that sullen, weak girl he adored, who would die unexpectedly hardly three months later. But now there is something like apprehension in the way he examines me from head to foot. It is the same hostile expression with which he always looks at any stranger.

"What are you doing?" I ask him.

"I am looking at you," he answers. "I am looking at you, because I know you too well..."

He shivers. He goes over to the hearth, and while he tries to revive the bluish flame that is coming from some damp logs, he continues very calmly:

"Until we were eight years old, we used to take a bath at the same time, in the same bathtub. Then, summer after summer Felipe and I, hiding, while lying on our stomachs in the weeds, would watch all the girls in the family dive into the river. I don't even need to see you with no clothes on. I even know the scar you have after your operation for appendicitis.

I am so exhausted that, instead of answering I let myself fall into a chair. I, in turn, look at the body of the man who is standing in front of me. This large and rather clumsy body is one I also know by memory, since I have seen it grow up and reach maturity. For years I have not stopped saying that if Daniel doesn't manage to stand up straight he will become hunchbacked. And since I often have stuck fingers trembling with anger in them, I know the strength of his jagged and curly blond hairs. However, this indication of unease in his movements, and this distressed look, are something new for me.

When he was a boy, Daniel was not afraid of ghosts, or furniture that creaks in the darkness during the night. Since the death of his wife, it seems as though he is always afraid of being alone.

We go to a second room that is even colder than the first one, and we eat without saying anything.

"Are you bored?" my husband asks me unexpectedly.

“I am exhausted,” I answer.

With his elbows on the table, he looks at me fixedly for a while, and then he asks me something else:

“Why did we get married?”

“To be married,” I answered.

Daniel chuckles.

“Do you know you are very lucky to have married me?”

“Yes, I know,” I say, ready to fall asleep.

“Would you have liked to be a wizened old maid who sews for the poor people on the farm?”

I shrug my shoulders.

“That’s the future that awaits your sisters...”

I don’t say anything. I am no longer bothered by the caustic phrases that have upset me for the past fifteen days.

A new and violent rainstorm is pounding on the windows. Out there in the back of the farm can I hear the continuous barking of dogs, coming closer, and then moving farther away. Daniel rises and picks up the lamp. He starts to walk. As I follow him wrapped in a blanket of vicuna that the kind serving woman had given me, I come to realize that his sarcasm was actually directed against himself. He is pale, and seems to be suffering.

As soon as he gets in the bedroom, he sets down the lamp and rapidly turns his head, as something like a snort he’s unable to hide comes out of his throat.

I look at him with surprise. And a second later I realize he is crying.

I step away from him, trying to persuade myself that the best thing to do is to pretend that I know absolutely nothing of his pain. But deep down I also know that this is also the most comfortable thing for me to do.

And then I am upset by the idea of my own egotism, even more than by the pain of my husband. I let him go into the next room without making any sign that I am aware of his pain, without saying a single word of sympathy. I get undressed, I go to bed and, without knowing how, or why, I instantly fall asleep.

The next morning, when I wake up, next to me there is an empty furrow in the bed; this tells me that Daniel got up and went to town as soon as it got light.

* * *

The girl lying in that white casket was sitting under the arbor coloring post cards not two days ago. And now here she is, imprisoned and immobile, in that long wooden box where they have fitted a piece of glass into the lid so that those who knew her can contemplate her final expression.

I approach and, for the first time, I see the face of a dead person.

I can see a pale face, without even a trace of a shadow in her wide closed eyelids. It is a face that is empty of all feelings.

This dead woman, to whom I would never think of speaking, because she never seems to have been alive, suddenly suggests to me the word silence.

Silence: a great silence, a silence of years, or centuries, a terrifying silence that seems to grow in the room, and inside my head.

I back away and nervously make my way through the group of silent mourners and finally reach the door after having stumbled over horrible wreaths of artificial flowers.

Almost running, I go through the garden and open the gate, but outside a dense fog has covered the landscape, and the silence is even more intense.

I descend the small hill where the house is located, hidden between cypress trees like a tomb, and I make my way through the woods, stepping firmly and strongly on the ground in order to wake up some sound. However, everything is still quiet and my foot drags the fallen leaves that don't crackle because they are still wet, as though in decomposition. I avoid the silhouettes of trees which are so static and so blurred that I stretch out my hand, trying to convince myself they really exist.

I am afraid. In that immobility, and also in that of the dead woman lying back there, there is some kind of hidden danger.

And because it is threatening me for the first time, I react violently against the assault of the fog.

"I exist, I am real," I shout out loud, "and I am beautiful and happy! Yes, happy; and happiness is nothing more than having a young body that is slender and graceful."

Nevertheless, for a long time I have been tormented by a sense of unease. One night while I was sleeping, I glimpsed something that might have caused it. When I was awake, I tried in vain to remember what it was. Night after night I have been hoping, without success, to recover that same dream.

A cold breeze hits my forehead. Silently, almost touching me, a bird with red wings, the color of autumn, just flew over me. I am filled with fear again, and I start to run desperately in the direction of my house.

I catch sight of my husband who is slowing down the trot of his horse, and I shout to him that his brother Felipe, with his wife and a friend, have stopped to visit us on their way to the city.

I enter the living-room through the door that is next to a bush of rhododendrons. In the half-light I see two shadows that suddenly separate from each other with so little dexterity that the hair of Regina, which is half unbound, is still tangled with the buttons of the jacket of an unknown man. I look at them, overwhelmed.

Felipe's wife looks back at me with a look that is full of anger. He, a tall and very dark-haired young man, calmly brushed aside the locks of her hair and moved his chest away from the head of his lover.

I think about the tight braids that crown my head ungracefully, and I leave without saying a word.

In front of the mirror in my room, I untie the braids of my hair that is also dark. There was a time when I wore it unbound so that it almost touched my shoulders. Very dense, and falling over my temples, it glistened like shining silk. Then, my hairdo seemed to me like a warrior's helmet, which I am sure would have pleased Regina's lover. Sometime later, my husband had made me bind my wild hair because, in every way, I must be like his first wife who, according to him, was a perfect woman.

I look at myself in mirror attentively and confirm, with sadness, that my hairs have lost the tint of red that used to give them a strange splendor when I shook my head. My hair has darkened and is going to get darker every day.

