

THESIS

HELL HATH NO LIMITS

Submitted by  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
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THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

HELL HATH NO LIMITS

The first part of the thesis is a study of the mythological elements in the works of José Donoso. Seen on the mythological plane, the novels are not so much a trilogy as variations upon a single theme. Coronación presents the basic sketch of the powerful goddess figure, which is studied from two distinct angles in the later novels. Este domingo is concerned with the Great Goddess of the earliest myths, before the patriarchal figure came into power. El lugar sin límites deals with the later conflict of the goddess and the god, and in this variation the goddess is overpowered.

The second part of the thesis is the translation into English of El lugar sin límites. The novel has two themes: the portrayal of the power of a corrupt politician, who destroys a small town and dooms its inhabitants to oblivion or death; and the life and brutal murder of an aging transvestite, who is one of the town's inhabitants.

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## PREFACE

The translation of this novel is as faithful as possible, given the deliberate obscurity of parts of the work. Since Spanish adjectives often indicate the gender of the person referred to and English adjectives do not, occasionally the name of the person in question was inserted in the English version for the sake of clarity. In the Spanish, it is never clearly indicated just when Manuela changes in his own mind from feminine to masculine, since the Spanish verbs do not require subject pronouns. In these instances, it was necessary to make a personal judgment as to the probable moments of change and indicate them accordingly. In all other passages where the Spanish was purposely obscure, the English is faithful to the original.

The Spanish titles "Misia" and "don" have been preserved in the English text, since they have no English counterparts. "Misia" is peculiar to Chile, and is a contraction of "Mi Señora" ("My Lady"); apparently it pertains to middle class women. "Don," a title of respect used with the first name, is roughly equivalent to our nineteenth century usage of "Mister" with a first name. Lastly, the nickname "Japonesa" means "Japanese (woman)," and "Japonesita" is the diminutive.

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## INTRODUCTION

## JOSE DONOSO

José Donoso was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1924 to an upper middle class family. In Santiago, Donoso attended a British primary school and later the University of Chile where he received his bachelor's degree. After graduating he spent a year in Magallanes, a province in southern Chile, working as a shepherd; upon his return to Santiago he attended the Pedagogical Institute. In 1949 he was awarded a scholarship to Princeton where he studied for a year--he then returned to Chile and taught in several universities and published a series of literary articles. Since that time he has traveled through Latin America and Europe and spent two years (1965-1967) at the University of Iowa as a visiting lecturer at the Writer's Workshop. For the past 3 years he has resided in Mallorca and Spain with his wife and adopted child.

Before receiving his B.A. in 1951, Donoso wrote his first two short stories--in English--for a university literary magazine; since 1951 he has published two books of short stories: 1955, El veraneo y otros cuentos and 1960, El Charleston, and three novels: 1962, Coronación (Coronation), which won the William Faulkner Foundation Prize in that year; 1966, Este domingo (This Sunday); and 1966, El lugar sin límites (Hell Hath No Limits). He is currently working on his fourth novel, El arcángel incompleto, which will be published in 1970.

In José Donoso's works are almost all of the basic elements of naturalism and existentialism. The naturalistic elements include a

criticism of Chilean society; focus on the influence of the environment on the individual; emphasis on the abnormal person and his baser emotions; and careful visual description. Among the existentialistic elements are emphasis on man's irrationality and loneliness, which result in a breakdown of communication and, usually, in either death, insanity, or flight into oblivion.

Traditionally, Donoso's novels have been taken to be a triptych dealing with Chilean society and modern society in general. However, it would seem that they have another dimension, which carries them to even greater heights of unity and profundity: this new dimension is the world of mythology, which appears in each of the three novels. By studying both the traditional values of the works and their mythological allusions, each takes on a much greater meaning, while many extraneous elements fall into place.

Since the elements which correspond to modern reality have been discussed by Rodríguez Monegal and others, this study will concentrate solely on the mythological elements.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, only the upper class characters will be discussed at length, although the lower classes and their connections with the upper classes make up a large and important aspect of the works.

## CORONACION

Coronación, the first of the three novels, is the broadest in scope and the most traditional in style. The mythological allusions concentrate almost entirely on one figure, that of Misia Elisa, the main character. This one figure is so powerfully represented, however, that even without a knowledge of mythology she is unforgettable: her characterization marks Coronación as one of the more important contemporary Latin American novels.

The story revolves around the 94 year old head of a Chilean middle class family, Misia Elisa, whose childhood inhibitions have manifested themselves in the form of insanity. Obsessed with the idea that she is of noble birth, she is reduced to sporadic attacks of screaming vile obscenities at those around her. Her only living relative is Andrés, her grandson, who is a parasite on society; having reached middle age, he realizes that his life has been wasted, and tries desperately to recapture his idly-squandered youth. With the arrival of Estela, a young country girl who is to care for Misia Elisa, comes Andrés' downfall: sexually attracted to her, he deludes himself that she is in love with him. When he finally realizes that she has only used him in order to help her lover steal the family silver, he slips into the pretense of insanity, and in so doing, may be regarded as actually insane. Meanwhile, in a magnificently powerful scene, his grandmother's saint's day party degenerates into a drunken frenzy, and Misia Elisa is crowned "the best little queen in the whole world." After a period of unconsciousness,

she awakens, mistakes the sequins on her gown for stars and constellations, and quietly dies.

Although Misia Elisa is basically a pathetic, insane old woman, she is, in many ways, the grotesque personification of the Roman goddess Juno and her Greek counterpart Hera.

JUNO, the wife of Jupiter and the highest of the celestial goddesses, is the queen of heavenly lights. As the queen of womankind, she is the representative of woman in general, and, as all goddesses of light are also goddesses of birth (the appearance of light from out of the darkness being looked upon as birth), she was honored as the mightiest of these.<sup>2</sup>

HERA is, in Greek mythology, the queen of heaven, being both the sister and lawful consort of Zeus. She is said to have lived long in secret intimacy with Zeus, before he publicly acknowledged her as his lawful consort. Regarded as the stern protectress of honorable marriage, Hera's jealousy and hatred of her consort's many paramours have become the outstanding traits in her character. In spite of this, Homer represents her as the most majestic of all the goddesses. The other Olympians pay her royal honors, and Zeus treats her with all respect, though not always yielding to her demands. She is the spotless and uncorruptible wife of the King of Heaven, and indeed may be called the only lawful wife in the Olympian court. She is, accordingly, before all other deities the goddess of marriage and the protectress of purity in married life. The cuckoo was sacred to her as the messenger of spring, the season in which she was wedded to Zeus; so were the peacock and the crow. In works of art she is represented as seated on a throne in full robe, covering the whole figure. On her head is a sort of diadem; the expression of the face is severe and majestic, the eyes large and wide open. In one hand she holds a sceptre with the cuckoo on top.<sup>3</sup>

A careful study of the characterization of Misia Elisa reveals many minute and dramatic parallels between her and the goddesses Juno and Hera. In her youth she possessed great beauty, and was honored twice a year by all of her social circle, just as the Olympians honored the beautiful Hera. Secondly, as Misia Elisa's mind began to lose contact with reality, she was gripped by three obsessions: that she was of noble birth, that

her husband was unfaithful to her (as indeed he later was), and that her maids were stealing the feathers from her hats. Lapsing into frenzied moments of jealous rage, she grew certain that her husband had changed toward her and accused him of loving the "sluts" (servants) more than her: "Everything she has kept hidden all these years, out of shame or insecurity, erupts into her life."<sup>4</sup> Thus she corresponds to Hera in insane jealousy, and with the progression of her illness her accusations become more frequent and more lewdly specific. In accusing the maids of stealing her feathers, and implying a relationship between them and her husband, she again personifies Hera, to whom feathers were sacred as the symbol of her marriage. Furthermore, in the latter years of her insanity Misia Elisa rightly guesses at Estela's relationship with a man, and at Andrés' passion for Estela: apparently most of her insane rages are well founded, as were Hera's.

The most powerful parallels between Misia Elisa and Hera, however, are found in the final scenes of the novel, during the "coronation." She is seen dressed in a full length gauze dress, holding a scepter decorated with streamers and ribbons, and crowned with a diadem made of silver and pearl flowers, the latter being the symbol of spring and beauty. Thus, her description corresponds perfectly to the classic concept of Hera. Furthermore, as the maids fight over an old feather boa, the feathers float lightly down around Misia Elisa, mingling on the floor with the star-like spangles from her dress. To the fanfare of the flowered gramophone's trumpet, the maids swirl around her in an orgy of primitive dancing, much as ancient women must have done in honor of the goddess of womanhood. Finally, at the moment before her death, Misia Elisa mistakes the sequins on her coronation gown for stars and

constellations symbolizing her coronation as Hera, the goddess of all the heavens and of the heavenly lights.

HEPHAISTOS, the smith-god, in Homer is a fully accredited Olympian, a son of Hera. His father is apparently Zeus; but in Hesiod he is already a child of Hera only. Even in Homer, he is rather a figure of fun, at whose clumsy activity the gods laugh 'unquenchably' when he waits at table. He is lame from birth, and Hera was so ashamed of his deformity that she cast him out of heaven, or, by another account, Zeus cast him out when he interfered in a quarrel between his parents. By the first account, the god was caught by Thetis and Eurynome, and he lived with them nine years. According to the second version he alighted on Lemnos, after falling all day, and was kindly received by the Sinties, as Homer calls the natives. By this account, his lameness was a result of this fall. However, his usual workshop was neither with the sea-goddesses nor in Lemnos, but in heaven, and the poems are full of descriptions of the marvellous things he wrought. His reentry into heaven was attained as follows: in a subterranean cavern he fashioned a number of exquisite works of art, among them a golden throne with invisible chains, which he sent his mother by way of revenge. She sat down in it, and was chained to the seat, so fast that no one could release her. On this it was resolved to call Hephaistos back to Olympus.<sup>5</sup>

The connection between Andrés and Hephaistos is apparent in several instances. First, both man and god are clumsy, inept figures, and where-as the god is lame, Andrés collects walking sticks, which he admires because of their finely worked metal handles. Andrés is haunted by a nightmare in which he is running along a bridge and suddenly plunges into an abyss; this is strikingly parallel to Hephaistos' fall to earth. Further, Andrés spends a long period of time away from his grandmother's home, having chosen to live in an apartment. Upon his return to the house, where he occupies a second-story room directly below Misia Elisa's quarters (for Hephaistos is a lesser god than Hera), he is, in a sense, reentering her reign, or heaven. In addition, Misia Elisa is permanently bedridden, literally a captive in her enormous, throne-like bed: with Andrés' return, for the first time in many years, she leaves the bed and

moves to her "coronation throne." And finally, by willingly entering into his grandmother's world of insanity, Andrés completes his symbolic return into the realm of the gods, and is physically and mentally a part of their world.

IRIS is the personification of the rainbow which unites heaven and earth. As a virgin goddess, swift as the breeze and with wings of gold, she is the messenger of the gods, especially of Zeus and Hera, and, according to later writers, exclusively of the latter. She bears their behests from the ends of the earth even to the river Styx, and into the depths of the sea.<sup>6</sup>

The copper-skinned Estela, Misia Elisa's servant and companion, corresponds to this description in several ways. A naive girl, she is a virgin upon arrival and seems to be the personification of naive purity. Secondly, she is the messenger, or rainbow, who connects Misia Elisa's third floor reign (the heavens) with the lower part of the house (the earth). In this connection, she is also the link between the gods (Misia Elisa and Andrés) and the mortals (her lower class lover and his family).

These, then, are the mythological allusions found in Coronación. Since it is Donoso's first novel, it is neither as avant-garde in technique nor as powerful in mythological conception as his later works: it appears to be a masterful preliminary sketch, which Donoso later expands in Este domingo and El lugar sin límites.

The most powerful character in Coronación is clearly Misia Elisa, who dominates all within her household. As a goddess figure, she is the queen of her surroundings. Don Ramón, her husband, or consort, has a strikingly small, ineffectual role, and the other male figure, Andrés, is scarcely more forceful than don Ramón, in spite of the fact

that he has the greater role. The novel then, focuses on the matriarchal aspect of both society and myth, and the characters who should represent the mighty gods are either for all practical purposes nonexistent or ludicrously weak. Misia Elisa herself is a grotesque figure, but she is the dynamic force in her little world, as as such is the destructor of the male characters. This concept of the strong, emasculating female figure is the sketch upon which Donoso's second and third novels expound: as will be seen, the dominating female character represented by Misia Elisa will later become an overwhelming force.

## ESTE DOMINGO

While Este domingo has many thematic elements in common with Coronación, and whereas the latter is traditional in structure and technique, Este domingo shows a marked advance in these areas, as well as a deeper degree of psychological penetration. Again, the plot centers around a middle class family, and again the family is matriarchal in type. Told from three different points of view, the story deals with a woman whose frustrated maternal feelings manifest themselves in an obsession to help the poor. One of her "finds" is Maya, a convict serving time for murder. With her influence, Chepa has the remaining time of his sentence commuted and arranges for him to live with Violeta, her husband's former servant. In a flashback it is revealed that Alvaro (Chepa's husband) and Violeta were lovers for a considerable period of time, each pretending that the other was someone else.

Apparently Chepa and Alvaro have never known sexual satisfaction together, and both of them are tied to the lower classes in the sexual sphere: Alvaro, through his affair with Violeta, and Chepa because of her obsessive feelings of maternity for Maya. Her sexual desire for Maya, mixed with her maternal feelings, borders on incestual passion. By sending Maya to live with Violeta, with whom he has sexual relations, Chepa has a vicarious relationship with him, and links the four of them, Alvaro, Violeta, Maya and herself into a circular relationship. Maya, however, under one of his recurring attacks of "the black hand" kills Violeta and begs to be taken back to the penitentiary, apparently unable

to cope with the world. Chepa, meanwhile, has gone looking for him in a shanty town. In her search she meets a mob of street urchins, but instead of feeling maternal towards them she feels fear; the children turn on her and she is left sobbing in a garbage heap.

When she learns of Violeta's murder, Chepa withdraws into her own world, living the rest of her life in remote silence.

The mythological world of Este domingo is based not upon the gods of the heavens, as in Coronación, but upon the goddess of the earth:

ARTEMIS, in addition to being the Greek goddess of the hunt, is a mother-deity as well as the protectress of little children and of all suckling animals. Hence she is a goddess of birth, appealed to by women on that occasion, and is called *Locheia*, She of the Child-bed, and *Kurotrophos*, Nurse of Youths. In a popular variation, the Artemis of Ephesus is confused with her, but, unlike her counterpart, she was not regarded as a virgin, but as a mother and foster mother, as is clearly shown by the multitude of breasts in her rude effigy.<sup>7</sup>

While the correspondence between Chepa and the goddess Artemis, especially the Artemis of Ephesus, is not as detailed as the one between Misa Elisa and Hera, it clearly exists. She is both a mother and a foster mother: after her own children have grown up, she directs her frustrated maternal feelings towards the poor, and in this she parallels the vision of Artemis as a mother-deity. At the same time she is a virginal figure, and her husband speaks with scorn of her distaste for sexual relations. In this way she parallels both the image of the virgin goddess and the mother goddess; in addition, in what is the most striking resemblance, she is often referred to by Alvaro as:

" . . . a littered bitch lying on a dirty rag with hungry whelps stuck to her, sucking on her teats, never happy unless she can feel mouths that are thirsty for help, comfort, care, compassion, fastened to her breasts."<sup>8</sup>

Chepa herself admits to:

" . . . that feeling she sometimes gets with the poor people of her shanty town: they are voracious, they want to devour her, to take pieces of her flesh to feed themselves on, and sometimes, in her dreams, she feels that she has thousands of teats and all the thousands of inhabitants of her shantytown, men, women, children, old women are fastened to those teats . . ."9

Granted, then, that Chepa is at first glance a strong, maternal figure, and given Donoso's predilection for these types, all seems to be neatly tied up. Upon reconsideration, however, it appears that there is no real male god in the place where one might be expected. In Coronación, Ramón and Andrés were clearly gods, even though in weak or grotesque form: Alvaro, then, should also be a god, but he obviously is not. By the same token, Maya, because he is a murderer and a convict, should not be a god, but his importance is such that neither is he conveniently classified as a non-god, or mortal. Examining these problems at first separately, and then as a whole, it becomes evident that Este domingo goes far beyond the limits of merely sketching a character likeness to a goddess and is, in fact, a powerful representation of the great ancient matriarchial society that existed long before the patriarchal figures were developed. This, then, focuses the attention of the novel on the figure that Robert Graves has called the White Goddess.

THE WHITE GODDESS of Birth, Love and Death, was a personification of primitive woman--woman the creatress and woman the destructress. In Europe there were at first no male gods contemporary with the Goddess to challenge her prestige or power, but she had a son, the Star-son, who was also her lover and her victim. The Star-son was alternately the beneficent Serpent of Wisdom, who, incarnate in the sacred serpents which were the ghosts of the dead, sent the winds. The Son was incarnate in the male demons of the various societies ruled by the Goddess, and assisted the erotic dances held in her honor. Also called Lucifer or Phosphorus

("bringer of light") because as the evening-star he led in the light of the Moon, the Son was reborn every year, grew up as the year advanced, destroyed the Serpent, and won the Goddess's love. Her love destroyed him, but from his ashes was born another Serpent which, at Easter, laid the "glain" or red egg, which she ate; so that the Son was reborn to her as a child once more.

Star-son and Serpent are at war; one succeeds the other in the Moon-woman's favor, as summer succeeds winter, and winter succeeds summer; as death succeeds birth and birth succeeds death. The Sun grows weaker or stronger as the year takes its course, the branches of the tree are now loaded and now bare, but the light of the Moon (the Goddess) is invariable. She is impartial: she destroys or creates with equal passion. There are as yet no fathers, for the Serpent is no more the father of the Star-son than the Star-son is the Serpent; they are Twins. The Goddess is the mother of all things; her sons and lovers partake of the sacred essence only by her grace.<sup>10</sup>

The great Goddess, then, is the basis for Este domingo. She is one with the Artemis of Ephesus, having many names but only one basic form: that of the all pervasive mother-goddess, the personification of primitive woman. Impartially creating or destroying, she is often called the white Sow, who both creates and devours her children. The multiple-breasted Chepa, as the personification of the Goddess, is both mother and destroyer of her children: she helps, or gives birth, to her poor, only to smother the life out of them by the same act. She obtains Maya's release from prison, symbolizing his rebirth, and then slowly kills him, consuming him with her passion.

Chepa has also symbolically killed her husband Alvaro, having totally emasculated him. Impotent on their wedding night, he is consumed by the Goddess with whom he lies: in the ancient rites the Goddess, after coupling with a chosen consort to ensure her fertility, slays and eats him, much as a sow eats her young.

Alvaro and Maya, then, are two sides of the same being, and are the personifications of the Twin. Often Alvaro plays chess alone in his study

competing against an unseen adversary; symbolically Alvaro and Maya represent the Star-son and the Serpent, and as such are eternally at war with one another, competing for the favours of the Goddess. In addition, both men carry her mark of destruction: Alvaro carries the mark on his breast, in the form of a cancerous growth, and Maya is marred by a mole on his face. However, in addition to being outwardly disfigured, they are also marked inwardly, and in this way are doubly doomed, with the external growth symbolizing the internal stain. Twice in the novel reference is made to the "animita," or death-prayer in the form of a fire lit in honor of the dead. Fire is also a symbol of consuming passion, and in this the "animita" of the novel would also seem to correspond to the anima of which von Franz speaks.

The ANIMA, or "the woman within," is a personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in a man's psyche. The character of a man's anima is as a rule shaped by his mother: if he feels that his mother has had a negative influence on him, his anima will often express itself in a sort of dullness, a fear of disease, of impotence, or of accidents. Another way in which the negative anima can be revealed in a man's personality is by waspish, poisonous, effeminate remarks by which he devalues everything. There are legends throughout the world in which "a poison damsel" appears: she is a beautiful creature who has weapons hidden in her body or a secret poison with which she kills her lovers during their first night together. In this guise the anima is as cold and reckless as certain uncanny aspects of nature herself.

If, on the other hand, a man's experience of his mother has been positive, this can also affect his anima in typical but different ways, with the result that he either becomes effeminate or is preyed upon by women and thus is unable to cope with the hardships of life.

The most frequent manifestations of the anima take the form of erotic fantasy. This is a crude, primitive aspect of the anima, which becomes compulsive only when a man's feeling attitude toward life has remained infantile.

All these aspects of the anima have the same tendency; that is, they can be projected so that they appear to the man to

be the qualities of some particular woman. It is the presence of the *anima* that causes a man to fall suddenly in love when he sees a woman for the first time and knows at once that this is "she." In this situation, the man feels as if he has known this woman intimately for all time; he falls for her so helplessly that it looks to outsiders like complete madness.<sup>11</sup>

The *anima* then, as a projection of the woman, and thereby of the Goddess, who is the personification of woman, is clearly discernible in both Alvaro and Maya. In other words, her omnipotent influence is seen within them, and is symbolic of her creative and destructive powers over them. Alvaro projects this *anima* in the form of effeminacy, impotence, and dread of disease. Having been emasculated by the "poison goddess," with whom he fell hopelessly in love at first sight, his destruction at her hands is unmerciful. Since he, as the Star-son, is also her child, it is doubly certain that it is she who is the force within his *anima*. Maya is also preyed upon by the *anima*, and thus is incapable of coping with the hardships of life. Further, his name itself is symbolic of this inner, destructive force:

'The MAYA can be described as our own more or less beneficent shapes and appearances. Thus we are the captives of our own Maya-Shakti and of the motion picture that it incessantly produces . . . The Highest Being is the lord and master of Maya. All of the rest of us . . . are the victims of our own individual Maya . . . To liberate man from such a spell . . . is the principal aim of all the great Indian philosophies.'<sup>12</sup>

And so Maya, as the Serpent, is destroyed by the force of the Goddess's *anima* within him, as is his Twin the Star-son.