Now that it has lost its wild brilliance, there will never be anyone who says I have beautiful hair.

The house resounds and continues to vibrate during a short interval of chords that two hands are playing on the old piano in the living-room. Then a nocturne begins, with a hundred notes that continue to be repeated, and then multiply. I hurriedly bind my hair and run down the stairs.

Regina is playing by memory, a confused, uncertain, and rapid combination of notes, with a wild passion that is almost immodest.

Behind her, her husband and mine are smoking, without listening to her.

The piano stops abruptly, then Regina rises and slowly walks across the living-room; she comes over to me, and almost touches me. Very close to my face, her face is pale, with a paleness that is not a lack of color, but an intensity of life, as if she were always living through a moment of violence inside her.

Regina then goes back across the room and sits down next to the piano again. As she passes by, she smiles at her lover, who is watching every one of her steps with desire.

It seems like they have poured fire into my veins. I go out in the garden and start running. I sink into a mist and, suddenly, a ray of sunlight shines through it lending the golden clarity of a cave to the forest in which I find myself; it sinks into the ground and opens profound, moist aromas.

I am filled with a strange languor. I close my eyes and lean against a tree. Oh, to throw my arms around a warm body, and roll with it down a slope without end...! I feel myself weakening, and I shake my head in vain, trying to get rid of the stupor that has taken control of me.

Then I take off all of my clothes until my flesh is tainted with the same brilliance that shines through the trees. Then, naked and golden, I submerge myself into the pond.

I have never seen myself so white, so beautiful. The water lengthens my limbs until they reach unreal proportions. I have never dared to look at my breasts before, but I look at them now. Small and rounded, they seem like diminutive corollas suspended over the water.

I am sinking up to my knees into a thick strip of velvet. Warm currents caress me, and penetrate me. With arms like silk, the aquatic plants wrap around my torso with their long roots. The fresh breath of the water kisses the back of my neck and rises to my forehead.

Early the next morning noises from downstairs and unwonted movements around my bed disturbed my sleep. In a dream I tire myself uselessly thinking that I was helping Daniel. Along with him I open boxes and look for a thousand objects, without ever being able to find them. A great silence finally wakes me up.

I notice the room is in a tremendous state of disorder, and I see a forgotten cartridge belt on the night table. I remember then that the men were going to leave the house, and only come back at nightfall.

When Regina gets up, she is in a bad mood. At breakfast she never stops protesting bitterly about the untimely whims of our husbands. I don't say anything, fearing that if I do, I will infuriate her even more with what she calls my outspokenness.

Sometime later, I sit down on the steps of the stairway and listen carefully. Hour after hour I wait in vain to hear a distant detonation that comes to break the unnerving silence. The hunters seem to have been sequestered by the mist...

How rapidly the season is shortening the days! In the western horizon the sunset is already beginning to glow. Behind the glass of each of the windows it seems like there is a bonfire burning. Everything is ignited by a red glow whose splendor does not extenuate the fog.

Then night falls. There are no frogs croaking, and not even the calm chirp of some cricket lost in the grass. Behind me, the house is still completely dark.

Feeling anxious, I go back in the living-room and turn on the lamp. I have to smother a sudden feeling of surprise. Regina has fallen asleep on the couch. I examine her. Her features seem to be smoother; her cheekbones have softened, and her skin appears even more shiny. I walk over to her. I never knew that people look more beautiful when they are lying down. Now Regina doesn't look like a woman, she looks like a child, a sweet and indolent child.

I imagine her sleeping like that in nicely carpeted rooms where an entire mysterious life insinuated itself in the floating perfume of heads of hair and feminine cigarettes. Inside me once more this stabbing pain, like a scream.

I leave the room again to go and sit down in the darkness in front of the house. I see lights moving between the trees. The shapes of men are advancing with great care, carrying large burning branches in their hands like they were torches. I hear the dogs beginning to bark.

"Did you have good luck?" I ask happily.

"Damn fog!" Daniel grumbles, as his only answer.

Exhausted men and animals come and collapse at my feet. In front of me there is a cluster of broken wings and mutilated bodies covered with mud.

Regina's lover drops a bird on my knees that is still warm, and is dripping blood.

I stifle a shriek and push it away, nervously. While the others go away laughing, the hunter persists in keeping his shameful trophy in my lap against my will. I struggle to control myself, almost crying with indignation. When he loosens his forced embrace, I raise my head.

His scrutinizing gaze intimidates me, and I lower my eyes. When I raise them again, I see that he is still looking at me. He is wearing his shirt unbuttoned, and from his chest there is an aroma of hazel nuts and the sweat of a man who is clean and strong. I smile at him, disturbed. Then, jumping up, he leaves me and enters the house without looking back.

Every day the fog gets thicker and thicker around the house. It has now covered the trees whose branches brush against the edge of the terrace. Last night I dreamed that, through the cracks of the doors and windows, the fog was slowly leaking into my room, diminishing the color of the walls and the furniture, filtering into my hair, and sticking to my body, as it dissipates everything, absolutely everything... In the middle of this disaster, the only thing that was still intact was the face of Regina, with its fiery look and her lips full of secrets.

Several hours ago we arrived at the city. Behind the thick curtain of fog spreading around us I can feel it bearing down on the entire landscape.

Daniel's mother has entered the large dining room and lighted the candelabras on the long dining table where we sit down on one side, all bunched together. And the wine they serve us in crystal glasses warms our veins and flows from our throat to our shins.

Daniel, who is slightly tipsy, promises to restore the abandoned oratory in our house. By the time we have finished eating we have agreed that my mother-in-law will come with us to the country.

The pain I have felt during these last few days, this lancinating pain like a burn, has turned into a sweet sadness that brings a weary smile to my lips. When I get up, I have to lean on my husband. I don't know why I feel so weak, and I don't know why I can't stop smiling.

For the first time since we have been married, Daniel arranges the pillows for me. At midnight I wake up, feeling suffocated. I toss and turn under the sheets for a long time, without being able to go back to sleep. I feel stifled. I am breathing with the feeling that, no matter how hard I try, I never get enough air. I jump out of bed and open the window. I lean out of the window and nothing feels different. The fog, blocking out the shapes and filtering out the sounds, has given the city the warm intimacy of a closed room.

A crazy idea takes control of me. I go and shake Daniel, who opens his eyes.

"I am suffocating. I need to go somewhere. Is it all right if I go outside?"

"Do whatever you want," he murmurs, and he lethargically lowers his head on the pillow again.

I get dressed. I take my straw hat, and leave the house. The front door is not as heavy as I thought it was. I begin to walk down the street.

The sadness comes back to the surface of my mind, with all the violence it had during my dream. I keep on walking, I cross the streets, and I think:

"Tomorrow we will go back to the country. The day after tomorrow I will go and hear mass in the city with my mother-in-law. Then, during lunch, Daniel will talk to us about the jobs on the ranch. After that I will go see the greenhouse, the aviary, and the garden. Before supper I will take a nap next to the fireplace, or I will read the local newspapers. After eating, I will amuse myself by provoking small catastrophes in the fire, foolishly poking the coals. Around me the silence will soon show there is nothing we want to talk about; Daniel will place the bars over the doors and we will go to bed. And the next day it will be the same, then for a year, and for ten years. It will be the same until old age takes away my chance to love and be desired, until my body withers and my face ages, and I am ashamed to let myself be seen without something that covers my body.

I wander at random, I cross different streets, and I keep on walking.

I don't feel capable of running away. Run away, but how, and where would I go? Death seems like a more accessible possibility than running away. I feel quite willing to die. It is possible to want to die, because one loves life too much.

In the darkness and the fog I catch a glimpse of a small plaza. Like I do when I'm out in the country, I lean against a tree, exhausted. My cheek searches for the moisture of its bark. Very close by I hear a fountain gushing a thick stream of water.

The white light of a street lamp that the mist transforms into a dull smudge bathes my hands until they are pale, and my feet are lengthened by the dim silhouette that is my shadow. Then I see another shadow next to mine, so I raise my head and look.

A man is standing there, very near to me. He is a young man, with bright eyes in a rather dark face where his raised eyebrows give him an expression that is almost supernatural. A soft but absorbing heat seems to come from him.

And he appears quick, forceful, and decisive. I realize he expects me to follow him, and that I am going to go that wherever he goes. When I put my arms around his neck, he kisses me, and while he does that his bright eyes never stop looking at me. I keep on walking, but now the stranger guides me. He leads me to a narrow, sloping street, and then makes me stop. Through an iron grate I can see an abandoned garden. The stranger takes a moment to open the moistened lock of the iron chain.

Inside the house it is completely dark, but a warm hand reaches for mine and pulls me forward. We are able to advance without stumbling against the furniture, and our footsteps echo in the empty rooms. I feel my way up a long staircase without having to lean on the railing, since the stranger is still guiding every one of my steps. I follow him feeling under his control, submitting myself to his will. At the end of a corridor he pushes open a door and lets go of my hand. I remain in the doorway of a room which, suddenly becomes illuminated.

I step into the room whose chintz curtains lend it a sort of antiquated enchantment, as well as an intimate sadness. All the warmth of the house seems to have concentrated in this room. The night and the fog can flutter in vain against the window panes, but they will not be able to filter a single spark of death into this room.

My friend closes the curtains and, using the weight of his chest, makes me back up slowly toward the bed. I feel myself falling into a sweet expectation and, nevertheless, a strange sense of modesty causes me to pretend I am afraid. He smiles at me then, but his smile, though tender, is ironic. I suspect that no feeling harbors secrets for him. Then he backs away, also pretending, that he wants to calm me down. Then I am alone.

I hear soft footsteps on the carpet, steps that are barefoot. Then he is in front of me again, completely naked. His skin is dark, but a chestnut-colored glow, ignited by the lamp, covers him from head to foot with an areola of light. He has long legs, broad shoulders, and narrow hips. His face is calm and his arms are hanging motionlessly at his side. The grave simplicity of his posture gives him second kind of nakedness.

Almost without touching me, he unties my hairs and begins to take off my clothes. I surrender to his quiet desire, with my heart beating rapidly. A secret apprehension shakes me when my clothes hold back the impatience of his fingers. I am burning with desire, wanting him to look at me as soon as possible. I want the beauty of my body to be something he pays homage to.

As soon as I am naked, I sit down on the edge of the bed. Under his attentive look, I lean my head back, and this fills me with an intimate sense of well-being. I stretch my hands behind his neck, I twist and untwist my legs, and each movement brings with it an intense and total feeling of pleasure, as if finally my arms, my neck, and my legs, had a reason for existing. Even if this pleasure were the only result of love, I would already feel well compensated.

He comes close to me; my head is level with his chest, and he takes hold of it with a smile. I press my lips against him and then rest my face and forehead against him. His

skin has a fruity and vegetal smell. With a sense of urgency, I throw my arms around his torso and again I pull his chest against my cheek.

I embrace him tightly and listen to him with all my senses. I listen to his breath go in and out. I listen to his heart beating tirelessly without stopping in the center of his chest, then reverberating inside him, spreading through his entire body, transforming each cell into a sonorous echo. I hug him, then hug him again, always with more eagerness; I feel the blood flowing through his veins, and I feel the strength that is hiding in his muscles. I also feel the shaking bubble of a sigh. Between my arms I can feel an entire physical life, with all of its fragility, and its mystery, as it moves and stirs. The effect is so strong that I begin to tremble.

Then he leans over me and, with our arms wrapped around each other, we fall into the bed. His body covers me like a large boiling wave, he caresses me, he burns me, he penetrates me, he wraps around me and holds me as I am fainting away. Something like a sigh seems ready to come out of my throat, and I don't know why I begin to moan, nor why it feels so good to moan, and why the strain caused by weight of his body on top of me feels so good.

When I wake up, my lover is sleeping by my side. The expression on his face is calm and peaceful; his breath is so soft that I have to lean over his lips to feel it. And attached to a tiny, almost invisible chain, I notice a small medallion nested in the chestnut-colored hairs on his chest, a small medallion like children receive after their first communion. My heart is softened by this puerile detail. I smooth the lock of hair that is stuck to his face, and I get up without waking him. I get dressed quietly. Then I leave like I came in, feeling my way.

Now I am outside, and I open the gate. The trees are motionless, and it still hasn't dawned. I run up the side street and cross the plaza, then walk through the streets. A mild scent accompanies me, the scent of my enigmatic friend. All of me has been impregnated by his aroma. And it is as though he is still walking by my side, or holds me wrapped in his embrace, or, as if he had poured his life into my blood, forever.