It is in this way, then, that Donoso has varied and expounded upon the goddess sketch offered in Coronación. The goddess figure has become the Great Goddess of the earliest myths, and as such is both the creative

mother deity and the destroyer of her young. Ministered to by eunuch priests, she is the castrator of men, to whom she gives birth and then destroys, having used them briefly to ensure fertility. This process of destruction is symbolized in the novel by a cancer or mole on her victims, which in turn represents her influence, or anima, within them. In turn, the anima is often personified as a superior female figure: a priestess, sorceress, earth mother, or goddess of nature or love, all of which are embodied in the White Goddess.<sup>13</sup> In this way then, the Goddess, through the anima, destroys both the Star-son and the Serpent, who are both her sons and lovers. Vying over her favor, they are both destroyed by it, only to be recreated and redestroyed. At the same time, in Este domingo the Goddess herself is destroyed, by the very power that she uses to destroy others: she is all-powerful until she attempts to wield her power over Maya--he is destroyed, but, in allowing her passion to dominate her, she is destroyed also, as is obvious when she throws her furs to the children.

## EL LUGAR SIN LIMITES

Although El lugar sin límites shares its themes of decadence and mythology with both Coronación and Este domingo, in language, structure and technique it marks a considerable advance. Just as Este domingo is more sophisticated than Coronación, El lugar sin límites surpasses both of these novels and is by far the most avant-garde of Donoso's works.

The plot centers around an aging transvestite dancer, Manuela, who is part owner of a house of prostitution located in a small town which is rapidly becoming extinct. His partner in this fast-failing enterprise is his daughter Japonesita, a cold, sexless girl who, in spite of her position, is a virgin.

In the opening chapter of the novel it becomes apparent that both father and daughter are vying for the affection of the same man, Pancho Vega, a husky truck driver who, a year earlier, had started a brawl in their house. At the news of Pancho's return to El Olivo, Manuela and Japonesita, outwardly terrified, are inwardly elated, in spite of Pancho's past threats of violence. Manuela hastily mends his dancing costume, a flamenco-style dress which Pancho had ripped the year before, and spends the rest of the day jabbering incessantly, assuring Japonesita that Pancho won't bother them, and inwardly praying that he will.

Japonesita also prepares for Pancho's visit; a drab, mousey girl, she allows Manuela to arrange her hair, and mentally surrenders herself,

body and soul, to Pancho's brutal masculinity: caaffish as he is, Pancho is her only hope for salvation from her empty, barren life.

In the midst of these preparations are several flashbacks which introduce the other two main characters, don Alejo and Big Japonesa. Don Alejo is an elderly politician who literally created the town of El Olivo to serve his business interests, and now is coldly calculating its destruction. As a young political hopeful, he had brought Big Japonesa--Japonesita's mother--into the town to work in his house of prostitution; later, at a party celebrating his election as deputy, he half jokingly bet Big Japonesa that she could not arouse Manuela, who had been imported to dance for the celebration. Big Japonesa, insisting that she not only could arouse Manuela, but even lure him into intercourse with her, talked don Alejo into putting up the title to the house as the stake and wheedled the horrified Manuela into her bed with the promise of making him full partner in the ownership of the house. Manuela, yearning for stability after a life of wandering and scorn, agreed, but, once in bed with Big Japonesa, his terror and repulsion reduced him to a state of impotent frenzy. However, Big Japonesa, genuinely aroused, cajoled him into believing that he was the woman, and Manuela, convinced of the inversion, for the first and only time in his life was capable of heterosexual intercourse. Japonesita was born as a result of the union, and during Big Japonesa's lifetime all went smoothly, although there was no repetition of the sexual act between Big Japonesa and Manuela. The town, meanwhile, had been bypassed by a new highway; defeated and despairing over the future isolation, Big Japonesa entered into a lethargic state of psychological withdrawal and died.

Returning to the present, the tension created by Pancho's impending arrival is temporarily alleviated by a visit from the now elderly don

Alejo, who informs Japonesita that the town's hopes for electricity will never be realized. Manuela correctly guesses that the disappointment is don Alejo's handiwork, being the final step in his plan to annihilate the town.

With don Alejo's departure, Manuela and Japonesita resume their waiting, and late in the evening Pancho and his brother-in-law Octavio make a belligerent entrance. Manuela, overtaken by fear, hides in the chicken coop; eventually he overcomes his terror, changes into his dancing dress, and makes his entrance into the house. After performing for Pancho, the two of them and Octavio reel out in search of more lively amusement, and in his elation Manuela makes the mistake of kissing Pancho in front of Octavio. Pancho, embarrassed at his attraction to Manuela and goaded by his brother-in-law, lashes out in a blind rage. Manuela flees, running toward don Alejo's house for protection. Finally, unable to cross the canal that bounds don Alejo's property, he is overtaken and beaten senseless in a brutal scene of ashamed sexual frenzy. A short time later don Alejo's four black dogs are heard howling in the vineyard, as Japonesita, upset and irritated by Manuela's departure with Pancho, goes to bed without even taking a candle to light her way.

The role of don Alejandro in the novel is that of a stern god who is capable of creating or destroying at will. Having built El Olivo to serve his political and financial needs, he casually decides to annihilate it when it no longer serves his purpose; his plan is to raze the land and turn it into an extension of his vineyards. From the clues provided in the novel, a parallel may be drawn between don Alejo and three gods of the underworld; Hades, Pluto, and Dionysus.

HADES, god of the underworld, is heartless and inexorable in the carrying out of his decrees, prayer and sacrifice to him being of no avail. His realm includes a place of torment for the wicked, but he is no enemy of mankind, does not tempt wickedness nor delight in it, and can reward the good as well as punish the sinners. He is a terrible, not an evil god.<sup>14</sup>

PLUTO, a milder form of Hades is sometimes called the giver of wealth, and sometimes the god of agriculture.<sup>15</sup>

DIONYSUS, represented as the planting of the vine, is an earth god, but may pertain to the underworld as well. He bestows gifts of wine upon those who welcome him, but punishes those who resist; he has an appearance of softness, but is in truth a mighty god.<sup>16</sup>

One of only three masculine figures in the book, don Alejo uses his virility in a destructive capacity: like Hades, he is a terrible god, although in appearance he is benign, as is Dionysus. The lord of extensive vineyards, don Alejo corresponds to Pluto and Dionysus as a god of agriculture; when he created El Olivo and parceled out the land he was a giver of wealth; by destroying the town he is the cruel Hades. As Manuela runs in the night he prays to the inexorable don Alejo, asking for protection, imploring him to strike his pursuers down: his prayers are to no avail and again don Alejo parallels the heartless Hades.

THE HOUSE OF HADES lies somewhere to the West; the world of the dead is separated from that of the living by a body of water, one of the waters of the underworld, which are five in number, Styx, Acheron, Pyriphlegethon, Kokytos, and Lethe. There is a headland, with groves of poplars and willows, and these stand outside the House of Hades. Somewhere in this region is a landmark, the White Rock, where the two great rivers meet, presumably two of the rivers of the underworld. Passing this, one comes to the Plain of Asphodel, where dwell the departed, great and small, living a tasteless and colorless life, with a sort of shadowy continuance of their former occupations in this world. The ghosts are the merest shadows of the living men, lacking the essentials of real vigorous life, probably the blood-soul, which a living man has. All that is left is the breath-soul, which by itself is a poor thing, being quite bodiless.<sup>17</sup>

The description of El Olivo and its surrounding area meshes perfectly with this description of the underworld. Manuela, crossing the town, stops to look around: the far side of the town is bounded by poplar groves, whose leaves invade the town. Another side of the town is almost deserted; what was once a thriving area of living men (blood-souls) is now a deserted jumble of iron works, dairies, cooper's shops, sheds and wine cellars, inhabited only by the wind (breath-souls). The network of don Alejo's vineyards, separated from the town by brambles and a canal, converges around the houses of the town. In a later passage Pancho travels to don Alejo's house, passing the point where the Palos ("Sticks" in English) Canal splits in two, and, further on, passing an ancient concrete landmark. Arriving at don Alejo's house, he drives past a double row of trees that line the entrance.

STYX, the boundary of the underworld, is guarded by the three-headed monster CERBERUS, who extends a friendly greeting to all who enter, but siezes those who attempt escape. To cross this boundary river, it is necessary to be ferried. The ferryman is a quaint and probably very old figure, but strong and vigorous, namely CHARON. A dark and grisly old man, he wears a black sailor's cloak and conducts the souls of the dead across the river of the lower world; however, if the House of Hades is literally a house, as it seems to be in the older documents, the entrance is a door, guarded by a porter, KERBEROS. But Kerberos is never displaced by Charon, but only moved to the far side of the river, where living visitants at least have to quiet him by throwing him a honey cake, in other words giving him his share of the food of the dead, since such cakes were a very common form of offering.<sup>18</sup>

It is possible that don Alejo's black dogs, although four in number, represent the monster Cerberus: they are described as having slavering bloody snouts, granular palates, yellow eyes flashing in narrow faces and the heavy ferocious feet of the purest of blood lines. Black as wolf shadows, the dogs are savage and eternal, since when one dies he

is replaced and the names are never changed. They recognize don Alejo as their master, and it is he who turns them loose to patrol the vineyards.

There are two possible interpretations of this theory, the first being that the writhing, three-headed monster with multiple extremities, referred to during the struggle among Pancho, Octavio and Manuela, could also represent the Cerberus, who, in addition to being dog-like, had hair of snakes. If this is the case, the dogs may be either taken as an alternate symbol of the Cerberus, or possible as a multiple of the Anubis, an Egyptian god with the head of a jackal, whom the Greeks represented in the form of a dog. Identified with Hades, he is the conductor and watcher of the dead.<sup>19</sup>

In either case, a short while after Manuela is left sprawled on the grass by the canal that he cannot cross, the four dogs bark ominously in the night, as if in greeting to the soul who is about to enter their realm.

Don Céspedes, don Alejo's gate keeper, is the counterpart of both Charon and Kerberos. A quaint, very old man, he also serves as don Alejo's guard, training the four black dogs and keeping a constant vigil over his master. Wrapped in an old blanket, on the night of Manuela's death he crosses the Palos canal with ease and passes through the thickets by way of passages known only to himself. Conversing with him, Japonésita envies his immunity to the dogs and to fate, recalling that someone once told her that he ate only when don Alejo's house servants remembered his existence in some remote corner and took him bread or cheese or a hot dish of food. At the sound of the dogs' insistent barking, don Céspedes leaves Japonésita to investigate the cause, and, in the mythological interpretation, to ferry Manuela's soul across the river.

PERSEPHONE, one of the principal goddesses of the fertility of the earth, was greatly desired by Hades, who schemed to carry her off into his realm. As she was gathering flowers he caused a flower of marvelous size and beauty to grow out of the ground; when the goddess plucked it, the earth opened and Hades appeared in his chariot, for he is connected with horses. Seizing Persephone, he carried her off to the underworld. Her mother Demeter, also a goddess of fertility, became greatly anxious and implored Jupiter to interfere to procure the restitution of her daughter; Jupiter consented, on the condition that Persephone had not partaken of food during her stay in the underworld. Hades, however, had tempted her to eat a pomegranate: this prevented her complete release, but a compromise was struck which allowed her to spend half of every year with her mother, and the other half with her husband. Demeter, by reason of her mourning, had caused the earth to grow desolate and famine-stricken, for without her influence, nothing could grow or reach maturity. With the return of her daughter, Demeter restored the fertility of the ground: during Persephone's six months on earth, the land is warm and the crops thrive, but during the other six months the land is barren and cold.<sup>20</sup>

Big Japonesa, brought to El Olivo by don Alejo, and having been his lover, is Persophene, the goddess of warmth and fertility. Manuela and Japonesita both allude to the heat exuding from her overly-ripe, voluptuous body:

"Even on the worst (i.e., coldest) of days, like this one for instance, she always wore a low-cut dress, big and fat, with her heavy breasts like bulging sacks of grapes. At the neckline's vee where her breasts began to swell she always carried a tiny handkerchief and . . . she would take out her handkerchief and dry the almost imperceptible drops of perspiration that always broke out on her forehead, her nose, and especially around the low neckline."<sup>21</sup>

and all around her are made to be aware of it:

"The men felt the wave of heat that emanated from her body, certain of its technique and its charms, not quite as fresh as before but hotter and more insistent . . ."<sup>22</sup>

She is the first and only person to arouse Manuela sexually, giving to him also the gift of fertility. While she is alive (i.e., on earth) the

town prospers and the house of prostitution, also a symbol of fertility, is filled with warmth, emotion, and prosperity. After her departure from the world, however, all becomes barren and cold, the town dies, the house starts sinking (i.e., into the underworld) and Japonesita yearns for her warmth to heat her chilly bed:

"Even the tomb in which they laid her in San Alfonso was probably hot and she wouldn't ever feel that warmth again."<sup>23</sup>

APHRODITE, the Greek goddess of love, shows her power as the golden, sweetly smiling goddess of beauty and love, which she knows how to kindle or to keep away. She outshines all the goddesses in grace and loveliness; in her girdle she wears united all the magic charms that can bewitch the wisest man and subdue the very gods. Her retinue consists of Eros, the Hours, the Graces, Peitho (persuasion), Pothos and Himeros (personifications of longing and yearning). By a regulation of Solon she becomes the goddess of prostitution; in later times, the worship of Aphrodite as the goddess of mere sensual love made rapid strides, and in particular districts assumed forms more and more immoral, in imitation of the services performed to love-goddesses in the East, especially Corinth, where large bands of girls were consecrated as slaves to the service of the gods and the practice of prostitution. And later still, the worship of Astarte, the Syrian Aphrodite, performed by eunuchs, spread all over Greece. In the Greek myths Aphrodite's love adventures with Ares, the god of war, are notorious, and from these sprang Eros. Amongst animals the ram, he-goat, hare, dove, sparrow, and other creatures of amorous nature were sacred to her.<sup>24</sup>

Manuela is the grotesque personification of Aphrodite, being based upon her more immoral forms. Just as Aphrodite is the queen of love, it is Manuela's desire to be the "queen" of the party, although in the translation of the novel the word is changed to "princess" because of the unfortunate double meaning of "queen" in English. Her (for it is difficult to think of Manuela as a man) famous dancing dress parallels the girdle of the goddess, and, wearing the dress, she bewitches both gods and men. In addition, as the owner of a house of prostitution, she

is parallel to Aphrodite as both the goddess of that profession and of sensual, erotic love. She is described as being very much the woman, and also is likened to a sparrow, which is sacred to Aphrodite as the symbol of love. Lastly, the goddess Aphrodite's bewitchment of Ares and their notorious love affair correspond to the relationship between Manuela and Pancho, who, as will be seen, is the personification of Ares.

ARES, warlike, with a violent disposition and a bloodthirsty nature, is hateful to his father Zeus and all of the gods except the greedy Hades who welcomes the bold young fighting men slain in cruel wars. He is little more than a divine swashbuckler, and his blind rages and unbridled strength often carry him to indiscriminate slaughter. He is depicted as a young and handsome man of strong sinewy frame, and often advances into battle in a chariot drawn by magnificent steeds.<sup>25</sup>

The careful description of Pancho's red truck with the double rear tires would seem to be an allusion to a chariot: as Pancho drives defiantly into town blaring the horn, he very much resembles Ares as he must have driven into battle, preceded by the fanfare of taunting trumpets. In addition, Pancho is called the "son of don Alejo" by the townspeople, as is everyone in the area with blue eyes: this may be construed as an allusion to the fact that, being blue eyed, he is like don Alejo, or of the same family, and is therefore a god, even though not specifically don Alejo's son. Finally, Pancho is impulsive, violent, and in the final scenes, cruelly bloodthirsty, as is the warlike Ares.

El lugar sin límites, then, is another variation on the basic theme presented in Coronación, and yet is different from the White Goddess concept of Este domingo. Whereas the latter presented the great matriarchal society before the patriarchal concept replaced it, El lugar sin límites takes a jump in time and shows the conflict between matriarchal

and patriarchal figures. Here, don Alejo represents a mighty, infernal god who drags an entire town, or society, into the depths of hell. As the goddess Persephone, Big Japonesa represents the forces of life, and only she can stay the hand of doom. However, even she is defeated by the male, and with her departure from earth all begins to die and become a part of the underworld, as symbolized by the town's invasion by the smoke of the burning, dead leaves. As the fertile goddess succumbs to the god's power, so do Aphrodite and Ares, who are by now only grotesque personifications of the original deities. Finally, in an ending again very similar to Robert Graves's The White Goddess, only the barren Japonesita is left to shiver in the cold of the sterile winter until warmth returns to earth.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, José Donoso's novels, seen on the mythological plane, are not so much a trilogy as variations upon a single theme. Coronación presents the basic sketch of the powerful celestial goddess, who is studied from two distinct angles in the later novels. Este domingo is concerned with the omnipotent Great Goddess of the earliest myths, before the patriarchal system came into existence; in the end, however, the Goddess's destructive power destroys her, as well as the male figures. El lugar sin límites deals with the later conflict of the goddess and the god, and in this variation the goddess is overpowered by the male. Here, however, the goddess represents the regenerative forces of good and fertility, while the god's role is that of the destructor.

On the non-mythological plane, Donoso's works are a study of modern society, which the author describes as essentially matriarchal in form. The modern characters who populate all three novels are, on the mythological plane, a series of grotesque parodies of the gods and goddesses, although the basic characteristics of the ancient mythological figures are retained.

By viewing both the mythological and the non-mythological aspects of the three novels, each takes on a far greater, more provocative meaning than has to date been attributed them, and as a group they present multiple levels of reality, masterfully conceived and articulated. For this reason, José Donoso may well be considered one of the most brilliant and promising young writers of our time.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A complete list of articles on José Donoso is given in the Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup>Oskar Seyffert, Dictionary of Classical Antiquities, eds. Henry Nettleship and J. E. Sandys (3rd ed. rev.; Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1956), p. 337. In most cases these mythological descriptions are composites of two sources. The original wording of each author has been preserved as closely as possible, although in some instances the order has been changed and the idea condensed. Consequently, the notes will indicate which authors have been cited, although the citations are mixed for the sake of giving the composite definition.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>4</sup>José Donoso, Coronation, trans. Jocasta Goodwin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>Seyffert, op. cit., pp. 277-278 passim and: H. J. Rose, A Handbook of Greek Mythology (6th ed. rev.; New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1958), pp. 165-166 passim.

<sup>6</sup>Seyffert, op. cit., p. 324.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 71-73 passim and: Rose, op. cit., pp. 112-118 passim.

<sup>8</sup>José Donoso, This Sunday, trans. Lorraine O'Grady Freeman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Graves, The White Goddess (amended and enlarged edition; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), pp. 383-393 passim. The credit for this connection is due to Dr. Harriet B. Powers, who very kindly shared her ideas with me.

<sup>11</sup>M. L. von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," Part 3 of Man and His Symbols by Carl G. Jung (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1964), pp. 177-188 passim. Credit is again due to Dr. Harriet B. Powers for her help with this section.

<sup>12</sup>J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), p. 197.

<sup>13</sup>von Franz, op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>14</sup>Seyffert, op. cit., pp. 263-264 and: Rose, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>15</sup>Seyffert, op. cit., p. 264.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 191-194 passim.

<sup>17</sup>Rose, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 88-90 passim and: Seyffert, op. cit., pp. 129-130 passim.

<sup>19</sup>Seyffert, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 472-473 passim and: Rose, op. cit., pp. 91-93 passim.

<sup>21</sup>See below p. 37-38.

<sup>22</sup>See below p. 71.

<sup>23</sup>See below p. 106.

<sup>24</sup>Seyffert, op. cit., pp. 38-40 passim.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 60-61 passim and: Rose, op. cit., p. 157.

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HELL HATH NO LIMITS  
JOSE DONOSO

FOR  
RITA AND CARLOS FUENTES

FAUSTUS

First will I question thee about hell:

Tell me, where is the place that men call hell?

MEPHOSTOPHILIS

Under the heavens.

FAUSTUS

Ay, so are all things else; but whereabouts?

MEPHOSTOPHILIS

Within the bowels of these elements,

Where we are tortured, and remain for ever.

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed

In one self place; but where we are is hell,

And where hell is, there must we ever be . . .

MARLOWE, DOCTOR FAUSTUS

# I

Manuela forced her bleary eyes open with difficulty, stretched slightly, and twisting herself toward the side opposite to where Japonesita was sleeping, reached out her hand to pick up the clock. Five til ten. Mass at eleven. Slimy strings of moisture resealed her eyelids even before she could set the clock down on the dresser next to the bed. At least half an hour before her daughter would ask for her breakfast. She rubbed her tongue against her barren gums: like hot sawdust and breath like a rotten egg. From drinking so much wine in order to hurry the men along and close up early. She winced. "Of course!" Opening her eyes, she sat up in bed: Pancho Vega was in town. She covered her shoulders with the pink shawl that was muddled in the covers at the foot of her daughter's side of the bed. Yes. Last night they had come to tell her. To be careful because his truck had been seen in the area, his snub-nosed truck, red, with the double tires on the back wheels. At first Manuela didn't believe it because she knew that Pancho Vega had another interest now, thank God, down around Pelarco where he worked hauling grape refuse. But a little while later when she had almost forgotten what they told her about the truck, she heard the horn by the post office on the next street. He must have honked it for almost five solid minutes, harsh and insistent, enough to drive you crazy. That was the way he carried on when he was drunk. The idiot thought it was funny. Then Manuela went to tell her daughter that it would be better to close early, why take chances, she was afraid that

what happened the last time would happen again. Japonesita instructed the girls to finish up quickly with the clients or to dismiss them: to remember last year, when Pancho Vega was in town for the vintage and had presented himself in her house with a bunch of his burly pals, all of them full of wine . . . blood might have been shed if Alejandro Cruz hadn't arrived just in time and forced them to behave themselves in a civil way. So they got bored and went away. But they said that later on Pancho Vega was furious and went around swearing, "I'm going to screw the two of them good, Japonesita and that fag she has for a father . . ."

Manuela pulled herself out of bed and started to put on her trousers. Pancho could still be in town . . . His hands, hard, heavy, as if they were made of stone, of iron. Yes, she remembered them. Last year the beast kept insisting that she do a Spanish dance. For he had heard that when the party livened up with the season's wine, and when the customers could be trusted, Manuela would put on a red dress with white polka dots, very elegant, and do Spanish dances. You bet! You big brute! To think that I'd dance for you, just look at you! I do that for gentlemen, for friends, not for stinking degenerates like you or for insolent peons who think they're big shots because they have a week's pay in their pockets . . . and their poor wives at home breaking their backs doing laundry so the kids don't die of hunger, while Their Highnesses are out drinking wine and punch and even hard liquor . . . no. And since she had drunk too much, she told him exactly that. Pancho and his friends were enraged. They started by closing the place down and smashing a bunch of bottles and plates and smearing the bread and the cold cuts and the wine on the floor. Then while one of them wrenched her arm the others pulled off her clothes and trying to force her into the famous Spanish dress they ripped it in two. They had begun to harass Japonesita when don Alejo

arrived, miraculously, as if they had invoked him. Such a good man. He even had the face of God Our Father, with his porcelain-blue eyes and his mustache and his snowy eyebrows.

She knelt to fish her shoes out from under the bed and sat on the edge to put them on. She had slept badly. Not just the wine that bloated so much. But because, God knows why, don Alejo's dogs had howled all night in the vineyard . . . she would be yawning all day, without the strength to do anything, with pains in her legs and back. She tied the laces slowly, with double bows . . . if you stooped down, there under the bed in the back was her suitcase. Cardboard, with peeling paint and white mouldy edges, held shut with a cord: it contained everything she owned. And her dress. Or rather, what was left of her lovely dress. Today, as she opened her eyes, no, that's a lie, last night, when they told her that Pancho Vega was in town, she was tempted to take the dress out again, God knows why. She hadn't touched it for a year. It was insomnia, not the sour wine, the dogs, or the pain in her ribs! Quietly, not wanting to irritate her daughter, she bent down again, pulled out the suitcase and opened it. A total loss. Better not to touch it even. But she did touch it. She examined the bodice . . . no, there's not so much damage, the neckline, the arm pit . . . it can be fixed. Spend this afternoon in the kitchen so I don't get stiff. Fiddle with the skirts and the train and try it on so the girls can tell me where I have to take it in because I lost six pounds last year. But I don't have any thread. She tore a strip from the end of the train and put it in her pocket. As soon as she served her daughter her breakfast she was going to head for Ludovinia's to see if she could find a little red thread of the same shade in one of her jars of odds and ends. Or something like it. In a town like Estación El Olivo you can't be choosy.

She pushed the suitcase back under the cot. Yes, at Ludo's, but before going out she ought to make sure that Pancho had left, if he really was in town last night. After all, it could very well be that she had just dreamed about the honking, like some times during the past year when she had thought she heard his rough voice or felt his brutal hands, or it could be that she had only imagined last night's honking, remembering the horn from last year. Who knows. Shivering, she put on her shirt. She wrapped herself up in the pink shawl, put her dentures in and walked out into the enclosed courtyard with the dress over her arm. She lifted her trivial raisin-creased face. Through dilated nostrils, black and hairy as an old mare's, she detected in the cloudy morning air the unmistakable aroma of the new vintage.

Half-nude, carrying a page of the newspaper in her hand, Lucy came out of her room like a sleepwalker.

"Lucy!"

Lucy's exhausted: these new wines are so treacherous. She locked herself in the outhouse that straddled the drain at the end of the patio, next to the chicken coop. But no, I won't send Lucy. Clotilde, yes.

"Hey, Cloty!"

. . . with her imbecilic face and skinny arms immersed in the soapy water of the wash tub, surrounded by the reflections of ivy leaves . . .

"Listen, Cloty . . ."

"Good morning."

"Where's Nelly?"

"In the street, playing with the neighbor's kids. That woman is so good to her, knowing what she is and all . . ."

Poor, unfortunate whore. That's the way she'd described her to Japonesita when they took Clotilde in a little more than a month ago.

And so old. Who would want to go upstairs with her. Although at night, the men, stupefied by the wine, flesh starving for other flesh, for any flesh that's hot and can be bitten and squeezed and licked, didn't know or care what they went to bed with — dog, hag, anything. And Clotilde worked like a mule, not even protesting when they ordered her to haul the Coca Cola crates from one place to another. It was bad for her last night. The fat yokel had been eager, but when Japonesita announced that she was going to close up, instead of going with Cloty to her room he said that he was going out by the street to vomit and he never came back. Fortunately he had already paid for his drinks.

"I want to send her on an errand. Don't you know that if Pancho is around I can't go to Mass? Tell Nelly to check all of the streets and tell me if she sees the truck. She knows it, the red one. How can I miss going to Mass?"

"Clotilde dried her hands on her apron.

"I'm on my way."

"Did you start the fire in the kitchen?"

"Not yet."

"Then loan me some coals to make breakfast for the girl."

Squatting over Clotilde's hearth to scoop some coals onto a flattened tin can, Manuela felt her spine crack. It's going to rain. I'm too old for these things. She was even afraid of the morning air now, afraid of the morning most of all, she was afraid of so many things, of the way she coughed, of the bile in her mouth and the cramped pain in her gums, of the early morning when everything is so different from the night, at night she's safely wrapped in the sooty brilliance of carbide light and wine and vigilant eyes, the conversations of friends and strangers at the tables, and the silver that falls dollar by dollar into her daughter's

purse, which by now must be almost full. She opened the door to the big room, set the coals on the ashes in the hearth and put on the tea kettle. She cut a loaf of bread in half, buttered it, and while she gathered up a saucer, spoon, and cup she sang softly and slowly:

. . . you led her away  
 tropical path . . .  
 Make her reeeetern  
 Tooooooooooooooooo me . . .

She might be old but she would die singing, dressed in very fine plumage indeed. In her suitcase, under the bed, in addition to her Spanish dress she had a moth-eaten old feather boa. Ludo had given it to her years ago as a consolation because a man had jilted her . . . just which man it was I don't remember now (one of the many who made me suffer when I was young). If the party got lively, and if they pleaded with her a little, it cost her nothing to put on the feathers even though they made her look like a scarecrow and they didn't have anything to do with the Spanish dance number. Just to make the people laugh, that's all, never mind, the laughter envelopes me and caresses me and the applause and the compliments and the lights, come have a drink with us, sweetheart, whatever you want, whatever you want as long as you dance for us again. Why be so afraid of Pancho Vega! Those thick-browed, rough-voiced brutes are all alike: the minute it gets dark they begin to paw you. And they leave everything smelling of machine oil and garages and cheap cigarettes and sweat . . . and in the dawn the wine dregs souring in the bottom of the glasses on the seven dirty tables, the lopsided, scratched tables, everything too brassy, everything too glaring this morning and every other morning. And there's a swamp beside the chair where Clotilde's fat man was sitting because the lout spit all night long--an abscessed tooth, he said.

The tea kettle started to boil. This very day she would talk to Japonesita. She was too old to go around fixing breakfast each morning after working all night, with gusts of wind blowing into the salon through the grooves in the loose siding and where the shingles had been dislodged by the earthquake. Clotilde was having such poor luck in the parlor that they might as well use her for a servant. And Nelly to run errands, and when she grows up . . . yes, let Clotilde bring them breakfast in bed. What other work could she expect at her age. At least she wasn't lazy like the other whores. Lucy returned to her room. Now she'll get back into bed with her muddy feet, the slut, and she'll spend all afternoon between the filthy sheets, eating bread, sleeping, getting fat. Of course, that's why she has so many clients. Because she's fat. Sometimes a very fancy gentleman comes all the way from Duao to spend the night with her. He says that he likes to hear the swishing of her thighs rubbing together, white and soft, when she dances. That that's what he pays for. Not like Japonesita who would like to be a whore, poor thing, and never will because she's so skinny. But as a manager, Japonesita is one of the best. There's no denying that. So efficient and thrifty. And every Monday morning she takes the train to Talca to deposit the profits in the bank. Heaven only knows how much she has hoarded. She never would tell her, even though it was a much hers as Japonesita's. And what good did it do them, Japonesita is such a miser that no one gets any good of it. She never buys herself a dress. Dress! She wouldn't even buy another bed so that we can each have our own. Like last night. Manuela didn't sleep a wink. Probably because of don Alejandro's dogs barking in the vineyard. Or was she dreaming? And the honking. In any case, having to sleep with a pubescent female mortified her.

She put the saucer of bread on top of the steaming cup and walked outside again. Clotilde, scrubbing violently, yelled to her that Nelly had gone to check the streets. Manuela didn't answer or thank her. Instead, she struck a bizarre pose and swayed affectedly in Clotilde's direction. Raising thread-like eyebrows above half-lidded eyes, she leered with mock passion and sang:

Tropicaaaaaaaaaaaaal  
paaaaaaaaaaaaaath.

## II

The house was sinking. One day they realized that the sidewalk was no longer at the same level as the dirt floor, but higher, so they bridged the discrepancy with two wedges and a stone slab in the doorway. To no avail. As the years passed, the sidewalk rose almost imperceptibly, God knows how, while the floor kept sinking. They hastened the sinking, perhaps, by wetting and flattening the floor for dancing and the stomping heels of the yokels had ground the earth down into a dirty pit. The stone slab, which was slowly wearing away, had never been level and now lateral fissures collected burnt matches, mint wrappers, scraps of paper, toothpicks, lint and buttons. Sometimes grass sprang up around the wedges.

Manuela kneeled in the doorway to pick up some scraps. She was in no hurry. There was still half an hour before Mass. A harmless half-hour, stripped of all tension by Nelly's report: not a truck, not a car in the whole town. Surely it had been a dream. She didn't even remember who came to tell her about the truck. And the dogs. They don't have any reason to run around loose in the vineyard anymore, when there's not even so much as a cluster of grapes left to steal. Well. Five minutes to Ludovinia's house, a quarter of an hour to find the thread, and five minutes for whatever, to drink some tea or to stop and gossip with someone on the corner. And then, her Mass.

Just in case, she looked up the street toward the poplar grove three blocks away that bounded one side of the town. No one. Not a soul. Of

course. Sunday. Not even the kids, who always howled like the devil, were playing ball in the road; they're probably waiting by the chapel door to ask for charity if some rich man's car drives up. The poplars trembled. If the wind increased the whole town would be invaded by the yellow leaves for at least a week and the women would spend all day sweeping them out from under everywhere, from the streets, the walkways, the doors and even from under the beds, to gather them in heaps and burn them . . . the blue smoke hovering in putrid ubiquity, creeping along like a cat sticking to the adobe buildings, coiling itself into the cavities of crumbling, weed-infested walls; and into the blackberry thickets that were devouring them and devouring the rooms and the sidewalks of the abandoned houses; blue smoke in eyes that smart and tear with the street's dying warmth. In her jacket pocket Manuela's hand grasped the dress scrap like one who rubs a charm to urge it to perform its magic.

Only a block more to the station that marks the boundary of this end of town and Ludo's house just around the corner, always cozy and warm with the hearth lit since early in the morning. She hurried past the neighboring houses, the poorest of the town. Very few were occupied because a long time ago the coopers moved their businesses to Talca; now, with the good roads, you could get there in no time from the rural areas. It wasn't that the other side of town, the side with the chapel and post office, had better houses or a larger population, but after all, it was the downtown area. Of course in better days this was the downtown because of the railway station. Now it was nothing more than a pasture divided by a line, a voided semaphore, a sidewalk of fractured concrete, fallen among the fennels under a pair of dilapidated euclyptus trees, an ante-diluvian threshing machine in whose rusty orange iron the children played,

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played, as if with a domesticated dinosaur. Further on, behind the mouldy wooden shed, more brambles and a canal separated the town from don Alejandro's vineyards. Manuela stopped on the corner to contemplate them for a moment. Everywhere, vineyards and vineyards and more vineyards as far as the eye could see, all the way to the mountains. Perhaps they didn't all belong to don Alejandro. If they didn't, they belonged to his relatives, brothers and brothers-in-law, cousins at the very least. All of them Cruzes. The network of vineyards converged around the houses that rimmed the town and surrounded a small park, but a park nonetheless, and a conglomeration of iron works, dairies, coopers' shops, sheds and wine cellars, all belonging to don Alejo. Manuela sighed. So much money. And so much power: don Alejo, when he came into his inheritance over a half-century ago, built Estación El Olivo so that the train would stop right there and pick up his products. And such a good man, don Alejo. What would become of the townspeople without him? Word has it that now for sure the gentleman is going to see to it that we get electric lights in the town. So cheerful and not at all pompous, considering that he's a senator and all. Not like the others, who think that a harsh voice and a hairy chest give them the right to insult a person. And don Alejandro, who is so manly? It's true that during the summer, when he came to town to hear Mass with Misia Blanca and they met by chance in the street, he pretended not to see them. Although sometimes, when Misia Blanca wasn't paying attention he winked at her.

Ludo served her tea and pastry. Manuela settled herself into a chair next to the hearth and began rummaging around in the boxes filled with pieces of ribbon and buttons and silk and wool and buckles. Ludovina couldn't see the contents anymore because she was so nearsighted. Almost blind. Manuela had advised her so many times not to be silly, to buy some

spectacles! But she never did. When Acevedo died, the moment before they sealed the coffin, Ludo almost went crazy and wanted to throw something in it that would accompany her husband through all of eternity. The only thing that occurred to her was her spectacles. Naturally. She had been Misia Blanca's servant when Moniquita died of typhus: the mother, desperate, cut off her blonde braid that reached down to her knees and threw it into the coffin. All of Misia Blanca's hair grew back. By trying to imitate her, stupid old Ludo threw away her eyesight. For Acevedo's sake, she said, he was always so jealous. So that she would never look at another man. When he was alive, he wouldn't let her have friends of either sex. Just Manuela. And when they kidded him by reminding him that no matter what things seemed, Manuela was still Japonesita's father, the cooper just laughed unbelievably. But Japonesita grew up and no one could doubt it: skinny, dark, toothy, with unruly hair just like Manuela's.

With the passing years Ludo had become forgetful and repetitive. Yesterday, Ludo had told her that when Misia Blanca came to see her she brought her a message from don Alejo saying that he wanted to buy her house, isn't it strange that don Alejo should mention again that he's interested in my property but I don't understand why and I don't want to leave, I want to die here. Ah, no, it was enough to choke you. Now it's no fun to chat with her. She didn't even remember what all she had stashed away in the multitude of boxes, packages, bundles, tubes that she hid in drawers or under the bed or in corners, covered with dust behind the dresser, stuck between the wardrobe and the wall. Why, she forgot everything, everything except don Alejo's family, and she knew all of their names right down to his great grandchildren. And now she couldn't even remember who Pancho was.

"What do you mean, you don't remember. I've spoken of him so often."

"You've spent your whole life telling me about men."

"That huge brute with the mustache and the red truck who came to town so much last year, I told you. He used to live outside of town but he went away and got married. Then he came back. The one with the coal-black eyebrows and the bull's neck that I thought was so nice when I was younger, until he came to the house that time with his drunk friends and made such a nuisance of himself. When they shredded my Spanish dress."

No use. For Ludo, Pancho Vega didn't exist. Manuela felt like leaving, like throwing the tea and the boxes of thread on the floor and going back home. Stupid old woman. All she had left was a soft lump in her head. Why talk to Ludo if she didn't remember who Pancho Vega was? She poked around in the box so that she could find her thread and leave. Ludo remained mute while Manuela searched. Then she began to talk.

"He owes money to don Alejo."

Manuela looked at her.

"Who?"

"The one you were talking about."

"Pancho Vega?"

"That's the one."

Manuela wrapped the red thread around her little finger.

"How do you know?"

"Did you find some? Don't take it all."

"All right. How do you know?"

"Misia Blanca told me the other day when she came to see me. He's the son of the dead Vega who was don Alejo's chief cooper when I worked for them. I don't remember the boy. Misia Blanca says that this what's-

his-name wanted to be independent of the Cruz family and when don Alejo found out that he was behind on payments for a truck, even though it had been a long time since the boy had been in town and his father was dead and Berta too, he told him to come around, this kid, and he loaned him money, just like that, without demanding a signature or anything, so that the boy could pay off his truck . . ."

"So he bought the truck with don Alejo's money?"

"And he hasn't paid him back."

"Not any of it?"

"I don't know."

"He hasn't been seen for a year."

"That's why."

"Scoundrel!"

Scoundrel. Scoundrel. If he came around to bother her again, she could say: Scoundrel, you swindled don Alejo, who's been like a father to you. Then, telling him that, she wouldn't be afraid. It was as if the word would help her break open a hard and sinister scab, it would still be hard and sinister, but in a different way. What a pity that all of that honking was just a dream . . . then why mend her red dress? She uncoiled the thread on her finger. What was she going to do all afternoon? Rain. Her bones told her so. Come to see Ludo? Why? If she spoke to her again about Pancho Vega she was sure to say:

"You're too old to be thinking about men and to come traipsing around here. Stay quietly at home, woman, and wrap your feet up well, don't you know that at our age the only thing a girl can do is to wait for death to carry us away?"

But death was a woman like herself and like Ludo, and among women things can always be arranged. At least with some women, like Ludo, who

had always treated her that way, without ambiguities, the way it should be. Japonesita, on the other hand, was all ambiguity. All of a sudden, especially in winter, when the poor thing got so cold that she shivered from the time of the vintage until the pruning season, she would start to say that she would like to get married. And have children. Children! And yet here she is, over eighteen years old and her period hasn't even started yet. It was a phenomenon. And then later Japonesita said no. That she didn't want to be pushed around. That since she owned a whore house it would be better if she were a whore too. But let a man touch her and she took off at a dead run. Of course with that face she wasn't going to amount to much. Manuela had begged her so many times to make up her mind. Ludo said that it would be better if she got married, because if nothing else, Japonesita was a worker. That she should marry a real he-man who would arouse her glands and make love to her. But Pancho was so brutal and so drunk that he couldn't excite anyone. Nor could don Alejandro's grandsons. Sometimes, during the summer, they got bored with their rural homes and with doing nothing and they came in to have a few drinks: unshaven, wearing glasses, quiet, but they were very young and preoccupied with their exams and they left without drinking much and without getting involved with anyone. If Japonesita were to get pregnant by one of them . . . no, of course she wouldn't get married, but after all, the child . . . Why not. It would be destiny.

They didn't understand her, Manuela told herself on her way to the chapel, the red thread wrapped around her little finger again. She was going to take the dress up here, at the waist, and there, in the back. And if she lived in a large city, one of those where they say they have carnivals, and all of the women go out into the street to dance dressed in all of their finery and have a splendid time and no one says anything,

she would go out dressed fit to kill. But here the men are all stupid, like Pancho and his friends. Ignorant. Someone told her that Pancho carried a knife. But it wasn't true. When Pancho tried to hit her last year she had had the presence of mind to feel the brute all over: he wasn't carrying anything. Idiot. They berate poor silly women so much and we haven't done a thing to them . . . but when he grabbed me like the other men did and squeezed me hard, but with only good intentions, who's going to stop and think about how ugly or how old she is. And him so mad because a girl is silly, heaven only knows what he said he'd do to me. We'll just see, scoundrel, swindler. It makes me want to put on the dress in front of him, just to see what he'd do. Right now, for example, if he were here in town. To go out into the street with the dress on and flowers behind my ear and beautifully made up, and in the street they'd call to me, hello, Manuela, good heavens but you're elegant, sweetheart, do you want me to walk with you . . . Triumphant. And then Pancho, furious, runs into me on a corner and says you make me sick, go and take that off, you're a disgrace to the town. And just when he's about to hit me with those hams of his, I faint . . . into the arms of don Alejo, who's passing by. And don Alejo tells him to leave me alone, not to bother me, that I'm decent folk and after all he's just a tenant's son while I'm the great Manuela, famous all over the province, and he throws Pancho out of town for good. Then don Alejo lifts me into his car and takes me to the country and puts me in Misia Blanca's bed, Ludo says it's all smooth and pink, precious, and they go to find the best doctor in Talca while Misia Blanca puts compresses on my forehead and gives me smelling salts and tells me look, Manuela, I want us to be friends, stay here in my house until you get well and don't worry, I'll loan you my room and you just ask for anything you want, don't worry,

don't worry, because Alejo, you'll see, is going to throw all of the bad people out of town.

"Manuela."

An intersection. Her feet in a puddle of mud in the road. A white mustache, vicuna cape, porcelain-blue eyes under the hat brim, and behind, the four black dogs in single file. Manuela drew back.

"Heavens, don Alejo, how can you come out on the streets with those brutes. Hang on to them. I'm getting out of here. Hang on to them."

"They won't hurt you unless I tell them to. Easy, Moor . . ."

"They ought to lock you up for walking around with them."

Manuela was making her way back to the other sidewalk.

"Where are you off to? You had your feet in the water."

"I'll bet I catch cold. I was on my way to Mass, to obey the commandments. I'm no heathen like you, don Alejo. Look at your face, you look half dead. I'll bet you've been out on a spree, at your age, haven't I told you . . ."

"And you, you'll be begging forgiveness for your sins, you shameless . . ."

"Sins! My, wouldn't that be nice! I don't lack the desire, but look at how skinny I am. A Saint: Virgin and Martyr . . ."

"Don't they say that you've bewitched Pancho Vega?"

"Who said that?"

"He did. You'd better be careful."

The dogs stirred behind don Alejo.

"Othello, Moor, down . . ."

Water soaking her stockings, cold pant-legs stuck to her shins. She hadn't felt so near collapse in years. As she walked up the slope toward the next sidewalk she kicked at a pig to make him move away, but she

slipped and had to steady herself on his back. From the other side she called to don Alejo:

"Be careful of whom?"