And now here I am, laying by the side of another sleeping man.

"Daniel, I don't pity you, I don't hate you, I only want that you never know anything about what has happened to me tonight..."

Why do they have this stubborn need to constantly sweep the streets in the fall? I would let leaves pile up on the grass and the paths, and cover them with their reddish, crackling pillow, until moisture makes it become silent. I try to convince Daniel to leave me alone in the garden for a while. I feel nostalgia for abandoned parks where the weeds cover the footprints, and where the untrimmed bushes cover the paths.

The years pass by. I look at myself in the mirror, and I see myself with clearly noticeable little wrinkles that only showed when I laugh before. My breasts are losing their roundness and the consistency of a ripe fruit. My flesh is stuck to my bones, and I no longer look slim, but angular. But, what does it matter? What does it matter that my body withers, if it has known love? What does it matter that the years go by, all the same? I had a beautiful adventure, once... With just one memory one can tolerate a long life of tedium. One can even repeat day by day, without boredom, the same small, everyday tasks.

There is a person who I could not meet without trembling. I might find him today, or tomorrow, or ten years from now. I might find him at the end of the street, or in the city when I go around the corner. Perhaps I will never find him. It doesn't matter; the world seems full of possibilities, and for me in every moment there is hope, so that each minute has its emotion.

Night after night Daniel sleeps by my side, indifferent like a brother. I tolerate him with indulgence because, on one long night years ago, I experienced the warmth of another man. I get out of bed, I stealthily light a lamp, and write:

"I have felt the gentle touch of your body and, since that day I am yours. I want you. I would spend the rest of my life, lying there, waiting for you to come and press your strong body (that already knows me) against mine, as if it had belonged to you forever. After I leave your embrace, all day long I am haunted by the memory of when I leaned against your body and sighed in front of your mouth."

I write, and then tear it up and throw it away.

There are mornings when I am overrun by an absurd contentment. I have the feeling that a great happiness is going to come to me within the space of the next twenty four hours. I spend the day feeling a kind of exaltation. And I wait. For a letter, or an unexpected meeting? In truth, I don't know.

I go for a walk out in the country and, although it's not late, I shorten the path of my return. I will leave up to time, the chance that a miracle will eventually occur. I enter the living-room with my heart beating rapidly.

Daniel yawns while he is lying on the couch next to his dogs. My mother-in-law is winding up a new skein of grey wool. No one has come, and nothing has happened. The bitterness of my deception for only lasts a second. My love for "him" is so great that it is more important than the pain of his absence. It is enough to know that he exists, and that he feels and remembers things, in some corner of the world...

The time we are spending at dinner seems interminable.

My only desire is to be able to dream at ease. I always have so much to think about! Yesterday afternoon, for example, I ignored the possibility for a moment of jealousy between my lover and I.

I hate how they always want me to play a game of cards with them after dinner. I like to sit down in front of the fire and take the time to look for the bright eyes of my lover between the flames. Suddenly, they stand out like two stars and, for a long time, I let myself be immersed in that light. Never, except on those moments, do I remember with such clarity the expression of his face.

There are days when I feel a great weariness, and I try in vain to remove the ashes from my memory and let the spark fly that creates an image. Then I lose my lover.

A strong wind brought him back the last time. A wind that knocked down three walnut trees, made my mother-in-law cross herself, and caused him to come and knock on the door of our house. His hair was in disarray, and the collar of his coat covered part of his face, but I still recognized him and threw myself at his feet. Then he took

me in his arms carrying me away in the middle of the storm, hardly able to believe it... Since that day he hasn't left me.

This pallid autumn must have stolen this hot morning of sunshine from the summer. I search for my straw hat, but I can't find it. At first I look for it calmly, then with apprehension... because I'm afraid I might find it. A great hope has blossomed in me. I sigh, relieved, by the lack of success for my efforts. There is no longer any doubt. I forgot it that night in the house of that stranger. Such an intense feeling of happiness enters me that I have to put both my hands over my heart so that it won't fly out of me, like some fickle bird. As with all lovers, besides an embrace, there is something else that unites us forever. Something material, concrete, and indestructible: my straw hat.

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I feel haggard and quite often the house, the yard, and the woods seem to spin dizzily inside my mind, and in front of my eyes.

I try to calm myself, but it is only when I am walking that I can bring some rhythm to my dreams, separate them, and get them to form a perfect curve. When I am still, they all break their wings, and I can't reach them.

It is the day of the tenth anniversary of our marriage. The family has come to meet at our farm, except for Felipe and Regina, whose attitude has been bitterly criticized.

As though to compensate for the indifference between Daniel and me during all those years, there is now a plethora of embraces and gifts, and a fine meal with toasts. While we are at the table, the disdainful gaze of Daniel comes in contact with mine.

Today I have seen my lover. I don't grow tired of thinking about it, or announcing it out loud. I need to write: "today I have seen him, today I have seen him."

It happened this afternoon when I was swimming in the pond.

I normally stay there for many hours, with my body and my thoughts adrift. Often, there is nothing more of me on the surface than a quiet ripple; I sink into a mysterious world where time seems to stop suddenly, where the light is like a phosphorescent substance, where each one of my movements acquires a graceful, feline slowness, and I carefully explore the creases of that cavern of silence. I collect strange shells, and crystals that, when they are attracted to our world, are converted into shapeless, black pebbles. I pick up stones under which thousands of skittish, elusive creatures hide.

I was immersing from those luminous depths when, through the fog in the distance, I spotted a carriage approaching silently. It was rocking back and forth while the horses were making their way through the trees without making the slightest sound.

Taken by surprise, I grabbed hold of the branches of a willow and, not thinking about my nakedness, I lifted my body half way out of the water.

The carriage kept on advancing slowly until it reached the opposite side of the pond. Once there, the horses lowered their heads and began to drink without making a single circle in the surface of the water.

Something very important for me was about to happen. My heart and my nerves both felt it. Then, through the narrow window of the carriage, I saw a man's head lean over so he could look out at me.

I immediately recognized those bright eyes, and the face, of my lover.

I wanted to call out to him, but that impulse turned into a sort of indescribable, harsh shout. I couldn't call him, I didn't know his name. He must have noticed my anxiety, because, as if to calm me, he made a smile and waved his hand. Then, he leaned back and vanished from my sight.