"Of Pancho. They say that you're the only thing he ever talks about."

"But he never comes by El Olivo anymore. Didn't I hear that he owes you money?"

Don Alejo chuckled.

"You know everything, you old gossip. Do you know, too, that yesterday I went to the doctor in Talca? And do you know what he told me?"

"To the doctor's, don Alejo? But if you're so well . . ."

"You just finished telling me that I look half dead. And you're going to be half dead too if Pancho catches up with you."

"But he's not around."

"Oh yes he is."

The honking then, last night. No, she wouldn't go to Mass. And she wasn't in the mood to put up with nonsense in the street. It was too cold. God would forgive her this time. She was going to come down with a cold. At her age, it was best to go to bed. Yes. Go to bed. Forget about the Spanish dress. Go to bed, if Japonesita didn't tell her to do something, who knows, she was always yelling at her to do some chore. Last year Pancho Vega twisted her arm so hard that he almost broke it. Now it was hurting her. She wanted to have nothing to do with Pancho Vega. Nothing.

"Don't go away, woman . . ."

"Sure. You won't be the one he'll hit."

"Wait."

"Then tell me what you want, don Alejo. Can't you see I'm in a hurry? My feet are wet. If I die you'll have to pay for my funeral because it'll be all your fault. And it'll have to be the very best, huh . . ."

Don Alejo, trailed by his dogs, was walking along a little ahead of Manuela on the other side of the street and talking. The last call to eleven o'clock Mass. He had to shout to make himself heard because he was near the Guerrero's buggy, full of kids singing:

It's raining,  
it's pouring,  
the old man is snoring . . .

"Well, don Alejo. What do you want?"

"Ah, yes. Tell Japonesita that I need to talk to her. I'll come by this afternoon. And I want to talk to you, too."

Manuela stopped before turning the corner.

"Will you come in your car?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"So that you can park it in front of the door. That way Pancho will see that you're with us and won't dare come in."

"If I don't bring the car, I'll leave the dogs outside. Pancho's afraid of them."

"Naturally, since he's a coward."

### III

Miss Lila looked at Pancho Vega through the window grill, but in spite of the things he was saying she didn't lower her eyes; she had known him for such a long time that he no longer shocked her. Besides, it was good to see the big clown again.

"Now you're just like a sailor only on land, Pancho, what with your truck and your freight: a woman in every port. Emita won't see hide nor hair of you, the poor thing. Being married to you must be torture."

"She's not complaining."

This time Miss Lila blushed.

"And you, Lilita?"

He tried to take her hand through the grill.

"Cut it out, silly."

Miss Lila gestured toward Octavio who was smoking in the doorway, gazing at the street. Pancho turned to see the object of Lila's fear but seeing only his brother-in-law he shrugged his shoulders. The interior of the shed, whose far end functioned as the post office, was empty except for don Céspedes sitting on one of the bales of clover stacked at the other end. The old man stepped down from his bale and leaned on the door jamb opposite Octavio, looking out at the street. In front, a few people were hanging around the next shed, the one that served as a chapel on Sundays and as a Party meeting place during the week. It, too, belonged to don Alejo and was even smaller than the post office shed, but this didn't hamper the religious ceremonies: the

present chapel space was more than sufficient for the parishioners, especially after the vintage when the outsiders and the rural owners and their families had left. Pancho turned around and lit a cigarette.

"Did the priest from San Alfonso arrive?"

"They probably had car trouble."

Octavio slapped the old man's shoulder.

"You innocent old fool, don Céspedes, for God's sake. The priest was probably sleepy this morning and stayed glued between the sheets. They say that he danced all night long at old Wooden Heart's house in Talca . . ."

Miss Lila looked out of the window.

"Blasphemers! You're going straight to hell."

Pancho laughed while don Céspedes took his hand out from under his cape and crossed himself. Octavio went to sit on the bales. Don Céspedes looked at the sky.

"It's going to rain."

He followed Octavio and climbed above him on the pyramid of bales, dangling his dwarfish feet, darkened, deformed by scars and grime in his muddy sandals.

Through the grill Miss Lila and Pancho talked on.

"Didn't you spend the night at Japonésita's?"

"Me? Not me. I haven't been there for a long time. I'm not wanted there."

"As mischievous as you are . . ."

"The worst part is that I'm in love."

Miss Lila said that, naturally, Japonésita was a good girl and all, but ugly, and she didn't dress at all smartly. She looked as if she came from an orphanage with those baggy pants down to her ankles under

her apron. Of course, it was strange that she should dedicate herself to that kind of work, since everyone knew that she was a decent girl. Yes, yes, she inherited the house from her mother, but she could sell it. When she was small, Big Japonesa sent her to school, when there was a school in El Olivo, and it was right here, from the school in this very shed, before don Alejo bought it, that Japonesita always ran to the station to hide until classes were over. Even though the other girls and the teacher were nice to her, my little sister told me so, and all the time Big Japonesa didn't even know that she wasn't going to school, and Japonesita never went out to play in the street or anything and never spoke to a soul. Naturally, all the decent folks feel sorry for Japonesita now, poor thing. For the present, Miss Lila kept an eye out for Japonesita so that she could greet her as pleasantly as possible every time she saw her in the street. Why not, isn't that only right?

"Yes, but I'm not in love with her . . ."

Miss Lila looked at him, perturbed.

"Who is it, then?"

"It's Manuela . . ."

Everyone laughed, even Lila.

"Pigs, degenerates. You ought to be ashamed . . ."

"It's just that she's so cute . . ."

The pair began to whisper again through the bronze bars. Don Céspedes climbed back down from the bales of clover and stationed himself in the doorway, looking at the sky.

"Christ! Here comes the water . . ."

The people waiting near the chapel door took shelter under the eaves, plastered to the wall, their hands in their pockets, behind the curtain of water that fell from the tile roof. The Guerrero's buggy horse was

soaked in a matter of minutes; the Valenzuelas, who had just arrived, took refuge in the Ford to wait until Mass started. Don Alejo came into the post office at a run, followed by his four black dogs. He brushed the water off his cape and hat. The dogs shook themselves violently and Octavio climbed up onto the bales to avoid being soaked too. Then they pranced around in the shed, making it seem too small for the four of them.

"Good morning, Céspedes."

"Good morning, boss."

Don Alejo glanced at Octavio but didn't greet him. He saw Pancho from behind: he continued his chatting through the grill but didn't turn around.

"It's good to see you, Pancho . . ."

When Pancho didn't move, don Alejandro motioned to his dogs, who got up from the floor.

"Othello, Sultan . . ."

Pancho turned around. He raised his hands as if he expected to be shot. Don Alejo called to his dogs before they could attack.

"Moor, here . . ."

"Some joke, don Alejo . . ."

"You could at least answer when someone speaks to you."

"That's a lousy trick."

Octavio looked at them from the summit of the bales, near the cross beam that supported the roof. Don Alejo was walking through the store-room toward Pancho, surrounded by the leaping dogs. In the entire gray place, where even the lime on the walls was earth colored, the only live things were don Alejo's porcelain-tinted eyes and the red flames of the dogs' slaverling tongues.

"And your little jokes? Do they seem so trivial to you, you ungrateful bastard? Do you think I don't know why you came? I got you a job hauling grapes, but a few days ago I called Augusto myself to tell him to take the job away from you."

"We'd better talk somewhere else . . ."

"Why? Don't you want people to know that you're a scoundrel and an ingrate? Furthermore it's raining and I don't want to get any wetter, the doctor told me to take care of myself. You, don Céspedes, do me the favor of running down to the butcher's, the one just down the way, and tell Melchor to send me a few good scraps so these dogs will quiet down. And who is that?"

Octavio slipped down from the bales in two jumps. He cleared his throat while he dusted his dark suit and adjusted the tie that had slipped inside the neck of his shirt. Pancho answered.

"It's Octavio, my brother-in-law."

"The one who works at the gas station?"

"Yes, sir. At your service. Me and Pancho are buddies, you can talk in front of me . . ."

The uneasiness of the four black dogs, their magnificent tails, their pulsating throats, filled the shack. Don Alejo's delft eyes withstood Pancho's black look, forcing it to stay fixed under the shadowy lids. He read those eyes like a book: Pancho didn't want Octavio to know about his debt. The wind rustled through the shreds of old letters tacked to the wall.

"So you don't care if I call you a scoundrel and an ingrate just as long as we're alone? In that case, you're a filthy coward as well."

"That's enough, don Alejo."

"Your father, God rest his soul, wouldn't have put up with my talking to him that way. Now there was a man. The son who was going to take after him! It was only because of your father's memory that I loaned you the money, and it's the only reason I haven't had you locked up. Do you understand?"

"I didn't sign anything."

The dogs, sensing don Alejo's fury, stood up, teeth bared, growling at Pancho.

"You honorless bastard."

"Here, I've brought you the five overdue payments."

"And do you think that will satisfy me? Don't you think I know why you came? I can see under that layer of grease and I know you as if you were my own. It's obvious, they took away your freight contracts. So you've come with your tail between your legs to pay me, so that I'll see that you get them back. Give me the money, you ungrateful bastard . . . give it to me, I said . . ."

"I'm not ungrateful."

"What are you, then, a thief?"

"All right, don Alejo, cut it out, that's enough . . ."

"Give me my money."

Pancho handed him the wad of bills, warm because he had been clutching them in his hand in the bottom of his pocket, and don Alejo counted them slowly. Then he put them under his cape. Negus licked the toe of his shoe.

"All right. You still owe me six installments, and I want them to be prompt, do you understand. And listen, I want you to understand this even though anyone less stupid would already know: I pull a lot of strings, so be careful. I'm not going to let you get away with anything

just because you didn't sign a piece of paper; if I gave you some freedom it was only to see how you'd operate, although knowing you like I do, I should have known better, so you could work it out alone. Now you know. Next time tell me to wait a little if you can't pay me for a while, and then, having acted like a man, we'll see what I can do for you."

"It's just that I didn't have the time . . ."

"That's a lie."

"It's because I haven't been in the area, don Alejo."

"Another lie. When are you going to break that damned habit? They told me that you were seen several times in your brother-in-law's gas station on the North-South road. Would it have hurt you to come the mile and a half over here or to the outskirts of town? Or don't you even know the way to the house where you were born, you brute?"

No. He didn't want to have anything to do with that house or with this shitty town. It pained him to give his money to don Alejo. It was to recognize the old link, to be chained down again to everything that he had managed to forget for a little while, like a person who has whistled in order to forget his terror in the darkness; for five months he was strong enough not to pay him, to resist him and to save the money, to dream about using it for other things as if he had the right to spend it. It was a little bit of money for the house that Ema wanted to buy in that new district in Talca, the one with the houses all exactly alike, only painted different colors so that they don't look alike, and when Ema wants something no one can resist her. Fortunately, now with so many hauls Pancho didn't spend much time at home, sometimes he even preferred to park the truck along the side of the road and sleep there. That's why, she always said, that's why I need the house, because I almost never see you and how do I know what you're doing, that's why, because the

child and I have to have some consolation . . . and when I take to bed with my ulcer, a fire that burns me here, an animal that roots and gnaws at me, that tears and sucks me, here, here inside, and it doesn't let me sleep or talk or move or drink or eat, or hardly even breathe; sometimes when everything is hard and cramped and I'm afraid that the animal will bite me and I'll burst, then Ema takes care of me, and I look to her because without her I would die and she knows it. So she takes care of him as if he were a child moaning repentently, but she knows that he'll still do the same things the same old way. That's the reason Pancho needs the house. Sometimes he rides by the neighborhood in the truck to see how fast the "For Sale" signs are disappearing. Now there aren't any pink ones left, just blue and yellow ones, and Ema wanted a pink one. A few hundred dollars don't matter to don Alejo.

"So why don't you call don Augusto now so he'll give me back all of the good freight contracts?"

"What would it have hurt you to settle your accounts with me, if the freights were so good?"

Pancho didn't answer. The rain was running the puddles in the road together: impossible to cross. The priest arrived and the people went into the chapel. Pancho didn't answer because he didn't want to. He didn't have to make excuses to anybody, much less to this pompous ass who thought that just because Pancho was born on his land . . . They said he was don Alejo's son. But then they said that about everybody, about Miss Lila and Japonesita and God only knows who else, every blue-eyed peon for miles around, but not me. I'd stake my life on my old lady's virtue, and my eyes, they're black and my eyebrows too, sometimes they take me for a Turk. I don't owe him anything. As a boy he had worked driving a tractor and later he learned, on the sly, to drive the car,

stealing it from don Alejo with the help of don Alejo's grandsons who were the same age . . . Nothing else. The only thing that he owed him was that he had learned to drive. Plus the several payments before his debt would be settled. Until then, keep quiet. Let Ema wait. Maybe in another district, and then everything that he could ever want, freedom, just him alone, without having to account for himself to anyone . . . and I'll have seen the last of this shitty town. But the old man had to say that I got behind in my payments in front of Octavio. So that later Octavio just might mention it and Ema's stuck-up brothers . . . not Octavio, he's my friend . . . the rest of them will gossip about me all over the place.

"What do you mean? What for?"

Don Céspedes returned with the scraps. The dogs whined eagerly, licking his feet, his hands, jumping on him, all but knocking him down.

"Throw them a scrap, don Céspedes . . ."

The gory hunk flew and the dogs leaped after it, the four of them falling together in a clot on the floor, fighting over the piece of meat that was still warm, almost alive. They clawed at it, trampling it into the floor and howling at it, bloody snouts slavering, palates granular, yellow eyes flashing in narrow faces. The men flattened themselves against the walls. The meat devoured, the dogs began to dance, not around don Céspedes who had fed them but around don Alejo, as if they knew that the man with the cape owned the meat they ate and the vineyards they guarded. He caressed them--his four dogs as black as wolf shadows with their bloody fangs and the heavy ferocious feet of the purest of blood lines.

"No. Not until you pay me all of the remaining installments. I don't have any reason to trust you. I'm old and I'm going to die and I don't want to leave any loose ends . . ."

"All right, whatever you want, don Alejo . . ."

The floor was a crimson swamp. The dogs sniffed, snorting in search of something to lick. Pancho Vega clenched his teeth. He looked at Octavio, who winked at him, don't be upset, pal, wait a little, we'll straighten this thing out between ourselves. But this gloating old goat was a tough one. They heard the church bells.

"Aren't you going to Mass, Pancho?"

He didn't answer.

"When you were little, you used to help during the services. It pleased poor Blanca so much to see you, so pious, such a pretty boy. And those long confessions, we almost died laughing . . . And you, don Céspedes?"

"Of course, boss . . ."

"Do you see? How don Céspedes goes to Mass?"

Pancho looked at Octavio, who shook his head no.

"Don Céspedes is your tenant."

And he swallowed hard so that he could add:

"I'm not."

"But you owe me money and he doesn't."

It was true. Better not to start anything now. Better to go to Mass without complaining. What can it hurt me? When I'm at home on Sunday, Ema dresses Normita up in her sky-blue coat with the white fur and tells me to come with them to the eleven-thirty Mass, which is the best one, and I go because it doesn't make any difference to me and I like to greet the neighbors, sometimes I enjoy it and even look forward to it, other times I don't, but I always go because we look so elegant. I'll go with don Alejo, he's watching me from the door, ordering me to go. But Pancho couldn't help saying it:

"No. I'm not going."

Octavio smiled, satisfied at last. But before leaving, don Alejo turned.

"Ah. I forgot to tell you. They told me you've been going around talking about Manuela, that you've sworn to get her or something. Don't let me find out that you've gone to Japonésita's to bother them, they're good people. Now you've been warned."

He left followed by his dogs, who splashed across the muddy road and waited under the eaves behind the sheet of water. Don Céspedes, hat in hand, held the chapel door open: the dogs entered with the ringing of the bells, and behind them, don Alejo.

#### IV

Japonesita didn't guess right away why don Alejo so urgently wanted to talk to her. At first, when Manuela gave her the message, she was surprised, because the senator always just dropped in without warning like a person coming to his own home. Before long, however, she realized that so much protocol could only mean one thing: he was finally going to tell her the result of his efforts to bring electricity to the town. It had been a long time since he promised to get it done. But the answer to the request was always put off from year to year, who knows how many now, and the right moment to approach the provincial authorities always had to be postponed. The Commissioner was always away on a trip or we're already spending too much money on another area or the secretary of the Commission belongs to the enemy party and it would be better to wait.

But last Monday, as she crossed the Plaza de Armas in Talca on her way to the bank, Japonesita met don Alejandro on his way to the Commission. They stopped on the corner. He bought her a bag of roasted peanuts, a present he said, but while they were talking he ate almost all of them himself, crushing the shells which stuck to the hair on his vicuna cape as they fell, there where his belly protruded a little. He said this time for sure: everything was ready. In half an hour he had an interview with the Commissioner and he was going to slap him in the face with his neglect of Estación El Olivo. Japonesita had wandered around the plaza waiting for don Alejo to return with the results of the momentous interview. Then, since she had other things to do and it was time to catch

the train, she had to leave without seeing him. All week she had waited for him to come into town, but that week he didn't even pass through, not once. She resigned herself to wondering, to more waiting.

But today's the day. Finally. Japonésita stayed in the kitchen after lunch, after all of the whores had crawled back into their caves and Manuela had accompanied Lucy to her room. Instead of adding another log to revive the remaining cinders in the depths of the kitchen, she kept creeping closer and closer to the fading fire, burrowing deeper and deeper into her shawl: my bones are blue from the cold. It was already starting to get dark. The water remained at the same level, slowly covering the steps of brick that Cloty had put down across the patio. On the other side of the room, facing the kitchen door, the door to Lucy's room was open and she watched her light a candle. From time to time Japonésita lifted her head to glance over and see what they were laughing about so much. The last outburst of laughter, the loudest yet, was because Manuela, with his mouth full of hair pins for the modern hairdo he was giving Lucy, was tempted to laugh and the pins were scattered and the two of them, Lucy and Manuela, spent a good long time on their knees searching the floor for them.

There was still a little light outside. But it was surly, reluctant, lacking the strength to vanquish the kitchen's darkness. Japonésita extended her hand to touch one of the burners: a trace of heat. With electricity all of this was going to change. This awful weather. The water invaded the kitchen through the adobe wall, forming a mud that stuck to everything. Maybe then she would be able to stand off the aggressive cold that seized her body with the first winds, contracting it, squeezing it. Maybe the humidity would stop mounting from May to June, from June to July, until by August it seemed as if the scummy

mildew covered her entirely, her body, her face, her clothing, her food, everything. With electricity the whole town would revive and be again like it was in the days of her mother's youth. Last Monday, while she was waiting for don Alejo, she wandered through a store where they sold Wurlitzers. She had often stopped by the window to look at them, separated from their colors and music by her own reflection in the crystal window. She had never gone in. This time she did. A salesman with colorless eyelashes and translucent ears waited on her, giving her demonstrations, wooing her with pamphlets, assuring her of an extensive guarantee. Japonesita had realized that she was just going through the motions without really believing that she could ever buy one of the superb instruments. But she could. As soon as the town got electricity she was going to buy a Wurlitzer. Immediately. No, before then. Because if this afternoon don Alejo brought her the news that he had received permission to install the electricity or that he had managed to sign an agreement or a document, she was going to buy the Wurlitzer tomorrow, Monday morning, the one with the most colors, the one with the painting of a turquoise sea and palm trees, the biggest one of them all. Tomorrow morning she would talk to the boy with the colorless lashes and ask him to have it delivered to her. Then, the first day that the electricity was turned on in the town, the Wurlitzer would play in her house.

Better not to say anything to Manuela. All she would have to do is mention the project and he would be insane with excitement, jabbering, anticipating, without a moment's peace, until she would end up deciding not to buy anything at all. In the room across the way he was undressing so he could try on the red dress by candlelight. At his age he was no longer afraid of the cold. Just like my mother, God rest her soul. Even on the worst of days, like this one for instance, she always wore a

low-cut dress, big and fat, with her heavy breast like bulging sacks of grapes. At the neckline's vee where her breasts began to swell she always carried a tiny handkerchief, and while she was chatting or drinking from her enormous wine bottle or while she was making the best pastry in the world, she would take out her handkerchief and dry the almost imperceptible drops of perspiration that always broke out on her forehead, her nose, and especially around the low neckline. They said that Big Japonesa died because of a liver ailment, from drinking so much wine. But it wasn't true. She didn't drink that much. My mother died of grief. Grief because Estación El Olivo was going downhill, because it no longer was what it used to be. She had talked so often to don Alejo about the electricity. And nothing. Then they said that the paved road, the North-South one, was going to pass right through El Olivo, so that it would become an important town. As long as she had hope my mother thrived. But then they told her the truth, don Alejo I think, that the road would only come to within a mile and a half of the town, and then she began to lose hope. The North-South road is silver-plated, straight as a knife: with one slash it cut the life out of Estación El Olivo, nestled in a comfortable bend of the old road. The freight is no longer shipped by rail, as before, but by truck, on the road. Now the train only came through a couple of times a week. Scarcely a handful of townspeople were left. Big Japonesa remembered, until the end, how in the old days the summer Mass at twelve o'clock used to attract the most sumptuous buggies and carriages in the area, and the elegant young men from the nearby country homes would meet at sunset in front of the post office, on purebred horses, to pick up the mail that arrived by train. The boys, so proper during the day when they escorted their sisters, cousins, or sweethearts, let down their hair at night in Japonesa's house, which

never closed. And then, just the highway work crew came, traveling the mile and a half to her house on foot, and then not even they came, only the common laborers from near by, the tenants, the peons, the outsiders who came for the vintage. A different class of people. And later on not even them. Now the trip to Talca was so short that Sunday was the slowest day--you could be in the city in the twinkling of an eye, and now all pretense of competing with houses like Wooden Heart's was useless. Not even electricity, she used to say, not even that, I always heard her complain about so many things, about the bonfire in her stomach, complaining monotonously, softly at the end, bloated, hollow-eyed. But no, never, nothing, in spite of don Alejo's telling her to wait just a little while longer but one fine day she couldn't wait any more and she started to die. And when she died we buried her in the cemetery at San Alfonso because El Olivo doesn't even have a cemetery. El Olivo is nothing but a disorder of decrepit houses scattered by the geometry of vineyards that seem on the verge of swallowing them up. And him, why is he laughing so hard? What right does he have to ignore the cold that's shredding my bones?