The carriage started moving again and, without giving me time to even swim to the other side, it quickly disappeared into the forest as though the fog had swallowed it.

I felt a soft bump against my hip. I turned around, astonished. A small raft on which the sun of the gardener was gliding over the water had come to a stop behind me.

Pressing my arms over my naked bosom, I shouted frantically:

"Did you see him, Andres, did you see him?"

"Yes, ma'am, I saw him," the lad agreed calmly.

"He smiled at me, isn't that right, Andres, he smiled at me?"

"Yes, ma'am. How pale you are. Get out of the water quickly, you wouldn't want to faint in there," he said, and his raft started moving again.

Using a net, he continued picking up dry leaves that the autumn weather had dropped on the waters of the pond.

I am living, overwhelmed by happiness.

I don't know what the plans of my friend are, but I am certain that he is breathing somewhere near to me.

The village, the park, the woods, all seem filled with his presence. I go everywhere with the belief that he must be watching wherever I am traveling.

I shout: "I love you," "I want you," so that the sound of my voice will be able to reach wherever he is hiding, and he will know what is in my heart.

Yesterday a secluded voice responded to mine: "Looove!" I stopped, then listening more carefully, I made out the confused sound of muffled laughter. Full of shame, I came to the realization that it was the woodcutters who were parodying the way I had shouted.

Still—though it's absurd—at that moment, my friend seemed closer than ever. As though those fools had unconsciously been a spokesperson for what he was thinking.

Quietly, and without desperation, I am always waiting for him to appear. After we eat supper, I go out in the garden and furtively open one of the living-room shutters. That way if he wanted to, he could see me night after night, sitting in front of the fire, or reading under the lamp. He would be able to see each one of my movements and come to find me whenever he wanted. I don't want to keep any secrets from him...

During the afternoon, I go out on the terrace when Andres comes out of the woods, after he finishes his work.

I tremble when I see him with his bare feet, and the net over his shoulder. I always hope that he is going to bring me an important message as he passes by. But each time he silently disappears through the trees.

Then I sit down on the front steps and console myself thinking that the raindrops that are falling on my face are the same as those that are dripping on the body of my friend, or are splattering on his windowpane.

Quite often, when everyone is asleep, I sit up in bed and listen when the chirping of the frogs is suddenly silent. In the heart of the night far away out there I hear footsteps. I hear them slowly coming nearer, I hear them brushing away the moss, picking up dry leaves, and removing branches that are hindering the path. I am certain they're the steps of my lover, and it is the time when he is coming to me. The gate creaks. I hear the maddened barking of the dogs, and I hear the soft voice that quiets them.

After that, silence again, and I don't hear anything else.

But I am certain that my friend has come up next to my window and remains there, watching me sleep, until it gets light.

Once I heard him sigh softly, but I didn't rush into his arms because he still hadn't called me.

I don't know why he goes away without calling me.

Then, coming back from town, Andres told me peevishly that once he had seen a carriage that was completely closed, traveling away rapidly in the direction of town.

Nevertheless, I am not the least bit disturbed. I have had some happy moments, and now that he has come, I know that he will return.

It had been years since Daniel had kissed me and, because of that, I don't know how it could have happened. Perhaps there had been a slight premeditation on my part. But how nice it was to have someone relieve my boredom during those long summer days. Still, it was unexpected and shocking, and there is a gap in my memory before that moment when I found myself in the arms of my husband.

My body and my kisses never make him tremble but, like they used to do, they made him think about another body, and other lips. Like years ago, I saw him trying again furiously to caress and desire my body, and always with the memory of his dead wife between the two of us. As he surrendered himself to my breast, his face unconsciously tried to find the smoothness and the contour of another breast. He kissed my hands, and other places, searching for some familiar passions, odors, and shapes. And he wept bitterly, calling for her, shouting absurd things to me, that were directed at her.

But his previous wife had never, ever, seen him more haggard, and more desperate to be with her, than he was that afternoon. Trying to keep from thinking about her, he has suddenly found her again, almost inside himself.

I remained lying there in bed, sobbing, with my hair adhered to my temples that were wet with tears, filled with dejection, and shame. I didn't try to move, or even cover myself. I felt like my life was not worth living, and not worth dying. The only thing I wanted was to stop thinking about what had happened. And now, it was by immersing myself in that misery that I have betrayed my lover.

* * *

It has been a long time since I have been able to see the face of my friend, and now feel rejected. I write to him in order to dispel a growing misunderstanding:

“I have never deceived you. It is true that, during the entire summer, this ugly relation between Daniel and me has resumed again, caused by boredom, by perversity, and sadness. It is true that we have often been locked in our room until nightfall, but I have never betrayed you. Oh, if only this affirmation of mine could reassure you. My dear stubborn lover, making me describe and explain, because you think that a brief summer capriciousness is a betrayal.

Do you want me to speak, in spite of everything? If so, then I obey.

One hot day my husband and I were face to face, almost weeping with frustration and idleness. This second encounter with Daniel was identical to the first. The same sordid desire, the same desperate embrace, the same disillusionment. Like the previous time, I was forced to stay there, enervated, humiliated, exhausted.

And then the miracle happened.

A soft murmur began to rock me, while a delicate freshness with the moisture of river filtered into my room. It was the first rain of summer.

I felt less unhappy without knowing why. A hand rubbed my shoulder.

Daniel on on his feet next to the bed. A friendly smile covered his face. He handed me a moist glass, dripping with ice.

As I languidly raised my head, with unusual tenderness, he put his arm under my neck and poured into my mouth all the strawberries diluted into an ice-cold syrup.

A great feeling of well-being overcame me.

Outside the sound of the rain increased and spread out, as if it multiplied each one of its silver threads. A gust of wind made the window panes rattle.

Daniel laid down at my side again, and for a long time we remained silent, while the sound of the rain moved farther and farther away like a flock of moist birds.

The bedroom was filled with a blue twilight in which the mirrors, shining like pools of water, made me remember the sight of clear ponds.

When my husband turned on the lamp, on the ceiling, caught in the middle of its unknown dreams, a small spider scurried away to hide. “A premonition of happiness,” I muttered, and closed my eyes again. It had been months since I had felt such a wonderful, spirited happiness.

Now do you understand why I returned to Daniel?

But what did his embrace matter to me? Afterward, as was his custom, he came to give me something to drink, and then it was time to take a long rest in the ample bed.

With the white silk curtains on the windows tightly closed and, sunken into a radiant semidarkness, our room seemed like large pink tent where my struggle with the day was managed without anxiety, or tears of enervation.

I imagined men traveling laboriously down dusty roads, soldiers deploying strategies in lands where the hot ground was likely to crack the sole of their boots. I saw cities suffering severely through the hot summer weather, cities with empty streets and closed businesses, as if their soul had escaped, and nothing more remained than the tarred skeleton that was melting in the sun.

And at the moment when I felt a strange knot twisting in my throat until I was almost suffocated, the rain began to fall. Then, the same well-being I had felt that first day came back again. I seemed to feel the water falling gently on my feverish forehead and on my chest filled with sighs.

Oh, my beloved friend, do you understand now that I never deceived you?

It was all a caprice, an inoffensive summer caprice. "You are my one and only lover!"

* * *

They have set fire to all the piles of dry leaves and the garden is filled with smoke, like it has been in fog for years. This night I can't sleep. I get out of bed so I can open the window, and outside the silence is just as great as it is inside our closed room. I lay down again, and then I dream.

A head is resting on my chest, a head that gradually gets heavier and heavier, pressing on me until I almost feel suffocated. I wake up. Could it be that someone called me? It was on a night like this that I met him... maybe the time for a second meeting has come. As I place a coat over my shoulders, my husband sits up, half asleep.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm suffocating. I need to go outside... Don't look at me like that. Haven't I done the same thing at night before, at the same time?"

"You? When?"

"One night when we were in the city."

"You're crazy! You must have been dreaming. Something like that has never happened..."

Trembling, I grab hold of him.

"You don't have to shake me. I am wide awake. Never, I repeat, never!"

Raising my voice, I try to persuade him:

"Remember. It was a foggy night. We were eating in the large dinning-room under the light of the candelabras."

"Yes, and we drank so much that we slept all night long!"

I shout at him: "No! I beg you: "Remember; remember what happened!"

Daniel looks at me fixedly for a moment, then he asks me scornfully:

"And did you meet some people that night during your walk?"

"I met a man," I answer provocatively.

"Did he talk to you?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember his voice?"

His voice? What was his voice like? I don't remember; why can't I remember that? I turn pale and feel weak. I don't remember his voice, because I never heard it. I recall every minute of that night. I lied to Daniel. It's not true that he spoke to me..."

"He didn't speak to you? You see, it was a dream..."

This doubt that my husband has given me; this absurd doubt, and yet so powerful! Now I'm feeling like there's a burn inside my chest. Daniel is right. That night I drank

a lot without realizing it, since I never drink... But in the heart of the city, that plaza that I had never seen, and that actually exists... Could it have just been a dream?... And my straw hat? Where did I lose it then?

Just the same, oh my God! Is it possible that a lover would never open his lips even once during a long night? Only in dreams do people move around silently, like ghosts. But then what about Andres? How could it be that, all this time, I didn't think about asking him?

I will go and find him, and I will ask: "Andres, you don't ever see visions, do you?" "Oh, no, ma'am." "Do you remember that unknown man in the coach?" "I remember it as if it were yesterday, and I also remember how he smiled at you..."

He couldn't say any more than that, but if he did it would save me from that terrible uncertainty. Because, if there is a witness of my lover, who could ever tell me it wasn't that Daniel had just forgotten about my walk that night?

"Where is Andres?" I ask his parents who are sitting outside the pavilion where they live.

"Early this morning he went to clean up the pond," they tell me.

"I never saw him there," I shout, nervously. "I need to talk to him right away, right now!"

Where can Andres be? They call him, they look for him in the garden, in the park, in the woods.

"He must have gone to town without telling us. But please do not be impatient. I am sure he will return soon, the lazy bum..."

I wait, I wait all day long. Andres doesn't come back from town. The next morning they find his denim jacket on the on the raft that is floating adrift in the pond.

"The net must have gotten caught on something and then pulled him into the water. The poor fellow doesn't know how to swim and..."

"What are you saying?" I interrupt; and since Daniel is looking at me with surprise, I hold on to him and shout desperately: "No! No! He has to be alive! You have to look for him!"

They do look for him and, in fact, two days later they find his shattered body, the cavities of his eyes filled with silver bubbles, and his lips jagged after death had made them defenseless against the water, and time.

Next to his father, who is kneeling on the ground without a sound, I take the chance to touch him and try to talk to him.

And now... now how am I going to live?

* * *

Night after night I hear all the trains going by in the distance. Then I see the light beginning to filter slowly into my room, a dim and sad light. I hear the church bells tolling the hours and calling people to the six o'clock Mass where my mother-in-law and two of her servants are going to attend. I hear the measured breathing of Daniel who is having difficulty waking up.

When he finally sits up in bed, I close my eyes and pretend to be asleep.

During the day I don't cry. I can't cry. I am suddenly filled with shivers that spread from my head all the way to my feet, like a burst of lightning. I feel myself shaking.

If only I could really be sick! With all my heart, I wish that a fever, or some strong pain, would come and separate me from my doubt for a few days.

And I say to myself: if I could just forget, if I could forget everything: my adventure, my love, and my torment. If I could just resign myself to live like I did before my trip to the city, perhaps I would be able to recover my peace of mind...

I then began to try and force myself to do things more slowly, concentrating my imagination, and my mind, only on the matters at hand.

I kept an eye on the difficult salvage of the creepers that the wind has knocked down without letting myself be distracted. I swept the cobwebs off the roof, and I told them to call a locksmith to repair the lock of a cabinet where many books are lined up, covered with dust.

Casting aside my fantasies, I tried to limit myself to simple pleasures, choose a horse, follow the foreman on his daily round, pick mushrooms along with my mother-in-law, and learn how to smoke.

Ah! What do women do in order to forget about a lover whom they have loved for a long time, and who has made a burning mark on their lives?

But my love was there, hiding behind all these things; everything around me was saturated with my feelings, and everything made stumble into a memory. The woods, because for years I had gone there to feel my sadness and my illusion; the pond, because that was where I saw my friend one time while I was swimming; the fire in the hearth, because that was where his image was reflected every night.