"Father!"

She shouted it from the kitchen door. Manuela stopped in the illuminated frame of Lucy's doorway. He looked like an adolescent, thin and small, standing there in the doorway with one hip gracefully askew and his face stenciled by the darkness. But she knew that body. It didn't give off heat. It didn't warm the sheets. It wasn't her mother's body: that almost material heat that she had crawled into as if it were a cauldron, submerging herself in it, and it dried her mouldy clothing and her bones and everything . . .

"What?"

"Come here."

"What do you want me for?"

"Just come here."

"I'm busy with Lucy."

"Didn't I tell you that I need you?"

Covering himself with the Spanish dress, Manuela crossed the lake in the patio as well as he could, paddling among the grape arbor's abandoned leaves. Japonésita sat down again by the smothered fire.

"It's so dark, child. It's like a wake."

Japonésita didn't answer.

"I'm going to throw another log on the fire."

He didn't wait for it to catch fire.

"Shall I light a candle?"

What for? She could spend the whole afternoon, the whole day in the darkness, like now, without the slightest nostalgia for light, although she longed for a little heat.

"All right."

Manuela lit the candle and after putting it on the table near the potatoes, put on his spectacles and sat down to sew by its light. Lucy's room was dark. She was going to sleep until dinner. It was easy to kill time that way. Five o'clock. Still three hours until dinner. Three hours and it was already dark. Three hours before night, before work.

"I'll bet no one comes tonight."

Manuela stopped. He held the dress up against his body, the neck with his chin, the waist with his hands.

"How does it look?"

"All right."

The rain stopped. In the henhouse they heard Lucy's turkey ruffle his feathers arrogantly: the payment of a lover who didn't have anything else to give. The dress fit perfectly.

"I'll bet no one comes tonight."

This time Manuela said it. Japonesita jerked her head up as if it were on a spring.

"You know that Pancho Vega will come."

Manuela pricked her finger with the needle and sucked on it.

"Me? That Pancho Vega's coming?"

"Of course. Or else why are you fixing your dress?"

"But he's not in town."

"You told me that last night you heard the horn . . ."

"Yes, but I don't . . ."

"You know he'll come."

Useless to deny it. The girl was right. Pancho will come tonight come hell or high water. She picked up the dress, the ancient percale lukewarm from the fire. All the blessed day, with it raining like the devil, preparing her dress, preparing herself. We'll just see if he's the man he says he is. He's going to regret it. If anything happens tonight, everyone in the whole town is going to know about it, everyone, we'll just see how much he likes saying things about poor silly women, even the dead will hear of it. Manuela laid the dress down and put the candle on the wash basin, under the shard of mirror. She began to comb her hair. So little left. Scarcely four strands to slick across my skull. I can't arrange it into any kind of a style. Those days are gone.

"Listen."

Japonesita raised her head.

"What?"

"Come over here."

She moved to a wicker chair in front of the mirror. Manuela took hold of Japonesita's lank hair, squinted both eyes and looked at her, you have to try to look pretty, and began to untangle it--what good does it do you to be a woman if you're not a coquette, that's what men like, silly, that's what they come here for, to forget the scarecrows they're married to, and with your hair done this way, look, this is how you do it, this way it looks nice, with a little bit falling over your forehead and the rest high in what they call a beehive; and Manuela untangles it for her and they put a ribbon here, don't you have a pretty ribbon? I think I have one stuck away in my suitcase, I'll loan it to you if you want, I'll put it right here. Last summer I saw one of don Alejo's granddaughters with her hair like that, see how nice you look with it this way, don't be silly, take advantage of it . . . look, this way . . .

Japonesita gave in tranquilly. Yes. He was certain to come. She knew it as well as Manuela did. Last year, when he tried to take advantage of her, she felt his sour breath on her cheek, in her nostrils. Under her father's thin hands, as they occasionally grazed her face, the memory paralyzed Japonesita. He had seized her with his brick-rough hands, his square thumb, the nail corroded, oil-stained, wide, flat, imbedded in her arm, hurting it, a bruise that lasted over a month . . .

"Father."

Manuela didn't answer.

"What are we going to do if he comes?"

Manuela put down the comb. In front of the mirror Japonesita's hair was as smooth as an African's skin.

"You have to defend me if Pancho comes."

Manuela threw the hair pins on the floor. That was enough. Why did she act like such a fool? Did she expect her, Manuela, to stand up to a hulking brute like Pancho? Let her know once and for all so she'll stop talking about it . . . you know very well that I'm just a hopeless, silly old woman, no one ever tried to hide it from you. And you're asking me for protection: when Pancho comes I'm going to run and hide like a nervous hen. It isn't my fault I'm your father. He didn't make the famous bet and he hadn't wanted to have anything to do with the whole affair. What could he do. I've asked you so many times since Big Japonesa died to give me my share so that I can go, who knows where, there will always be some whore house around where I can work . . . but you never wanted me to go. And neither did I. It was all Big Japonesa's fault, she had convinced him--that they would make a fortune with the house, what did the girl matter, and when Big Japonesa was alive the girl didn't count because Manuela liked her mother . . . but it had been four years since they buried her in the cemetery at San Alfonso because this shitty town doesn't even have its own cemetery, and they'll bury me there too, and in the meantime, here sits Manuela. Not even a floor in the kitchen: mud. So why should Japonesita bother her? If she wanted someone to defend her, she should get married, or get a man. He . . . well, he couldn't even dance anymore. Last year, after that Pancho thing, his daughter had yelled at him that she was ashamed to be the daughter of an old queen like him. That of course he'd like to go somewhere else to live and start a new business. But that he wasn't going to because Estación El Olivo was so small that everyone knew him and was so used to him that he was hardly noticed. Not even the children asked questions because they had known since they were born. There's no need for explanations, that's what Japonesita said, and the town is going to go up in

smoke one of these days and you and me with it, this shitpile of a town that doesn't even ask questions and isn't surprised by anything. A store in Talca. No. Not a restaurant not a cigar stand not a laundromat, not a warehouse, not anything. Here in El Olivo, hiding . . . Okay, okay, you shitty girl, then don't call me father. Because when Japonesita called him father, the Spanish dress spread over the washstand became older, the percale worn out, the red faded, the stitches in plain sight, horrible, drab, and the long, cold, dark night reaching through the vineyards, clutching, conquering this flake of fire that had been cultivated in a desert, don't call me father, empty-headed bitch. Call me Manuela, like everyone else does. And you want me to defend you! That's all I need. And what about me, who's going to defend me? No, one of these fine days I'm going to pack up my wares and leave for a big town like Talca. I'm sure Wooden Heart will give me a job. But he had said that too often and he was sixty years old. He kept on smoothing his daughter's hair.

"What am I supposed to defend you from? Go to bed with him, don't be stupid. He's splendid. The most macho man around and he has a truck and everything and he could take us for rides. And since you're going to have to be a whore someday, you might as well . . ."

. . . might as well let him force her. Tonight, at last, even though there would have to be blood. Whether it was Pancho Vega or anyone else, she knew that. But today Pancho. She had dreamed of him for a year. Dreamed that he made her suffer, that he hit her, that he raped her, but in his violence, underneath it or within it, she found something with which to rout the winter's cold. This winter, because Pancho was cruel and brutal and he twisted her arm, this had been the warmest winter since Big Japonesa died. Even Manuela's fingers felt

warm, touching her head, patting her cheek next to her ear in order to give the appearance of curly flirtation . . . he was a child, Manuela. She could hate him, just as a little while ago. And not hate him. A child, a little bird. Anything but a man. He said himself that he was very much the woman. But that wasn't true either. At any rate, he's right. If I'm going to be a whore it would be better to start with Pancho.

Manuela finished arranging Japonesita's hair into the beehive. A woman. She was a woman. She would stay with Pancho. He was a man. And old. A queer. Poor, old. A crazy old woman fond of parties and wine and rags and men. It was easy to forget, here, sheltered in the town-- yes, she's right, it's better to stay here. But then suddenly Japonesita called him that name and his own image blurred as if a drop of water had fallen on it and then he lost sight of herself, himself, myself, I don't know, he doesn't know, he can't see Manuela anymore and nothing is left, this anguish, this helplessness, nothing else, this enormous blot of water in which he is shipwrecked.

As he gave the finishing touches to the hairdo Manuela sensed through her hair that his daughter was warming up to him. As if she had really offered her head to him so that he could make it beautiful. This kind of help she could and would give him. Japonesita was smiling.

"Light another candle so I can see myself better . . ."

He lit it and set it on the other side of the mirror. With her fingers Japonesita softly touched her own reflection in the mirror fragment. She turned around:

"Do I look all right?"

Yes, if Pancho Vega wouldn't be so brutal then Japonesita would fall in love with him and would be his lover for a while until he left

her and went away with someone else because that's the way with men and then she'd be different. And maybe not so stingy, not so tight with my money, after all, I work hard enough to get it. And maybe she won't be so cold. A little pain or bitterness when the brute left, but what would it matter, not at all, if she, and Manuela too, would be more serene.

It was one of those nights when Manuela would have preferred to go to bed, put on extra clothing, take a pill, and then, another day already. Not see anybody because all of her warmth seemed to have been transmitted to Japonésita, leaving her, Manuela, with none. Outside the clouds chased around the immense, clearing sky, and in the patio the kneeding-trough, the chicken coop, the outhouse, everything, even the most insignificant object acquired volume, flinging precise shadows over the water that had started to waste away under the speckled sky. Maybe Pancho wouldn't come after all . . . perhaps it was nothing more than a joke on don Alejo's part, he was so fond of jokes. Maybe not even don Alejo would come in this cold--he said himself that he was sick and that the doctors pestered him with examinations and diets and treatments. She touched her dress, wilted over the dirty potatoes, and in the silence she heard Lucy's snores from the other side of the patio. She saw herself in the mirror, over her daughter's face which gazed at itself ecstatically . . . the candles, on each side, were like those of a wake. Her own wake would have light like that, in the parlor where she used to dance when the party's warmth had melted down the harshness of everything. She was going to remain in Estación El Olivo forever. Die here, a long, long time before this daughter of hers who couldn't dance but who was young and who was a woman and whose hope, as she looked at herself in the mirror, wasn't a grotesque lie.

"Do I really look good?"

"Not bad . . . for as ugly as you are . . ."

They put a jar of wine, the very best, in front of him but he didn't even taste it. While he was talking, Japonésita removed one of the pins that held her hair and scratched her head with it. The dogs were lying on the clay sidewalk, growling from time to time near the door or scratching at it so hard that they almost demolished it.

"Negus, easy . . . Moor . . ."

Manuela also sat at the table. She poured herself a glass of wine, the kind that her daughter reserved for special occasions and never let her drink. Cloty, Lucy, Elvira and another whore were drinking tea in a corner, where they eluded the wind that blew in through the cracks in the doors and the roof. Give me another shot. No one is going to come tonight. They were yawning. Surely she's going to close up as soon as the gentleman leaves and we can go off to sleep. Elvira, change the record, put "Bésame Mucho" on for me, ah no, something better, a happier one. Elvira wound the victrola on top of the counter, but before putting on another record she started to clean it up with a rag, straightening the pile of records beside it.

The news that don Alejo Cruz brought was bad: they weren't going to install electricity in the town. For who knows how long. Maybe never. The Commissioner said that he didn't have time to bother with anything so insignificant, that it was El Olivo's destiny to disappear. Not even all of don Alejo's influence combined with that of the whole Cruz clan could convince the Commissioner. Maybe in a couple of years, but he wasn't making any promises. Come back and talk to him then and

we'll see if things have cleared up any. It was the same as a flat no. And don Alejo told Japonesita just that, in no uncertain terms. He tried to convince her that it was logical that the Commissioner would think like that, he gave her reasons and explanations even though Japonesita didn't utter one word of protest--yes, well you see child, there are so few coopers left, a couple, I think, and so old now, and the rest of the people, as you can see, are so few and so poor, and the train scarcely even stops here anymore, just on Mondays, so you can get on in the morning and get off in the afternoon when you go to Talca. Even the station's wine cellar is falling down and it's been so long since I've used it that not even the odor of the wine is left.

"Even Ludo told me this morning when I went to ask her for some red thread, when I met you, don Alejandro, that she was thinking about moving to Talca. It's only natural, her Acevedo is buried there and they have Mass every day and what with her sister and all . . ."

"Ludo? I didn't know that. How strange that Blanca didn't say anything and I just saw her a little while ago. How is Ludo? Is the house hers . . .?"

"Of course, Acevedo bought it for her when . . ."

Then Manuela remembered that Ludo had told her that don Alejo wanted to buy it from her, so he knew very well who the property belonged to. She looked at him, but when her eyes met the senator's she glanced away, and looking over at the whores signaled them to come over by the hearth. Lucy settled herself between Japonesita and don Alejo and she offered him the wine again.

"Don't you dare turn me down, don Alejo. It's from the vintage that you like so well. Even you don't have any of it left . . ."

"No, thank you little one. I'm on my way. It's getting late."

He picked up his hat, but before getting up he lingered a moment and covered Japonésita's hand with his huge one. She dropped the hair pin in a pool of wine on the table.

"You ought to get out of here too. Why do you stay?"

Manuela was burning to take part.

"That's what I keep telling her, don Alejo. Why are we staying here?"

The whores stopped murmuring in the corner and looked at Japonésita as if they were expecting a verdict. She huddled up in her pink shawl, making the slow definite motion of negation with her head that Manuela knew.

"Don't be silly. Go to Talca and set up a business with Manuela. You have plenty of money in the bank. I know because the other day I asked the manager, who's my cousin, about the state of your bank account. I wish it were mine . . . that's what he told me, a lot of holdings and a lot of debts, but Japonésita has it all cleared up. You can buy a restaurant, for example. If you don't have enough I'll ask the bank for a loan and I'll endorse it for you. You'll have the money in a couple of days, everything arranged among friends, among people you know. Cheer up, girl, can't you see, this isn't living. Isn't that right, Manuela?"

"Of course, don Alejo, help me convince her . . ."

Why ask him, when all he wants is to have a free rein around here?

"The money belongs to you both, in equal shares, according to what I understand. That's the way Big Japonésita left it, isn't it?"

"Yes. We would have to sell the house . . ."

Don Alejo scarcely let a moment elapse.

"I'll buy it from you . . ."

His eyes were turned down, staring at the hair pin that was floating in the wine stain. And on the back of the generous hand that sheltered Japonésita's hand the gold gossamer hairs flamed. But she, Manuela, was very sharp, and he wasn't going to deceive her. She had known him too long not to realize that he was plotting something. She had always wanted to catch him at one of those shady transactions that he was accused of by his political enemies. Of course, when they elected him deputy almost twenty years ago, he sold a lot of cheap land to the voters, on long terms, here in Estación, because this town is on its way up, it has a big future, all around here, over there, and the people started to paint their houses and improve them, because naturally values were going to go up around here . . . yessiree, not even a sewer, and barely a couple of streets that are just flattened ground. What do you want to do to us now? Don't you think you've already done enough? What's gotten into your head now, that you want to buy the few houses in town that aren't already yours? Don't come around telling her, Manuela, stories. Don Alejo didn't come this afternoon to tell them the bad news about the electricity, but to propose buying the house from them. The older he got the more transparent he became. His blue eyes had sparkled at the mention of Ludo's house. And now this house . . . he wanted to take this house away from them, Japonésita's and her house. Of course it was important to him, he wanted everyone to jump through a hoop and go live in Talca, even though they lost all their money!

"You don't like this business, you've never liked it, not the way your mother did. I'll even get you the money tomorrow if you want, and we can draw up the sales contract at the notary's, if you decide to. Give her a little push, Manuela. I can help you find a convenient local, a good one, a very good one, there in Talca. Are you going to take the train tomorrow?"

"Yes. I have to make a deposit."

"Well then . . ."

She didn't answer.

This time don Alejo stood up: the kernel of light in the neck of the carbide lantern fluttered with the cape's motion. The dogs began to pace around outside, thirstily smelling the air of the salon through the door joint. Manuela and Japonésita followed him to the entrance. He reached for the latch. With his other hand he put on his hat; it extinguished his face. He spent a few moments talking to them, repeating that they should think it over, that if they wished they could talk about it again another day, that he was at their service, that they already knew how fond of them he had always been, that if they wanted to have the house appraised, he knew an honest authority and was prepared to pay the appraiser's estimate . . .

When he finally opened the door and went out into the torrent of stars and closed it again, the Wurlitzer shattered behind Japonésita's frowning eyes. She and the whole town faded into the darkness. What did it matter if everything deteriorated, it didn't make any difference as long as she didn't have to move or change. No. She would stay here surrounded by the things she knew, surrounded by this obscurity in which nothing happened that was not a degree of slow, invisible death. No. The electricity and the Wurlitzer were nothing more than mirages that for an instant, a blessedly short one, had induced her to believe that something else was possible. But not now. Not a hope remained to grieve her, even fear was eliminated. Nothing would ever change, it never had, it would forever be the same. She went back to the table and sat down in the chair warmed by don Alejo's cape. She leaned over the hearth.

"Lock the door, Cloty . . ."

Manuela, who was walking toward the victrola, stopped short and turned abruptly.

"Are we going to close up?"

"Yes, No one's going to come now."

"But it's not going to rain anymore."

"The roads are probably filled with mud."

"But . . ."

". . . and it's going to freeze."

Manuela went to sit on the other side of the hearth and she too bent over it. Cloty put "Black Flowers" on the victrola and the record began to shriek. The rest of the whores disappeared.

"Why don't we think about what don Alejo said?"

She said it because she suddenly saw clearly that don Alejo, just as he had created this town, now had other plans and to carry them out he needed to eliminate Estación El Olivo. He would tear down all the houses, he would wipe away the crude clay streets and the cow dung, he would reunite the adobe of the thick walls with the land that it surged from and he would plow the ground, all for some incomprehensible purpose. She saw it all. Clearly. The electricity would have been a salvation. Now . . .

"Let's go away, daughter."

Japonesita began talking without looking at Manuela, scrutinizing the white-headed coals. At first it seemed as if she were only singing softly, or praying, but then Manuela realized that she was talking to him.

"Take off the record, Cloty, I can't hear."

"Are you going to need me?"

"No."

"Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight. I'll close up later."

They were alone in the parlor huddled over the hearth.

" . . . that everything would be the same. What are the two of us going to do in a big town? Just so they could laugh . . . no one knows us there, and to live in another house. Here there will always be peasants who are horny or who feel like getting drunk . . . We aren't going to die of hunger or shame. When I go to Talca every Monday I go back to the station early to wait for the return train so the people won't look at me--sometimes I wait for over an hour, two, and the station is almost abandoned . . ."

When Japonesita started talking like that Manuela felt like screaming, because it was as if his daughter were drowning him in words, slowly encircling him with her flat voice, with that monotonous sing-song. Damn the town! Damn the girl! To have believed that things were going to change and his life would improve because Big Japonesa made him house proprietor and her associate after the bet that, thanks to him, she won from don Alejo. Of course things were better then. Even the carbide lanterns gave off more light, not like now with the rains starting and oh, my God, four months of feeling ugly and old, when I could have been a princess. And now that don Alejo has offered to help us so that we can go to Talca, the two of us calm and happy, and start a business, she would like drygoods because she knew all about cloth, but no, the girl started in talking and she never stopped, like now, slowly, building a wall around Manuela. Japonesita turned the screw to shut off the lantern light.

"Leave it alone."

She left it for an instant but then continued turning the lamp screw.

"Leave it alone, I said, you shit . . ."

Japonesita was startled by Manuela's scream, but she kept diminishing the light, as if she hadn't heard. Even if I yell I don't exist. Until one fine day she, who could have been the princess of the whore houses from Chanco to Constitución, from Villa Alegre to San Clemente, princess of all the whore houses in the province, she would kick the bucket and the old woman of death would come to carry her off forever. Then, no artifice or lie would convince the shitty old witch to leave her alone for a little while longer, why do you want to stay, for God's sake Manuela, let's go away, business is much better on the other side, and they would bury her in a niche in the cemetery at San Alfonso under a stone that would say, "Manuela González Astica" and then, for awhile, Japonesita and the girls from the house would bring her flowers but then Japonesita was sure to go somewhere else, and of course, Ludo would die too and no more flowers and no one in the whole area, just a few spitting old men, would remember that the great Manuela was lying there.

She went to the victrola to put on another record.

Black flowers  
of destiny  
in my solitude  
your soul will tell me  
I love yoooooooo . . .

Manuela stopped the record. She put her hand on the black turntable. Japonesita had also stood up. In the center of the night, far away, on the road that led into town from the North-South highway, a horn swelled, a hot flame, insistent, red, that kept getting closer. A horn. Again. Playing the fool, the imbecile, waking everyone up at this hour. It was coming into town. The truck with the double tires on the back wheels. Honking all the time, now in front of the chapel, yes, yes, honking and

honking because he's sure to be drunk. Manuela smiled, the fragments of her face carefully arranged.

"Turn off the lantern, you fool."

Before it went out, Manuela made out a smile on her daughter's face --silly, don't be afraid of Pancho, of course she wants him to come, she's waiting for him, the fool is eager for him to come, and I'm waiting too, dirty old woman . . . but it was important for Pancho to think that no one was up. That he didn't come in, that he thought everyone in the house was asleep. That he knew that they weren't waiting for him and that he couldn't come in even if he wanted to.

"He's coming."

"What are we going to do . . ."

"Don't move."

The horn came closer in the night, undeniably closer, as if in the whole vineyard-striated land there was nothing to interfere with it. In the darkness Manuela approached the door. She unfastened the latch. At this hour, scoundrel, waking up the whole town! She remained by the door while the horn summoned, it aroused every muscle, every nerve and left them alive and suspended, ready to receive wounds or blows--the honking didn't let up. Now he was coming, yes, in front of the house . . . her ears ached and Japonesita closed her eyes and covered her ears. But like Manuela, she smiled.

"Pancho . . ."

"What are we going to do?"

## VI

All the women of the town agreed not to complain because of having to stay at home that night, even though they knew perfectly well that the men were going to Japonesa's. The mayor's wife, the police sergeant's wife, the postmaster's wife, the school master's wife: they all knew that their men were going to celebrate don Alejandro Cruz's triumph, and they knew exactly where and how they would be celebrating it. But because the party was in don Alejandro's honor and because anything connected with him had to be good, they were resigned to silence.

That morning they had seen the three Farías sisters get off the train from Talca, fat as barrels, squatly, with their flowered silk dresses girdling their beefy flesh like steel bands, sweating with the inconvenience of having to carry the harp and guitars. Two younger women also got off, and a man, if that's what he could be called. The women, watching from a careful distance, discussed what he might be: skinny as a broom handle, with long hair and his eyes almost as mascaraed as those of the Farias sisters. Standing near the platform, knitting so as not to waste time, surrounded by kids at whom they had to yell from time to time not to beg from the strangers, they had something to talk about for days to come.

"He must be the queer who plays the piano."

"But Japonesa doesn't have a piano."

"That's true."

"They said she was going to buy one."

"He's an artist, look at that case he's carrying."

"What he is, is a queer, that's for sure . . ."

And the kids trailed after them along the dusty road as far as Japonesa's house.

The ladies, back home for lunch, berated their husbands not to forget one detail of what went on that night at Japonesa's house, and if it were possible, if there were any special delicacies, to put a few in their pockets for them when no one was looking, because after all they had to stay at home alone, bored, while the men would be doing who knows what at the party. Of course, it was all right if they got drunk today. This time it was for a good cause. But they should stay close to don Alejandro, that was the important thing, that he see them at his celebration, so that just in passing and as if they didn't really like to, they could remind him of the land deal, and of the barrels of wine that he had promised to sell them at a discount, yes, let them sing together, let them dance, let mayhem reign, today it didn't matter as long as they were with don Alejandro.

For months the town was wreathed in posters with don Alejandro Cruz's picture, some green, others sepia, others blue. The barefoot kids ran around everywhere hurling flyers, or delivering them gratuitously, time and again, to anyone who passed by, while the rest of the children, the ones who hadn't been trusted with the political propaganda, gathered them up and made paper boats out of them or burned them or sat on the corner and counted them to see who had the most. The campaign headquarters operated out of the post office shed, where the citizens of Estación El Olivo met nightly to revive their faith in don Alejo and to spread that faith by arranging interviews and campaign trips to the neighboring towns and districts. But the real heart of the campaign was Japonesa's house. It was there that the ring leaders met, from there came the orders, the

projects, the assignments. No one went to the house now who wasn't a member of don Alejo's party, and the women, drowsing in the corners with nothing to do, heard the voices that schemed untiringly at the tables in the parlor, buzzing around the wine and Japonesa. Especially during the last month, when the nearness of triumph inflamed the proprietress to loquacity and made her forget everything but her political passion, she would serve her wine generously to any visitor whose political leanings were unsteady or ambiguous, and in the course of a few hours she either resolved his doubts or skillfully cleared up the ambiguities, leaving him with a sharply defined sense of duty.

The election had been ten days before but don Alejo had only recently returned to town. Japonesa's salon and patio were plastered with pictures of the new deputy. The invitations summoned only a select few in the district, from the chosen citizens of El Olivo to the administrators, majordomos and the vineyard keepers from the nearby rural areas. And from Talca Japonesa commissioned her friend Wooden Heart to send her two whores by way of reinforcement; and the Farías sisters so they would have music; and Manuela, that queer who is so amusing, the one who does the Spanish dances.

"The money it's going to cost me. But I have a right to please myself too, and everything is so that El Olivo will have the kind of a future that we've been promised by that brilliant deputy don Alejandro Cruz, here in attendance, the pride of the district . . ."

Naturally Japonesa was pleased with it all. She wasn't so young any more, no doubt about that, and the last years had fattened her so much that the accumulation of blubber around her cheeks tightened her mouth into a perpetual moue that seemed to be--and almost always was--a smile. Her myopic eyes, which had earned her the knickname of "Japonesa,"

were nothing more than two oblique slits under the brows that she stenciled in high arches. In her youth she had had an affair with don Alejo. It was whispered that he had brought her to this house years ago, to a former proprietress now long dead. But her affairs were a thing of the past, a legend that gave root to the present reality of a friendship that united them like a couple of conspirators. Don Alejo used to spend long periods of time working in his rural vineyards, not going to his city home until after the vintage, or the pruning, or the spraying; he was therefore often away from his wife and family and the routine was very boring for him. But at night after dinner, he escaped to Estacion to have a few drinks and laugh a little with Big Japonesa. In those days she took it upon herself to have a special girl for don Alejo, and he was the only one who touched her. He was generous. The house that Japonesa lived in was an ancient holding of the Cruz family and he gave it to her for an insignificant annual rent. And every night, winter or spring, the people from the neighboring area, the administrators and the vineyard keepers and the chief mechanics, and sometimes even the less proud owners, and their sons, who had to be thrown out when their fathers appeared, all of them came to Japonesa's house in Estación El Olivo. Not so much to climb into bed with the women, although they were always young and fresh, but to amuse themselves for a while talking with Japonesa or drowning a bottle or playing a hand of cards in a cheerful but safe atmosphere, because Japonesa didn't open her doors to just anyone. Only refined people. Only people with money in their pockets. That's why she belonged to don Alejo's political party, the historic, traditional, well-organized party, the party of decent people who paid their debts and didn't get themselves into jams, the people who went to her house for amusement and whose faith that don Alejo would do great things for the region was just as unshakeable as Japonesa's.

"I have a right to do what I like."

The great pleasure of her life was giving the party that night. Manuela had scarcely arrived before Japonesa had taken him over. She had thought the dancer they told her about was younger: this one was pushing forty, like herself. But it was better this way because young ones, when the clients got drunk, tried to compete with the women: a big mess. Since Manuela arrived early in the morning and didn't have anything to do until late that night, at first he just wandered around and watched, until Japonesa motioned him over to her.

"Help me put these boughs here on the platform."

Manuela took the decorating into his own hands: not so many branches, he said, the Farías sisters are too fat and with the harp and guitar and boughs besides, you won't be able to see them. It's better just to put branches up there, yellow willow branches with colored paper that should fall like green rain, and at the foot of the platform, also framed by weeping willow boughs, the biggest picture of don Alejo that you can get. Japonesa was pleased with the results. Manuela, help me hang the paper wreaths, Manuela where would be the best place to put the grill for roasting the pigs, Manuela peek at the salad dressing, Manuela this, Manuela that, Manuela check that over there. All afternoon and with every order or request from Japonesa, Manuela suggested something that would make things look nicer or that would make the barbeque sauce tastier. By late afternoon Japonesa fell into a chair in the middle of the patio, half drunk, shouting orders, at ease because Manuela was doing everything so well.

"Manuela, did they bring the strawberries for the burgundy?"

"Manuela, let's put more flowers on this decoration."

Manuela ran, obeyed, corrected, suggested.

"I'm having a splendid time."

Wooden Heart had told him that Japonesa was nice, but not this nice. So unpretentious, proprietress or not. When Japonesa went to her room to dress, Manuela went with her to help: after a short time she came out looking very elegant with her black silk dress coming to a low point in front, and all of her hair gathered up into a discreet but coquettish chignon. The wine began to flow as soon as the first guests arrived, while the aroma of the pigs that were starting to brown, and of oregano and hot garlic and onions and cucumbers soaking in the salads' juices, flowed into the patio and the salon.

Don Alejo arrived at eight, pretty well lit. During the applause he embraced and kissed Japonesa, whose eyeliner had run either from perspiration or from her emotional weeping. Then the Farías sisters climbed onto the platform and the music and the dancing began. Many of the men took off their jackets and danced in their suspenders. The women's floral dresses darkened with sweat under the arms. The Farías sisters seemed inexhaustible, as if they rewound themselves after every tune and heat and fatigue didn't exist.

"Bring out another bottle . . ."

Japonesa and don Alejo had quickly finished the first bottle and now they ordered a second. But before starting it the new deputy carried the hostess off to dance while the others formed a circle around them. Then they went to sit down again. Japonesa called to Rosita, who had been brought from Talca especially for don Alejo.

"Do you see, don Alejo? Look at that rump, feel it, feel it, just as you like, soft, pure affection. I brought her down just for you, I knew you would like her, shouldn't I know your tastes by now . . . That's enough, leave me alone, I'm too old for that sort of thing. Yes, look,

and Rosita isn't too young because I know you can't stand them when they're just children . . ."

The deputy squeezed the proffered buttocks and then had her sit beside him so he could put his hand under her skirt. The mayor of Estación wanted to dance with Japonesa, but she told him no, that tonight she was dedicating herself to waiting on the guest of honor. She herself chose the golden slices of pig, watching over don Alejo to see that he ate well, until he got up to dance with Rosita, his mustache stained with sauce and oregano and his chin and fingers smeared with grease. Manuela walked over to Japonesa.

"Hi."

"Sit down."

"And don Alejo?"

"It's all right. He hasn't said anything."

"Good."

"Did you help yourself to everything?"

"It was excellent. All I need is a small glass of wine."

"Drink some of this."

"What time do I dance?"

"Wait until the party warms up a little."

"Yes, it's better. The other day I danced in Constitución. I had a lovely time and stayed to spend the weekend at the beach. Don't you ever go to Constitución? So pretty, the river and everything, and such good sea food. The proprietress of the house where I stayed knows you. Her name is Olga and they say she's half German. Which isn't surprising because she's completely freckled, here on her arms. No, I'm from here, I was born in the country near Maule, yes, right there, ah, so you've been around there too. Hah . . . we're countrywomen. No. I moved into town

and later worked with a girl and traveled through all the towns in the south, yes, she did well, but don't think that it went too badly for me either, just between you and me. But I was young then, now I'm not. I don't know what's become of her, we even worked in a circus once. But we didn't do well at all. I prefer this kind of work. Of course, a girl gets tired of so much moving around from place to place, all of the towns are alike. No, Wooden Heart is getting very senile. Over sixty, way over, almost seventy. Haven't you noticed her varicose veins? And they say she used to have such lovely legs. I brought the dress in my suitcase. Yes. It's one of the prettiest I've seen. Red. A girl who worked in the circus sold it to me. She hadn't used it much, but she needed the money so she sold it to me. I guard it as if it were the bone of a saint because it's perfection and I'm so dark the red looks splendid on me.

Listen . . . Now?"

"Wait."

"How much longer?"

"About an hour."

"But shall I change?"

"No. It's better to surprise them."

"All right."

"My God, but you're in a hurry."

"Naturally. It's because I like to be the belle of the ball."

Two men who overheard the conversation started to laugh at Manuela, trying to touch her to find out whether or not she had breasts. My pretty little darling . . . what have you got here? Let me feel you a little, get out of here you drunk bastard, don't you come around here trying to touch me. Then they said it was the abundance of men that attracted queers like this one, that it was a disgrace, that they were going to

talk to the policeman who was sitting in a corner with one of the whores on his lap, and he'd put Manuela in jail for being immoral, for being a degenerate. Then Manuela scratched one of them. Leave her alone. She could have the policeman thrown out of office for being half drunk. He'd better watch his step, because Manuela was very well known in Talca and she was on good terms with the police force. I'm a professional, they paid me to put on my show . . .

Japonesa went to find don Alejo and brought him over quickly so that he would intervene.

"What are they doing to you, Manuela?"

"This man is bothering me."

"What's he doing to you?"

"He's calling me names."

"Like what?"

"Degenerate . . . and queer . . ."

Everyone laughed.

"And aren't you?"

"I might be queer but I'm not a degenerate. I'm a professional. No one has the right to treat me like that. Why does this fool have to come and bother me? Who's he to call a girl names, huh? They brought me down because they wanted to see me, so . . . If they don't want a show, then fine, pay me for tonight and I'll go, I'm not interested in dancing here in this shitpile of a town full of starved corpses . . ."

"Okay, Manuela, okay . . . drink this . . ."

And Japonesa made him drink another glass of wine.

Don Alejo broke up the group. He sat down at the table, called to Japonesa, sent someone away who wanted to sit with them, and put Rosita on one side of him and Manuela on the other: they toasted with the recently imported burgundy.

"May you be ever triumphant, Manuela . . ."

"The same to you, don Alejo."

When don Alejo left to dance with Rosita, Japonesa moved her chair next to Manuela's.

"The man has taken a liking to you, child: that's easy enough to see. No, there's no one like don Alejo, he's one of a kind. Here in the town he's like God. He does whatever he wants to do. Everyone is afraid of him. Don't you know that he owns all of the vineyards, all of them, as far as you can see? And he's so good that when someone offends him, like the one who was bothering you, afterwards he forgives and forgets. He's either a very good man or else he doesn't have time to worry about people like us. He has other worries. Projects, always projects. Now he's selling us land here in Estación, but I know him and I haven't fallen for it yet. According to him, everything's on its way up. Next year he's going to parcel out a block of his land and he's going to make a town out of it, he's going to sell model property, he says, with easy payments, and when he's sold all of the lots he's going to have electricity brought to the town and then for sure we'll be riding high. Then they'll come from all over to my house, you know it already has quite a reputation, from Duao and from Pelarco . . . I'd expand and my house would be more famous than Wooden Heart's. Ah, Manuela, what a man he is, I was so much in love with him. But he doesn't let himself get tied down. Naturally he has a wife, a pretty blonde, very ladylike, distinguished, I'll tell you, and another woman in Talca and I don't know how many more in the capitol. And all of them working like dogs for him during the election. If you could have seen Misia Blanca, she didn't even buy stockings, and the other woman too, the one from Talca, working for him so he could win. Naturally we all profited by it. And on election day

he even came with a truck and everyone who didn't want to vote was thrown in by force and let's go my friend, to San Alfonso to vote for me, and he gave them money and they were so happy with the whole thing that later on they went around asking when there was going to be more elections. Of course they would have voted for him anyway. He's the only candidate they know. The others just by way of the propaganda posters, while don Alejo, they really know him. Who hasn't seen him on the roads on that gray horse of his, Mondays on his way to the bazaar in San Alfonso? And besides the money, he gave the ones who voted for him a good supply of wine and he killed a calf, they said, so they could have an all-day barbecue, and he brought them all back from San Alfonso in the truck again, they say that everyone said that he was such a nice man, but later on he disappeared because he had to go back to the capitol to see how things were going . . . Look at how the mayor is dancing with that blonde woman . . ."

Japonesa squinted her eyes so she could see the far end of the patio: when she couldn't see something, she told Manuela to check as to whether the blonde lady was still dancing with the same man, and who was Sargent Buendía with and were the cooks putting more pigs over the coals, look they might not be hungry now but in a little while they'll want to eat again.

Don Alejo came over to the table. With his blue delft eyes, like a doll's, frank, like a sculptured saint. He looked at Manuela, who trembled as if all of her will power had been absorbed by the gaze that encompassed her, that dissolved her. How could she help feeling ashamed of meeting the glance of those marvelous blue pools with her grizzly little eyes and niggardly lashes? She lowered them.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

Manuela looked at him again and smiled.

"Shall we go, Manuela?"

He said it so softly. Was it possible, then . . . ?

"Whenever you want, don Alejo . . ."

Her shivering increased, multiplied into chills that encircled her legs, all of her, while those eyes remained fastened to hers . . . until they dissolved into a laugh. And Manuela's chills subsided with don Alejo's friendly slap on the shoulder.

"No, woman. It was just a joke. I don't really . . ."

And they drank together, Manuela and don Alejo, laughing. Manuela, still swaddled in a blanket of sensations, took short sips, and when everything passed, she smiled slightly, gently. She couldn't remember ever having loved a man as much as at that moment she was loving Deputy don Alejandro Cruz. Such a gentleman. So suave, when he wanted to be. Even when he made the jokes that others made, with their thick, greasy, contemptuous lips, he made them another way, with an artlessness that didn't wound, with a smile far removed from the guffaws of the other men. Manuela laughed, drinking down what was left of the burgundy in her glass, as if trying to hide the flush that climbed to her plucked eyebrows behind the greenish goblet: right then, while she raised the glass, she forced herself to admit that no, that anything except this platonic cordiality was impossible with don Alejo. She had to break this feeling if she didn't want to die. And she did not want to die. And when she set the glass down on the table again she no longer loved him. Why. Better not to think about it.

Don Alejo was kissing Rosita, his hand beneath her skirt. He removed it to smooth his hair when a group of men moved their chairs over to the table. Of course he had promised to enlarge the sheds near the

station if he was elected, certainly, and of course, remember the electricity as soon as possible and the business about augmenting the police force, especially during the vintage, because of the outsiders who wandered around from vineyard to vineyard looking for work and sometimes stealing, certainly, that he would remember, this triumph isn't going to make me swell-headed, don't forget about us don Alejo, we helped you when you needed us, because after all you're the town's mainstay, its support, and without you it would die, yes sir, pour yourself a little more don Alejo, don't refuse my hospitality, and give more to your girlfriend, look how thirsty she is and if you don't take care of her she's liable to go off with someone else, but as I was saying, sir, all of the sheds leak and are extremely small, you can't turn me down after we've helped you, you said you would. He answered, stroking his mustache from time to time. Manuela winked at him because she saw that he was smothering yawns. She was the only one who realized that he was bored, humming along with the Farías sisters' singing: this isn't any kind of talk for a party. Men are so tiring with their business talk, isn't that right don Alejo, Manuela said to him with her glance, until don Alejo couldn't hold back a monstrous yawn, wet, that revealed his epiglottis and his whole pink palate ending in the tunnel of his trachea, and the men, while don Alejo yawned in their faces, shut up. Then, when he had managed to close his mouth, with watering eyes, he searched for Manuela's face.

"Listen, Manuela."

"What, don Alejo?"

"Weren't you going to dance? It's getting dull."

## VII

Manuela spun around in the center of the platform raising a whirl of dust with her red train. At the moment that the music stopped she plucked at the flower that she wore behind her ear and hurled it to don Alejo, who rose and reached for it, trapping it in the air. The crowd broke out in applause while Manuela dropped panting into the chair next to don Alejo.

"Let's dance, sweetheart . . ."

The sharp twanging voices of the Fariás sisters took command of the patio again. Manuela, with her head thrown back and her body arched, pinned herself to don Alejo and together they danced a few steps surrounded by the glee of those who had formed a circle around them. The postmaster approached them and snatched Manuela from don Alejo. They managed one turn around the floor before the mayor went over to take her away from him and then more and more came from the circle that stretched around Manuela. Someone stroked her while she was dancing, another rubbed her leg. The chief vineyard owner of a neighboring area tucked up her skirt, and when they saw that, the men who were grouped around her trying to carry her off helped raise the skirt over her head, binding her arms as if she were in a straight jacket. They felt her wispy, hairy legs and her lank rump, abashed, choking with laughter.

"She's hot."

"She's starting to steam."

"Let's throw her in the canal."

Don Alejo stood up.

"Let's go."

"We have to cool her off."

Various people lifted Manuela up. Trilling, her bare arms traced arabesques in the air as she let herself be carried off. In the clarity of the street they advanced toward Estación's eucalyptus grove. Don Alejo gave orders to cut the wire fences, which after all were his, and forcing their way through the brambles they arrived at the canal that bounded his vineyards and separated them from Estación.

"One . . . two . . . three . . . heeeeeeeave . . ."

And they pitched Manuela into the water. The men who were watching her from above, standing between the blackberries and the canal, were doubled over with laughter, pointing at the figure that struck poses and danced waist deep in water with her dress floating around her like a wide stain singing "El relicario." She shouted to them as she took off her dress and threw it up onto the bank, she dared them, she taunted them, insisting that she liked them all each for himself, not to be cowards in front of a poor woman like herself. One of the men tried to urinate on her, but she managed to dodge the stream's arc. Don Alejo gave him a shove and the man, cursing, fell into the water, where for an instant he merged into Manuela's dance. When they finally gave them a hand so they could both climb onto the bank Manuela's anatomy startled them all.

"What a stud!"

"Look at how well-hung he is . . ."

"Wow, that doesn't look like a fag to me."

"Dont' let the women see that or they'll all fall in love with you."

Manuela, teeth chattering, answered with a laugh.

"The only thing I use it for is peeing."

Don Alejo returned with the group to Japonesa's house. Part of the men went home without being missed by the party. Some others, their bodies heavy with wine, fell among the weeds on the bank or the street or in the station to sleep it off. But don Alejo still felt like celebrating. He ordered the Farías sisters to return to the platform and sing. He sat with some cronies at a table littered with remains, a plate of cold bones and a grease-filmed knife. Japonesa joined them to listen to the details of Manuela's bath.

"And he says that he only uses it to urinate."

Japonesa raised her fatigued head and looked at them.

"That might be what he says, but I don't believe it."

"Why?"

"I don't know, just because . . ."

They argued about it for awhile.

Japonesa became excited. Her swollen breast rose and fell with the passion of her conviction: yes, Manuela could do it, if she were handled in bed in a special way, a little of this a little of that, so she wouldn't be afraid, carefully, delicately, yes, Big Japonesa was sure that Manuela could. The men felt the wave of heat that emanated from her body, certain of its technique and its charms, not quite as fresh as before but hotter and more insistent . . . yes, yes . . . I know . . . and of all the men who listened to her saying yes, I can excite Manuela no matter how queer he is, there wasn't one who wouldn't have given anything to be in Manuela's place. Japonesa dried her forehead. She ran the tip of her pink tongue over her lips, which shone for a minute. Don Alejo was laughing at her.