And I was unable to look at myself in the mirror, because my body reminded me of his caresses.

I ran from one place to another in order to come in complete contact with him, all in a single day. And afterward I went to lie down, panting, on my bed.

But in spite of all I did, I was never able to erase his power to hurt me. There is something like a poison in things, that never loses its power to infect.

My love was also lingering behind each one of my movements. As before, I would stretch out my arms to embrace an invisible person. I rose up half asleep in order to write and, with my pen in my hand, I suddenly remember that my lover had died.

“How long will it take, how much time will I need, for all of these memories to be erased and be replaced by other recollections?”

Sometimes when I succeed in distracting myself for a while, I suddenly feel that I am going to remember. The mere thought of the pain that will bring crushes my heart. And I gather all my strength to drive it away, but the pain arrives and bites me, and then I shout softly, so no one hears me. I am a sick woman, who is ashamed of her illness. But that’s how it is; I will never be able to forget!

And if I were ever able to forget, how would I live then? I know very well now that the people, the events, the days, are only bearable when I see them in the state of life that creates my passion.

For me, my lover is more than love. He is my reason for living, my yesterday, my today, and my tomorrow.

Early that morning the news arrives in a telegram that my husband weakly shakes in front of my eyes. While I fight to reject the stunning effect of a dream that is suddenly interrupted, Daniel runs hurriedly to knock on the door of his mother's room. After a moment, I understand what has happened. Regina is in danger of dying. We have to for the city without delay. I sit up in bed, full of happiness, an almost fierce happiness. In going to the city, there is the solution for all my anxieties. Walk through the streets and look for the mysterious house and spot the stranger, talk to him and perhaps, perhaps... but I will dream of that later. One must not use up so much happiness all at once. I already feel enough to jump quickly out of bed.

But I remember that the cause of my happiness is also a misfortune. Somber and preoccupied, I give orders and arrange the luggage.

In the train, I ask about the condition of Regina. She looks at me with surprise, with indignation: "What am I always thinking? Haven't I already realized that what bothers people most is, precisely, the vagueness of the news? It's quite possible that they have informed us that way so as not to alarm us. It could be that Regina was already... As a matter of fact, this distraction of mine, is getting close to madness.

I don't say anything more and with great difficulty during the trip, I try to hold back a hopeful smile that persists in giving my face an unusual animation.

In the waiting room of the clinic, standing there glumly with our eyes fixed on the door, Daniel, his mother, and I, form a sinister group. The morning is cold and foggy. Our limbs are numb, and our hearts filled with anxiety, are also numb.

If it wasn't for the smell of ether and disinfectant, I would think that I am now in the parlor of the convent where I was educated. Here there are the same impersonal and detestable furnishings, the same tall, bare windows looking out over the same muddy landscape I hated so much.

When the door opens, it is Felipe. He is not pale, or disheveled, nor with heavy eyelids, or bags under his eyes, as if he has been crying. No, something worse than that has happened to him. On his face there is an indefinable expression that is tragic, but without showing exactly what he is feeling. His voice is cold, and opaque:

"She has shot herself. She may still live."

A moan, and then a pause. The mother has thrown her arms around the neck of her son and sobs convulsively.

"Poor Felipe, poor Felipe!"

Looking like a sleepwalker, the son supports her without being perturbed, as if he were feeling sorry for someone else... Daniel frowns.

"They brought her back from the house of her lover," he tells me in a low voice.

I look at him, and I feel disgusted by his reaction. Wounded pride, a feeling of decorum.

I know that compassion is the proper emotion to feel for such a situation, but I do not feel it either. Feeling uneasy, I walk over to the window and, once there, I press my forehead against the glass covered with fog. I try to find a feeling of pity, somewhere inside my heart.

Regina! Weeks of struggles with useless, desperate thoughts, long nights during which her mind writhes with frenzy; efforts to sleep through it, followed by the cruel effect of waking up, were things that led her to this final action.

Regina experienced a fiery pain that was impossible to withstand; a pain during which there was no real expectation of relief, and it soon becomes no longer possible to withstand it, even one day longer.

I understand, yes I understand and, nevertheless, I'm still not upset. Egotist, egotist!, I call myself, but something in me does not agree with that insult. As a matter of fact, I don't feel guilty for failing to be upset. Am I not even more miserable than Regina?

Behind the things that Regina has done is an intense feeling, an entire life of passion. Just one memory supports my life, a memory whose flame I need to stoke, day after day, so it never goes out. A memory so vague, and so distant that it almost seems like fiction. The misfortune of Regina is an affliction caused by love, by real love, by a love that lasted for years, a love composed of letters, of caresses, of bitterness, of tears, and deceptions. For the first time I tell myself that I am unlucky, that I have always been horribly, and totally unlucky.

And these short and monotonous sighs, these ridiculous sighs like a hiccup that are suddenly caused by confusion, are they really mine?

I lie down on the sofa. I make myself drink sips of a very bitter liquid. Someone makes condescending pats on my back that irritate me, while a man with a grave expression speaks to me kindly and softly, like to you do to someone who is sick.

But I don't listen, and by the time I get up I have already made a resolution.

A fever is scorching my temples and drying my throat. In the middle of the fog that dematerializes everything the muffled sound of my footsteps at first gives me a certain feeling of assurance, but then begin to upset and distress me. I suffer with the feeling that someone is following me with some kind of secret order.

I am looking for a house with closed shutters and rust-covered grates. But this fog! If a gust of wind were to clear it away like a veil for at least this afternoon, I would have already found the façade I've been looking for now more than two hours! I remember it is on a narrow, sloping street with uneven tiles where moss is growing. I also remember it is very near a little plaza where the stranger took me by the hand...

But I can't find this little plaza either. I think that I have gone exactly the same way I did years ago and, nevertheless, I turn around and around, with no success. With its smoky wall, the fog prevents any direct sight of things, or people, and makes one feel isolated within oneself. I feel like I am walking through empty streets.

In the middle of so much silence, the sound of my footsteps becomes an unbearable noise, the only noise in the world, a noise whose regularity seems conscious, and that even must produce mysterious echoes on other planets.

I let myself collapse on a bench so that there will finally be silence in the universe, and in me. By now my body is burning like a hot coal.