"But you're old now, what could you . . ."

"Bah, the older the wiser . . ."

"But Manuela! No, no, I'll bet you can't."

"All right. I'll bet you I can."

Don Alejo cut short his laughter.

"It's a deal. Since you think you're so good, you've got a bet. Just try to get the queer hot for you. If you manage to excite him and he performs like a man, fine, then I'll give you whatever you ask for. But it has to be with us watching, and put some action into it."

Everyone was silent waiting for Japonesa's answer. She motioned to the Farías sisters to sing some more and ordered another bottle of wine.

"All right. But what will you give me?"

"I told you, whatever you want."

"And if I asked you to give me El Olivo?"

"You wouldn't. You're an intelligent woman and you know very well that I wouldn't give it to you. Ask for something more reasonable."

"Or that you would want to give me."

"No, that I can . . ."

There was no way to break him down. Forget it.

"All right then . . ."

"What?"

"This house."

When the bet was first mentioned she had just thought of asking for a few barrels of wine, the good kind that she knew don Alejandro would send her without her having to ask for it. But then he made her mad and she asked for the house. She had wanted it for a long time. She wanted to be a proprietress. How would it feel to be a proprietress, the owner of this house where I started to work as a girl. She had never dreamed of owning it. Only now, because it enraged her that don Alejo should count on what he called her "intelligence," taking advantage of her. If

he wanted to laugh at Manuela, and at everyone, and at her, fine, then he would pay for it, don't count on her to be reasonable. Let him pay for it. Let him give her the house if he was so all-powerful that he could shove them around like that.

"But the house is worthless, Japonesa."

"Didn't you say that property values are going to go up here in Estación?"

"Yess of course, but . . ."

"I want it. Don't try to get out of it, don Alejo. I have witnesses here, and they'll say that you don't keep your promises. That you build up a lot of hope and then, nothing . . ."

"You're on, then."

While the onlookers applauded, don Alejo and Japonesa touched their glasses and emptied them. Don Alejo took time out to dance with Rosita. Afterward they went inside to spend awhile together. Then Japonesa wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and closing her eyes yelled:

"Manuela . . ."

The few couples who were dancing stopped.

"Where's Manuela?"

The majority of the women had already paired off with the men with whom they would remain for the rest of the night. Japonesa crossed under the grape arbor, whose leaves had begun to shiver in the wind, and walked into the kitchen. It was dark. But she knew that he was there next to the black, but still hot stove.

"Manuela . . . Manuela?"

She sensed his shivering near the coals. The poor thing was wet and tired from so much revelry. Feeling that Manuela was there, Japonesa moved over to the corner and touched him. He said nothing. Then she

leaned her body against Manuela's. She lit a candle. Thin, wet, diminished, revealing the truth of his miserable structure, of his feeble bones, as a bird is revealed to someone who plucks it to throw it into the pot. Shivering by the stove, wrapped in a blanket that someone had lent him.

"Are you cold?"

"They're such boors . . ."

"Brutes."

"It doesn't matter to me. I'm used to it. I don't know why they always do this or something like it to me when I dance, it's as if they were afraid of me. I don't know why since they know I'm just a silly woman. At least they only threw me in the water, usually it's worse, you'll see . . ."

And laughing he added:

"Don't worry. It's included in the entertainment fee."

Japonesa couldn't keep from touching him, as if she were searching for the wound so she could cover it with her hand. They both had sobered up. Japonesa sat on the floor and told him about the bet.

"Are you crazy, Japonesa, for God's sake? Can't you see I'm hopeless? I don't understand. How could you play a mean trick like that?"

But Japonesa kept talking to him. She took his hand casually. He withdrew it, but while she talked she took it again and this time he didn't object. No, if he didn't want to, he didn't have to do anything, she wasn't going to force him, it didn't matter, it was just a matter of play-acting. After all, no one would be watching close to them, just from the window and it would be easy to fool them. It was just a question of undressing and getting into bed together, she would tell him what to do, everything, and by candlelight they couldn't see much, no, no, no.

Not even if they didn't do anything. He couldn't stand women's bodies. Those flabby breasts, so much excess fat, fat that things sink into and disappear forever, those hips, those thighs like two immense mountains that fused together in the middle, no. Yes, Manuela, hush, I'll pay you, don't say no, it's worth it because I'll pay you whatever you want. Now I know that I have to have this house, that I want it more than anything else, because the town is expanding and me and the house along with it, and I can do it, and it's possible for this house that used to belong to the Cruzes to be mine. I'd fix it up. Don Alejo didn't like it at all that I asked for it. I know why, because they say that the North-South highway is going to come right through here, right by the house's door. Yes, because he knows what it will be worth and he doesn't want to lose it, but it frightened him that the others heard the bet and he had to put up or shut up . . . and then he said all right and it can all be mine. I would bring in artists, you, Manuela, for example, I would always bring you in. Yes. I'll pay you. For just being in bed nude with me for awhile. Just a little while, a quarter of an hour, no, ten, no, five minutes . . . and we'll have a good laugh, Manuela, you and I, I'm tired of those big studs that I liked before when I was young, they stole my money and betrayed me with the first woman who walked by, I'm tired of them, and the two of us can be friends, as long as it's mine, my house, mine, if not, I'll always be clinging to don Alejo, doing whatever he wants, because this house is his, you know that. But it scares me, even that scares me, Japonesa, even the pretending, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. Do you want me to pour you some tea, you're shivering and I'll drink some with you, no, I don't like tea, I'll just have some now to keep you company: damn it Japonesa, you're feeding me propaganda, confusing me, you'll see how warm the tea will make you feel don't be

afraid, don't be afraid of me, of the rest of the women yes but not of me, see how good the tea is, and you won't be cold any more. But Manuela kept saying no, no, no, no . . .

Japonesa put the tea kettle back on the fire.

"And if you were my partner?"

Manuela didn't answer.

"As my partner?"

Japonesa saw that Manuela was thinking.

"We'll split everything. I'll sign you as a partner, you too as an owner of this house when don Alejo transfers it to me in front of the notary. You and I, partners. Half of everything. Of the house and the furniture and the business and of everything we'll have . . ."

. . . and that way, as a proprietress, no one will be able to throw her out, because the house would be hers. She could give orders. They had thrown her out of so many whore houses because she always went crazy when the party got going and her face burned from the wine, and the music and everything, and sometimes the men started to fight because of her. From one whore house to another. Ever since she could remember. One month, six months, a year at the most . . . it always had to end by packing her things and going somewhere else because the owner got mad, because, she would say, Manuela added fuel to the fire because she was so scandalous. . . . to have my own room, mine forever, with cute magazine cut-outs stuck on the wall, but no: from one house to another, always, ever since they threw him out of school when they found him with another boy and he hadn't dared to go home because his father used to carry an enormous riding crop, he even drew blood with it when he beat the horses, and then he went to the woman's house who taught him to do Spanish dances. And then she threw him out, and others, always from house to house, without

a nickel in his pocket, without having anywhere to rest when his gums hurt, those pains he always had, ever since he could remember, and he didn't tell anyone about it and now at forty my teeth are falling out and I'm afraid of spitting them out when I sneeze. That's it. It was a way to pass the time. I don't like beans but when there's nothing else to eat . . . that's it. Proprietress, me. No one will be able to throw me out, and if it's true that this town is on its way up, then, of course, life wouldn't be so bad, and there's even hope for an ugly silly woman like me, and then my misfortune wouldn't be misfortune but would turn into a miracle thanks to don Alejo, and things could be marvelous, singing and laughing and dancing in the spotlight every night, forever.

"All right."

"Is it a deal?"

"But you'd better not do anything to me or I'll scream."

"Is it a deal, Manuela?"

"It's a deal."

"We'll put one over on don Alejo."

"And then we'll sign at the notary's?"

"At the notary's. In Talca."

He wasn't trembling now. His heart beat quickly.

"And when are we going to put on the show?"

Japonesa looked out the door.

"Don Alejo hasn't come out yet, wait a bit . . ."

They sat by the stove in silence. Manuela removed her hand from Japonesa's, who let go of it because now it didn't matter, she was hers now, entirely. Manuela in her house forever. Tied to her. Why not? She was a good worker, that was obvious, and cheerful, and she knew so much about arrangements and clothes and meals, yes, she wasn't bad,

better to be partners with Manuela than with some other man who would make her suffer, while Manuela would never make her suffer, a friend, just a friend, the two together. Easy to love him. Maybe some day she would suffer for him, but in a different way, not with that scream of pain when a man stops loving her, being torn in pieces because a man goes off with another woman or deceives her, or takes her money, or takes advantage of her and she, so he won't leave her, pretends that she doesn't know anything, scarcely daring to breathe at night next to that body that suddenly, suddenly could tell her no, never again, that this is as far as it goes . . . she can excite him, she's positive, almost without trying, because inside, without knowing it, the poor thing was already responding to her warmth. If he hadn't she wouldn't ever have decided to try it.

Exciting him is going to be easy. And making him fall in love with her. But no. That would ruin it. It would complicate things. It was preferable that Manuela never forget his place in the house--the queer of the whore house, the partner. But business aside, it would be easy to make him fall in love with her, just as easy as at this moment it was for her to love him.

"Listen, Manuela, don't fall in love with me . . ."

## VIII

"That's all that counts, buddy, don't be ridiculous: money. Don't you think that if you had it you'd be as good as he is? Or do you think don Alejo is someone special? No, there are no two ways about it. You're afraid of the old man because you owe him money, that's all. No, of course I'm not going to tell anybody. Do you think that I want people to know how he treated my sister's husband? In the envelope I gave you there's enough money to pay him what you owe him . . . no, pay me whenever you can, there's no hurry, you're one of the family. I'm not one of those two-faced jerks and I'm not going to treat you like he does. The things he called you, my God! I told you not to worry about it, I've got plenty. People like him make me furious . . . Why should you do what he says and not go to Japonésita's house if you feel like it and you pay your bill? Does Japonésita belong to him? Of course, that ass thinks everything belongs to him, but no sir. He can't order you around, or me either, and if we want we'll go wherever we feel like going. Right. Pay him his money and faretheewell . . . Come on, Pancho, cheer up, it's no big deal . . ."

The truck went by Japonésita's house without stopping. It turned slowly at the corner and then went around the block and back by Japonésita's house, this time without honking, Octavio persuading him, going around and around the block.

"And what will I do about the freight jobs?"

"Don't worry about them. Don't you know that all of the trucks from around here go by my gas station and I know where the best leads in the area are? Don't worry about it. I'm telling you you're not the old man's slave . . . All right. I'm tired of the whole thing. Let's go pay him right now, yes, now . . ."

"It's late . . ."

Octavio thought it over.

"So what, what do I care if they're eating. Let's just go."

Pancho spun the truck around in the narrow street and headed the other way, toward the outskirts of El Olivo, past the station. He knew this truck, and on the road past the blackberries and the canal that bordered the station he dodged ruts and holes, maneuvering the enormous machine that seemed lighter now that he was going to don Alejo's house to wrest from him the part of the truck that still belonged to him.

"We're going to get stuck in the mud . . ."

Octavio opened the window and threw his cigarette out.

"No . . ."

Pancho stopped talking because he was advancing through a narrow passage of blackberries. He had to go very slowly, his eyes squinted, his head inclined over the windshield. To see the rocks and pot holes. He knew the road well, but anyway, better to be careful. He even knew the noises: here, behind the thickets, the Palos canal split in two and the branch that flowed toward the Los Lagos pasture gushed through a wooden spout for a stretch. Now you couldn't hear it. But if you were on foot, as before, when he was a boy, you would start to hear the noise of the water in the wooden spout right here, passing the crooked willow. This was the road that he used to run along barefooted every day to go to school in Estación El Olivo, when there was a school. A waste of time.

Misia Blanca had taught him reading and writing and simple arithmetic along with Moniquita, who learned so quickly that she always beat him at everything. Until don Alejo said that Pancho had to go to school. And after studying who knows what, the University. You bet. I was the dunce of all times and was never promoted because I didn't feel like it, until don Alejo, who's no fool, realized it and fine, why bother with this kid if he's not any good at studying, let him just learn the numbers and reading so they can tell him from the animals, and then let him help out in the fields, we'll see what we can do with him, why waste time in school if he's so obstinate. Every rock. And further on, the concrete landmark that's been broken forever. Who knows how it got broken. It must be hard to break a concrete landmark, but broken it is. Every hole, every rock: don Alejo made him learn them by heart, coming and going, every day from the country to the school and from the school to the country until they told him that was enough, what good was it. But Ema wants Normita to go to a parochial school, I don't want her to be just another nobody, like me, who had to marry the first man who looked at me so I wouldn't be an old maid forever--think what I'd be if you had studied a little. Why do you say that when you know you liked me from the first time you saw me and you walked out on the kid who owned the butcher shop because you fell in love with me, but if you'd studied it would have been different, what's studying mean, Mama, and what are nuns? I want the girl to study something quick like obstetrics, what's obstetrics, Mama? And he didn't like for her to ask, she's so small and what can you tell her, better wait until she grows up. If I want to, if I feel like it, I'll make my daughter study. Don Alejo won't have anything to say about it. Nothing to do with me. I'm my own boss. Nobody else. And of course the family, like Octavio, who's my pal so I don't mind owing him

and he won't do anything if I get a little behind on the payments . . . he'll be happy that I'm going to buy a house for Ema. Now I'll pay the old man and leave for good.

The truck wheeled between the plane trees and entered the palm-lined avenue. On both sides, sheds. And piles of fetid grape pulp beside the dark closed sheds. At the far end, the park, the gigantic holm oak where he used to watch them lying in hammocks and multi-colored canvas chairs--watching them from the other side, but not when he was little because he and Moniquita played together in the giant hydrangea, the two of them alone, and the grownups laughed at him asking if he was Moniquita's boyfriend and he said yes, and then they let him in, but later, when he was bigger, never then: they were reading magazines in strange languages, napping in the faded canvas chairs.

The dogs lunged toward the truck, which was approaching through the avenue of palms, and attacked its shining carcass, scratching it and muddying it as soon as it stopped in front of the gate house.

"Let's get out."

"How, with those monsters?"

The leaps and growls of the dogs kept them in the cab. Then Pancho, just because they enraged him, because they frightened him, because he hated dogs, started to honk the horn like an insane man and the dogs redoubled their leaps scratching the red paint that he polished so often, but now it didn't matter, now nothing mattered except blaring, blaring, enough to knock down the palm trees and the oak and to split the night apart until nothing is left, blaring, blaring, and the dogs howl while in the hall a light is lit and figures come to life among the shadows and in doorways, yelling at the dogs, running toward the truck but Pancho doesn't let up, he has to keep on, the furious dogs ignoring the peons

who are calling them. Until don Alejo appears at the top of the walkway and Pancho stops honking. Then the dogs quiet down and run to him.

"Othello . . . Sultan. Here, Negus, Moor . . ."

The dogs fell in behind don Alejo.

"Who is it?"

Pancho remained mute, bloodless, as if he had used up all of his strength. Octavio nudged him with his elbow, but Pancho remained mute.

"Bah. Coward."

Pancho opened the door and leaped to the ground. The dogs hurled themselves at him but don Alejo managed to call them off while Pancho scrambled back into the cab. Octavio had turned off the lights and the landscape loomed up in the darkness, the black oak and the palm leaves and the mass of the walls and the roof tiles suddenly etched themselves against the deep empty sky.

"Who is it?"

"Pancho, don Alejo. Keep an eye on your whelps."

"What's all the damned racket about? Are you drunk, you good for nothing, to think you can come to my house at all hours making all this noise? You--lock the dogs up over there, go on Moor, Sultan, over there, Othello, Negus . . . and you, Pancho, come on up to the walkway while I go to look for my cape, look, it's starting to freeze . . ."

Cautiously Pancho and Octavio climbed down from the truck, trying not to fall into the puddles, working their way up to the corridor. At the base of the U that embraced the park they saw a few lighted windows. They walked over to them. The dining room. The family gathered under a lamp. A boy with glasses--grandson, don Jorge's son, what's he doing here when he ought to be away at school. And Mísia Blanca at the head. White haired, now. She used to be blonde, with a long braid that she wrapped

up behind her head and cut off when he gave Moniquita typhus. He saw her do it, Misia Blanca, in the suffocating chapel--she raised her arms, her hands grasped her heavy braid and she cut it off at the base, at the nape of her neck. He saw her: through the tears that came only then, only when Misia Blanca cut off her braid and threw it into the box, he watched her swimming in his tears, as he saw her now swimming in the dining room's tarnished glass. Loan me Pancho: she came to ask his mother for him so he could play with Moniquita because they were almost the same age and the house servants laughed at him because he said he was the boyfriend of the boss' daughter. Now she was like an old lady. She ate in silence. And when don Alejo finally came out to join them in the corridor, with his hat and vicuna cape on, Pancho thought he looked so tall, as tall as when he used to look up at him, a boy who barely came past his knees.

"What's the occasion, Pancho?"

"Good evening, don Alejo . . ."

"Who's with you?"

"It's Octavio . . ."

"Good evening."

"What can I do for you?"

He dropped into a rattan chair and the two men remained standing in front of him. He looked small now. And sick.

"What brings you around at this hour?"

"I came to pay you, don Alejo."

He stood up.

"But you payed me this morning. You don't owe me anything until next month. What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

They began walking around the U of the corridors. From time to time the image of Misia Blanca presiding at the long and almost empty table reappeared, one time stirring her medicine, another time closing the cheese crock, another time crumbling a piece of bread against the snowy table cloth, all within the framed light of the window. Octavio was explaining something to don Alejo . . . who knows what, I don't want to hear it, he does it better than I do. Yes, let him do it because he won't let don Alejo run all over him like he does me. From a plate Misia Blanca selects a lump of toasted sugar for her medicine. One for her, one for Moniquita and one for you, Panchito, it has a piece of juniper leaf stuck on it, it gives it a special flavor, Misia Blanca likes it that way, well, go play in the garden and don't lose sight of her Pancho, you're the biggest and you have to take care of her. And the colossal hydrangea there at the foot of the shade, next to the drain with its dusk-colored velvety bricks, he was the doll's father and she was the mother, until the kids caught us playing with the little crib, me singing a lullaby to the doll in my arms because Moniquita says that's what fathers do and the kids laugh--sissy, sissy, playing with dolls like a girl and I don't want to come back ever but I have to because they feed me and dress me but I prefer to go hungry and I spy from the flower hedge because I'd like to go back but I don't want them to call me the sweet-heart of the boss's daughter and sissy, sissy because of the dolls. Until one day don Alejo sees me spying from behind the flowers. I've caught you, you little bastard. And his hand grabs me here, at the neck, and I hang from his cape kicking, him so big and me so small looking up at him, like looking up a cliff. His cape a little slippery and very hot because it's made of vicuna. And he drags me through the bushes and I hang on to his cape because it's so soft and so hot and he drags me along and I

tell him that they haven't given me permission to come, liar, he knows everything, you're a liar Pancho, don't pull away because who's going to take care of her except you, and he pushes me toward the huge park and I have to look for her in the tangle of briars, and I run and my feet get tangled up in the periwinkles but I don't have any reason to run so hard because I know she's where she always is, under the hydrangea, in the shade by the wall with the shining slivers of broken bottles embedded in it, and I find her and touch her and from the tip of my body, running, penetrating the undergrowth, the tip of my body drips and gets me wet and then I get typhus and she does too and she dies and I don't, and I'm left watching Misia Blanca and only when her hands lift her braid to cut it off do the tears start because I got well and because Misia Blanca is cutting her braid. The dining room light has been turned off. This time around she's not there. Octavio's voice keeps explaining: yes, don Alejo, of course, it doesn't matter if they don't give him the cargo, I've already found him some others, yes, very good ones, some brick shipments, that they're making on the other side of . . .

"Whose bricks are they?"

Octavio didn't answer.

Don Alejo stopped, surprised by the silence, and they did too, Octavio meeting the senator's gaze for an instant.

Was it possible? Pancho realized that Octavio wasn't answering don Alejo's question because if he found out whose bricks they were he could make a telephone call, that was enough, and they wouldn't give the shipments to him. He knew everyone. Everyone respected him. He had them all eating out of his hand. But his brother-in-law Octavio, his buddy, Normita's godfather, was standing up to him: Octavio was new in the district and wasn't afraid of the old man. And because he didn't want

to answer he didn't. They made a complete turn around the corridor without speaking. The park was quiet but alive, and the silence on the heels of their voices was embroidered with almost imperceptible noises, the drop that fell from the edge of the roof, the keys clinking in Octavio's pocket, the rustle of the nearly-stripped jasmine spikes piercing rain-drops, the slow footsteps that halted at the house door.

"It's cold . . ."

"Of course. This is a very icy place."

Pancho trembled at his brother-in-law's words: don Alejo looked at him on the verge of asking what he meant by that, but he didn't, and he started to count the bills that Octavio handed him.

"Tons of it . . ."

"What did you say?"

"Tons . . . of ice . . ."

Pancho cut his brother-in-law off before he could continue, encouraged by his triumph. Or was it a triumph? Don Alejo seemed quite serene. Maybe he hadn't heard.

"No, no, nothing, don Alejo. Well, if it's all right with you we'll go now and stop bothering you. We're taking up your time. And in this cold. Please give my regards to Misia Blanca. I hope she's well."

Don Alejo walked as far as the end of the patio to see them off. Crossing the mud on their way to the truck they turned and saw the four dogs beside him on the slope.

"Be careful with the dogs . . ."

Don Alejo laughed loudly.

"Get them Sultan . . ."

The four dogs shot after them. They barely had time to leap into the truck before they started to claw at the doors. As they turned toward

the exit the headlights illuminated don Alejo's figure for a moment at the top of the grade and then the advancing lights gradually swallowed, two by two, the palm trees along the lane leading away. Pancho took a deep breath.

"That's that."

"You didn't let me tell him to his face that he's a bastard."

"Well, the old goat is honest."