Behind me, a powerful breath of unusual freshness covers my neck and shoulders, and I turn around and see only the trees in the mist. I am seated on the edge of a small

plaza where the fountain has stopped flowing, and where the green paths emit a fragrant humidity.

Without a sound I get on my feet and start running. I take the first street to the right, I turn the corner and make out two trees whose large branches are rocking, and I see the dark patina of a tall façade.

I am finally in front of the house of my lover. The shutters are still closed. He will not arrive until nightfall. But I want to savor the pleasure of knowing that I have found his house. I joyfully contemplate the abandoned garden. I press against the cold grates to feel their solidity against my skin. No, it was not a dream!

I pull on the gate, and it creaks open. I notice that it is no longer secured by its old chains. I am filled with a burst of nervousness. I run up the steps, I stop in front of the door, and I press on the rusty button. After that I hear the sound of a bell inside the house. Several minutes pass. I decide to leave, but I wait for a moment longer without knowing why. I am struck by a strange sort of vertigo when the door suddenly opens.

A servant motions me to come in. Dazed, I take a step inside. I find myself inside a foyer with a large number of windows looking out over a patio filled with flowers. Painfully dazzled, even though the light is not bright, I close my eyes halfway. But then hadn't I expected to find myself in a dark house?

"I will inform the lady," the servant said, and walked away.

The lady? What lady? I look around me. And what does this house have to do with the house of my dreams? There is tasteless furniture, garish curtains, and in one corner, hanging from the ceiling, a cage with two canaries. On the walls are portraits of conventional people. But not a single portrait that could be my mysterious lover.

Somewhere a moan breaks the silence, a long moan that seems to come from the second floor. I am filled with a sudden happiness. To get my bearings, I close my eyes and, like on that night of love, I make my way up a staircase that now is carpeted. I walk down a narrow corridor in the direction of the moan that is calling me. I can feel I am getting closer and closer. I push open the last door and look around.

Where is the softness of the large bed, and the shadow of the old chintzes? The walls are clustered with books and maps. Under a lamp, a child sitting in front of a music stand, is practicing playing a violin.

At the foot of the stairs the servant is waiting for me, respectfully.

"The lady is not at home."

"And her husband?" I ask urgently.

A glacial voice answers me:

"Her husband? He died more than fifteen years ago."

"How did he die!"

"He was blind. He fell down the stairs. When they found him, he was dead..."

I leave abruptly, and run away as fast as I can.

With the vague hope of having been mistaken about the street and the house, I keep on walking through the town. I search everywhere. I would like to keep on looking, but it has gotten dark and I can't distinguish anything. Besides, why struggle with it? It was my destiny. The house, my love, and my adventure, have all vanished in the fog;

something like a burning claw grabs me around the neck, and I suddenly feel like I have a fever.

Again there is the strange odor of this hospital. Daniel and I enter through open doors, passing through small dark rooms where confused figures sigh and shake.

“They told us she has lost a lot of blood,” I think, while a nurse directs us into a room where a woman is lying on a bed.

Regina looks so ugly that she seems like someone else. Some limp locks of hair are hanging down to the middle of her neck, as though they are full with sweat. They have cut off some of her hair. The skin on her face looks very thin, and she is lying on the bed, with one hand twitching strangely.

I walk over to her. Regina’s eyes are half-closed and she is breathing with difficulty. Wanting to caress her, I try to touch her emaciated hand. I regret it immediately, because with this slight contact, she rocks her head from one side of the pillow to the other, making a long moan. She jerks up suddenly and then falls back again, emitting a desperate cry. She calls to her lover, and then shouts words of heartrending tenderness. But then she insults him, she threatens him, and then calls him again. She begs them to let her die, then she begs them to let her live until she can see him, and she begs them not to let him come and see her while she has the smell of ether and blood. And once again she breaks out in tears.

Around me they whisper about her acting like that, with continuous agitation, since the tragic moment when...

My heart skips a beat. I see Regina, still warm, lying on a large bed. I imagine her clinging to a man, fearing that she will fall into the abyss that is opening beneath her, and precipitously deciding to do something about it. While they carried her face up on the stretcher to the ambulance, she must have been able to see the stars shining in the sky on that dark autumn night. In the hands of her lover, who is filled with terror, I catch a glimpse of two plaits of hair soaked with blood.

I suddenly feel like I hate Regina, and that I envy her pain, her tragic adventure, and even the possibility of her death. I have a strong desire to go over and shake her hard, asking her what she is complaining about, she who has had everything: love, frenzy, and indulgence.

Right at the moment when I am about to leave, an ambulance arrives at the hospital. I press against the wall in order to let it pass, while some voices are echoing under the arch of the gate... “A boy ran his car over her...”

The act of throwing oneself under the wheels of an automobile requires some sort of unconsciousness. I would close my eyes and try not to think for a second.

Two hands that seem brutal jerk me backward vigorously. A gust of wind and noise passes in front of me. I stumble and fall against the chest of the mistaken person who thinks he has saved me.

Dazed, I raise my head and behind me I can see the red, emaciated face of a stranger. But then I jerk away violently, because I recognize my husband. It has been years that I have looked at him without really seeing him. Now how old he looks, and how quickly

it happened! It is possible that I am the partner of this middle-aged man? I remember, however, that we were the same age when we were married.

I am shocked by the sight of naked body lying on a table in the Morgue. Limp flesh stuck to a thin skeleton, a belly buried between the hips... What a repugnant and useless thing, the suicide of a woman who is already old. Is my life not already the beginning of death? Dying to run away from who knows what new deceptions? What other new sorrows? Some years ago it would, perhaps, have been reasonable to destroy all the forces accumulated in me in a single act of defiance, so as not to see them shut down. But a cruel fate has stolen from me the right to choose to die, and has slowly, and callously, driven me to an old age without passions, without memories... without a chance to enjoy life.

Daniel takes me by the arm and starts walking as if nothing had happened. He seems to have not given any importance to this incident. I recall the night of our wedding... Like then, he now pretends to have a total ignorance of my pain. Perhaps it is better that way, I think, and I follow him.

I follow him in order to carry out an enormous number of little jobs; to perform an enormous number of frivolous tasks; to cry as usual, and to smile out of obligation. I follow him to live correctly, and to die correctly, someday.

Around us the fog gives things the quality of endless immobility.

The End