But cold. Octavio had been telling him that on their way into town and he had believed him then, but now it was harder to believe. He said that even the stones along the road to Estación knew it. Not to be an idiot, to realize that the old man had never intended to bring electricity to the town, that it was just lies, that on the contrary, now it would suit him better if the town never had electricity. Not to be naive, that the old man was a shyster. The times he had gone to talk to the Commissioner about the matter were just to irritate him, so the town would never get electricity, I know what I'm talking about, the Commissioner's chauffeur is a friend of mine and he told me, wake up, buddy. It's obvious. Think about it. He wants everyone to move away from the town. And since he owns most of the houses, if not all of them, then what can he lose by having another chat with the Commissioner so that he'll grant him the land that the streets are on, it was his to begin with, and then he'll tear down all the houses and plow up the town, rich fallow land, and plant more and more vineyards just as if the town had never existed, hell, I know for sure that that's what he's after. Now, since his plans for making Estación El Olivo an important town have fallen through, because he thought the highway was going to pass right by here, right by his door . . .

Leaning over the wheel Pancho scrutinizes the darkness because he has to scrutinize it if he doesn't want to topple into a canal or be grafted into a thicket. You have to watch every stone in the road, every hole, every one of these trees that I was going to abandon forever. I thought that all of this would keep some trace of me, so that later I could think about these streets that I'm driving along, but now they won't exist and I won't be able to remember them, because they already don't exist and I can't return. I don't want to return. I want to go on to other things, go forward. The house in Talca for Ema and school for Normita. I'd like to have some place to come back to, not to really come back to it, but to have it to come to, that's all, and now I won't. Because don Alejo is going to die. The certainty of don Alejo's death drained the night and Pancho had to grasp the steering wheel to keep from falling into the abyss.

"Buddy."

"What's the matter?"

He didn't know what to say. It was just to hear his friend's voice. To see if he really wanted to be like Octavio, who didn't have any place to go back to and who didn't care. He was the finest man in the world because he made his own life and now he owned a service station and a little cafe along the North-South highway where hundreds of trucks passed. He did what he wanted to and his wife gave him spending money, not like Ema who took all of the money, as if he owed it to her. Octavio was a great man, really great. It was a stroke of luck that he'd married his sister. You had someone to back you up.

"We settled the score. Better not to have anything to do with them. They're a bunch of filth, buddy, I'm telling you, you don't know the trouble I've had with those sons-of-bitches."

They were coming into town.

"Where shall we go?"

"To celebrate."

"But where?"

"Where do you think, buddy?"

"To Japonesita's."

"To Japonesita's, right."

IX

Japonesita put out the lamp.

"It's him."

"Again?"

After they slammed the truck doors a thick moment of waiting passed, so long that it seemed that the men who got out were lost in the night. When they finally pounded on the drawing room door, Manuela clutched at her Spanish dress.

"I'm going to hide."

"Papa, wait . . ."

"He's going to kill me."

"And what about me?"

"Who cares. He's sworn to get me. What happens to you is no concern of mine."

She ran to the patio. If she made it through this she was sure to die of bronchial pneumonia like all the other old women. Why should Japonesita be any affair of hers? If she wanted to be defended, let her defend herself, if she wanted to give in to him, let her give in to him, she, Manuela, wasn't in the mood to save anybody, scarcely her own skin and much less Japonesita, who called her "papa," when she was afraid that Pancho would kill her just for being a silly old woman. The best thing to do would be to sneak off down the way and spend the night with Ludovinia, warm in her bedroom, and a double bed, no, no, none of that

about getting into bed with a woman, now that she knew what could happen to her. But maybe Ludo had some pastry left over from lunch and she'd heat them over the coals and give her some tea and they could talk about lovely things, Misia Blanca's hats when they used to wear hats, and forget about all this, because she certainly wasn't going to tell Ludo about it, because she didn't want her to ask questions that she would have to answer. Until this thing diminished, fading into the darkness that swallows it up, until she could tell Ludo yes, just imagine, perhaps tomorrow she could tell her about it, just imagine the girl finally made up her mind and took him off to her room, she's finally come down off her high horse, now for sure everything will go smoothly, and all of the darkness would envelope everything until it would be time to go to sleep and she could fall drop by drop, drop by drop, into the puddle of sleep that would swell until it filled Ludo's warm room altogether.

The light in the drawing room went on again. A man appeared in its rectangle. The victrola needle began to rasp against a record. Octavio leaned against the door frame. Manuela stepped back, opened the grid of the henhouse and hid under the water dispenser next to the lime-bleached perch, and Lucy's turkey began to strut, inflated, furious, all of its feathers bristling. Manuela put one of her hands under her shirt to warm it but every crease in her musty skin seemed to be made out of frosted cardboard, and she took it back out.

Japonesita crossed the rectangle of light, clinging to Pancho Vega. Manuela knew they would soon begin to search the house for her. If only Japonesita were woman enough to keep them occupied, to divert their masculinity toward herself, she who needed it so much! But no. They were going to search. Manuela knew it, they were going to make the whores come out of their rooms, take the kitchen apart, look for her in the outhouse,

maybe in the henhouse, wreck everything, the dishes and the glasses and their clothing, and the women, and her too if they found her. That was why they had come. They aren't fooling me. Those men hadn't just appeared out of the night to rush into the house and go to bed with just any woman and drink a few bottles of just any wine, no, they came to find her, to sacrifice her, to force her to dance. They knew that she had made it fiercely plain that she didn't want to dance for them, no more than she did last year when Pancho kept insisting that she had to dance for him, warped bastard, he's coming for me, Manuela knows it. For the present he settled for dancing with Japonesita. But then he would come to look for her. Yes, I should have gone to Ludo's. But no. Japonesita was dancing, strange, because she never danced, even if they begged her. She didn't like it. She seemed to now. She saw her whirl in front of the wide-open door, glued to him, as if melted and dripped over Pancho, his black mustache hidden in Japonesita's neck, his dirty mustache, the bottom hairs tinged with wine and nicotine. And clutching the cradle of her thighs, his hands stained by nicotine and machine oil. And Octavio standing in the open door, smoking, waiting: then he tossed his cigarette into the night and went in. The record stopped. Laughter. Japonesita screams. A chair falls. They're doing something to her. Manuela's hand, back between her skin and her shirt, right where her heart beats, clenches until it hurts, as if she would like to transfer the pain to Pancho Vega's body, because Japonesita screams again, ay, ay, papa, don't call me, don't call me that way again, because I don't have fists to defend you, I only know how to dance and how to shiver here in the henhouse.

. . . But one time I didn't shiver. Big Japonesa's nude body, oh, if I had that warmth now, if Japonesita had it so she wouldn't need other heat, Big Japonesa's nude, repellent, but warm body surrounding me, her

hands on my neck and me staring at those things that burgeoned from her chest, as if I hadn't known they existed, heavy and red tipped by the lantern light that we hadn't extinguished so that they could see us from the window. They insisted on at least that much proof. And the house would be ours. Mine. And me smothered in that flesh, and that drunken woman's mouth that searched for mine the way a pig roots in a swamp although we'd agreed that we wouldn't kiss, because it nauseated me, but she was searching for my mouth, I don't know, even now I don't know why Japonesa had such a hunger for my mouth and she searched for it and I didn't want to and I refused, shriveling it tight, biting her greedy lips, hiding my face in the pillow, anything I could, because I was terrified to see Japonesa raiding our agreement, something was beginning to stir and I didn't . . . I wanted not to be sickened by the flesh of this woman who was reminding me that the house was going to be mine for just this simple but ghastly pretense, that it wouldn't hurt anything but . . . and don Alejo watching us. Could we deceive him? I trembled. Could we? Wouldn't we die, somehow, if we managed to do it? And Japonesa made me drink another glass of wine so I wouldn't be afraid and in drinking it I spilled half the glass on the pillow next to Japonesa's head whose flesh was wooing me, and then another glass. And then she didn't say anything else. Her eyes were closed and her mascara was running and her face was sweaty and her whole body, especially her wet belly, stuck to mine and me realizing that all of this is monstrous, it's extravagant, they're betraying me, oh how clearly I saw that it was a betrayal to capture me and lock me up in jail forever because Big Japonesa was utterly reckless with that odor, as if she were preparing a witches brew in the fire that burned under the triangular vegetation of her legs, and that odor took root in my body and clung to me, the odor of that body with its

unimaginable incomprehensible channels and caverns, stained with other liquids, inhabited by other cries and other beasts, and that boiling so different from mine, from my foolish doll's body, depthless, everything on the surface, useless, hanging, while she caresses me with her mouth and her humid palms, with her eyes closed terribly so I won't know what's happening inside, open, everything inside, passages and channels and caverns and me there, dead in her arms, in her hand that's urging me to live, that yes, that you can, and me nothing, and on the stand beside the bed the lantern hissing lightly next to my ear in a long meaningless whisper. And her soft hands explore me, and she tells me you excite me, she tells me I want that, and she begins to murmur again, like the lantern, in my ear, and I hear laughter in the window: don Alejo watching me, watching us, us writhing, knotted together and sweaty to humor him because he ordered it and this is the only way he'll give us this adobe house, with its rat-gnawed beams, and they, the ones who are watching, don Alejo and the others who are laughing at us, don't hear what Big Japonesa is saying slowly in my ear, my little girl, it's exquisite, don't be afraid, we aren't going to do anything, it's just a play to make them believe it, don't worry my love and her voice is warm like an embrace and her wine-stained breath envelopes me, but now it doesn't weigh so much because no matter how much her hand touches me I don't have to do anything, anything, it's just an act, nothing is going to happen, it's for our house, that's all, for our house. Her smile stuck on the pillow, etched on the linen. She likes to do what she's doing here on the sheets with me. She's pleased that I can't: not with anybody, tell me, pretty Manuela, tell me not with any other woman before me, that I'm the first, the only one, so I can have you entirely my pretty little girl, my love, Manuelita, I'm going to have you, I like your terrified body and all of

your fears and I want to destroy your fear, no, don't be afraid Manuela, no, not destroy it but gently smooth it away to arrive at a part of me that she, poor Big Japonesa, thought existed but it doesn't exist and it never has existed, it never has existed in spite of your touching me and caressing me and murmuring . . . it doesn't exist, God damn you Japonesa, do you understand, it doesn't exist. No darling, Manuela, as if we were two women, look, here, look, our legs interwoven, sex in sex two sexes just alike, Manuela, don't be afraid of my thighs moving, my hips, my mouth in yours, like two women when the gentlemen in Wooden Heart's house pay the whores to let them watch . . . no, no, you're the woman, Manuela, I'm the man, look how I'm taking off your trousers and how I'm loosening your brassiere so your breasts will be bare and me playing with them, yes you have them Manuela, don't cry, you do have breasts, tiny like a little girl's, but you have them and that's why I love you. You talk and you caress me and suddenly you tell me, now darling Manuela, now you can . . . I dreamed about my breasts being caressed and something happened while she was saying, yes little girl, I'm making you like it because I'm the man and you're the woman, I love you because you're everything, and I feel her heat that devours me, me, a me that doesn't exist, and she helps me, laughing with me because I'm laughing too, the two of us choking with laughter to cover the shame of the waves of emotion, and my tongue in her mouth and what does it matter that they're watching us from the window, it's even better, more exquisite, until I shudder and am mutilated, bleeding inside of her while she screams and clutches me and then falls, my precious little boy, what an exquisite thing, it's been so long, so long, and the words dissolve and the odors evaporate and the hardnesses shrivel, I stay, sleeping over her, and she says into my ear, as if between dreams: little girl, little boy, her words muffled in the pillow. We can't

tell anybody, I'm ashamed of what happened, don't be silly, Manuela, you won the house royally, you won the house for me, for the two of us. But swear to me that never again, Japonesa for God's sake how repulsive, swear to me, partners, of course, but not this, not ever again because what I'm needing so much now no longer exists, the you, the me that I'd like so desperately to call to from this corner in the henhouse, while I watch them dance there in the drawing room . . .

. . . the fists that he doesn't have are useless for everything except curling themselves up in the faded parcel of the dress. To kill Pancho with the dress. Hang him with it. Lucy came out onto the patio as if she had been waiting for the moment.

"Sssstttt."

She looked around.

"Lucy, here . . ."

In the drawing room the record repeats and repeats.

"What are you doing in there like a broody hen?"

"Go on into the salon."

"I'm going. Is anyone there?"

"Pancho and Octavio."

Japonesita and Pancho dance past the doorway, awakening Lucy's face.

"Is she alone?"

"Go on, I said."

What right does that damned whore Lucy have to criticize her because she's hiding in the henhouse? Tomorrow she would make her pay the money she owed her for a dress, because she had been pretending to have forgotten about it. Knowing that men prefer her, and she thinks we have to put up with her. She's a lunatic like all the others. And Japonesa too . . . What right? Right to what? Papa. What do you mean papa! Don't make

me laugh, please, look at my chapped lips and how they hurt when I laugh . . . papa. Leave me alone. Nobody's papa. I'm just plain Manuela, the one who can dance until dawn and make a roomful of drunks laugh and in their laughter make them forget their snotty little wives while she, an artist, receives applause, and the light bursts into an infinity of stars. She had no reason to think about the scorn in the laughter that she knows so well because it's all a part of the men's fun, that's why they come, to scorn her, but on the stage, with a flower behind her ear, as old and knock-kneed as she was, she was still more woman than all of the Lucies and Cloties and Japonesitas on the face of the earth . . . arching her back and pursing her lips and tapping furiously, they laughed harder and their wave of laughter carried her up, up toward the lights.

Let Japonesita scream in there. Let them force her to learn to be a woman, as they had forced her. It's a good party. Lucy is dancing with Octavio, but she's the only one capable of turning the party into something thrilling, she, because she's Manuela. Even though she might be trembling here in the dark surrounded by chicken guano that's so old it doesn't even have an odor anymore. Those aren't women. She's going to show them what a woman is and how to be a woman. He takes off his shirt and folds it over the stairs. And his shoes . . . yes, bare feet like a real gypsy. He removes his pants and is nude in the henhouse, his arms folded across his chest and that foreign thing hanging from him. He puts the Spanish dress over his head and the skirts fall around her like a warm shower because nothing can warm her like those yards and yards of tired red percale. She adjusts the bodice. She smooths the folds around the low neck . . . a little padding here where I don't have anything. Naturally, it's because I'm so tiny, a little gypsy girl, dainty, scarcely a child who is going to dance, that's why she

doesn't have breasts, almost like a little boy, but not her, she who is so feminine, her curved figure and all . . . Manuela smiles in the darkness of the henhouse while she puts the gauze poppy that Lucy lent her behind her ear. Do whatever you want to with Japonesita. So what, what does she have to do with it. She's just the great artist who has come to Japonesita's house to do her number, silly, silly, she wants to amuse herself, she feels Pancho's heavy hands exploring her that night, like someone who won't explore unless everyone is watching, holding her, yes indeed, holding her and doing it with style. Let them do to her whatever they want, thirty men. If only I were younger so I could endure it. But no. My gums hurt. And my joints, oh how my joints hurt and my bones and my knees in the morning, how I feel like staying in bed forever, forever, with them taking care of me. If only Japonesita would make up her mind tonight. If only Pancho would take her away. If only he could make her pale blood circulate through that plucked chicken's body, not even hair where she ought to have it because she's old now, poor thing, and doesn't know what she's missing, Pancho's hands that squeeze my pretty girl, don't be silly, don't waste your life, I'm your friend, I, Manuela, I'm going to dance so that everything will be light and airy, as it should be and not sad like you because you count every dollar and don't spend any of it . . . and the flower in my hair. Manuela pushes forward across the patio smoothing her dress against her body. So skinny, dear God, no one's going to like me, especially with my stained dress and my muddy feet and she removes a vine leaf that clings to the muck on her heel and goes on toward the light and before she goes in she hides behind the door, listening, while she makes the sign of the cross as all great artists do before walking into the light.

Don Alejo gave don Céspedes all the wine he could drink, drink it down don Céspedes that's what it's for he repeated, but he drank sparingly. Sometimes a small glass before lying down to sleep on the jumble of bags, among the wooden barrels cured by harvest after harvest of wine. It was the same wine that don Alejo sold to Japonésita at cost, simply because of their friendship and so the poor girl could make a little profit, but not to anyone else, not even if they begged him. Sometimes, late at night, when don Céspedes couldn't get to sleep because of the pains that never abandoned one part or another of his body, he put on his sandals and throwing a blanket over his shoulder walked through the vineyard, crossed the Palos canal on a fallen willow trunk, poked through the barbed-wired blackberry thicket laced with gaps known only to himself, and arrived at Japonésita's house where he silently installed himself at one of the tables near the wall to drink a bottle of red wine, the same kind that was within easy reach at the gate house.

Octavio saw him come in. Japonésita didn't want to dance with him, so while Octavio waited for Lucy and Pancho to finish their dance he called to don Céspedes, who moved over to their table. Octavio was going to ask the old man something, but he didn't because he saw that he was sitting rigidly in his chair, staring fixedly at one precise point in the darkness, as if that point contained a detailed blueprint of the night.

"The dogs . . ."

"What did you say, don Céspedes?"

"That they turned the dogs loose in the vineyard."

They listened.

"I don't hear anything."

"Neither do I."

"But they're out there. I can feel them. Now they're running to the north, to the Lagos pasture where the cattle are . . . and now . . ."

A flight of geese passed over the town.

". . . and now they're running this way, toward Estacion."

Japonesita and Octavio tried to penetrate the night with their attentiveness, but they couldn't pierce the obstreperous music, couldn't fling themselves into the country to glean its atoms of noise and the far-away gusts of information. Octavio poured himself a glass of wine.

"And who let the dogs loose?"

"Don Alejandro. He's the only one who turns them loose."

"Why?"

"When he's in a strange mood . . . and tonight he was. He told me he was going to die, when he came to talk to me in the gate house tonight, a doctor told him so. He said peculiar things . . . that nothing would be left behind him because all of his projects had failed . . ."

"Greedy bastard . . . if he, a millionaire, is a failure, what does he leave to us poor people?"

"I'll bet he's in the vineyard with them."

"And why does he turn them loose if not a grape was left after the vintage and there's no reason to try to get in?"

"Who knows. Sometimes people come for other reasons."

"Like what?"

"You have to be very careful with the dogs. They're vicious. But they don't bite me . . . why should they bother when there's no meat left on my bones."

Japonesita watched him on the other side of the carbide flame, gray, remote, like someone to whom nothing can happen anymore; she envied his immunity. Even the dogs didn't bite him. Probably not even the fleas in his mangy straw mattress bit him. Once someone told her that don Céspedes didn't even eat anymore, that sometimes don Alejo's house servants remembered his existence and looked all over for him, in the warehouses and sheds, and they took him some bread or cheese or a hot dish of food. But then they forgot him again and who knows how the poor old man fed himself, sleeping on bags in the warehouses, lost among the plows and the machinery and the bales of straw and clover, on top of a pile of potatoes.

Pancho and Lucy sat down at the table.

"This is like a funeral . . ."

No one answered.

"Cheer up, buddy, if you don't, I'll run off with Lucy . . ."

And he looked at Japonesita to see how she reacted: she was looking at the same point in the darkness as don Céspedes. He touched one of her breasts, too small, like a wizened pear, the kind with no perfume, inedible, fallen under the trees. But her eyes. He took his hand away and looked at them. Two orbs lit from within. Each eye flared brightly swallowed up by the translucent iris and Pancho felt that if he leaned over them he would see, like an aquarium, the underwater gardens of Japonesita's soul. It wasn't pleasant. It was weird. If it were up to him he'd leave her right there. But why was he going to leave her? Because the old man told him to, because don Alejo warned him not to go near her?

But we're not outlaws, don Alejo, we're as good as you are, so don't look down on us, don't think that . . .

"Shall we dance?"

Lucy closed her eyes and opened them again. But when she opened them she didn't know how much time had passed since she closed them, nor into which fragment of the immense dilated time span she was looking. A band of geese passed over. Again? Or was this another part of the same time when she thought she heard them a while ago? The howls of the dogs, some near, others far away, traced the country distances in the night. A horseman galloped along the road, and suddenly Lucy, who was trying to hear only the bolero on the victrola, was tangled up in the anguish of not knowing who the rider was or where he came from or where he was going and how long this gallop would last, faint now, very faint, but always galloping further on into the interior of her ears until he remained there fixed. She smiled at Octavio because she saw he was annoyed.

"God but it's boring . . ."

Don Céspedes yawned and listened.

"That's Sultan . . ."

"And how do you know each dog?"

"I trained them for don Alejo, I've known them since they were small. Since they were born, really. When don Alejo sees that one of his black dogs isn't doing well, that he's getting lazy or tame or that he has injured a foot, we shut ourselves up, don Alejo and I, with the dog, and he shoots him . . . I hold him so the bullet will hit him just right and then I bury him. And when the bitch that we keep locked up at the far end of the orchard is in heat, we give the dogs a stimulant, and we shut ourselves up again, don Alejo and I, with the dogs in the shed, and the brutes fight over the bitch, they go mad, sometimes they're hurt, until

they mount her and that's it. He keeps the best pups for himself, but if he's killed only one of the big ones he just takes one pup and I put the rest in a bag and throw them in the Palos canal. Four, he always likes to have four. Dona Blanca is furious about it, she says it's not right, but he laughs and tells her not to interfere with men's affairs. And the dogs, even though they change, are always called the same names, Negus, Sultan, Moor, Othello, always the same ever since don Alejo was a boy just this high, the same names as if the dogs that he kills kept on living, don Alejo's four dogs, always perfect, he likes them to be savage, if they're not he kills them. And now he's turned them loose in the vineyard. Of course, he was very depressed . . ."

While don Céspedes was talking, Pancho and Japonésita sat down and listened.

"What's that got to do with his being so sad?"

"Because he's going to die . . ."

"That's enough about don Alejo!"

That's enough. That's enough. Let him die. What did it matter to him, he and his charming wife can go to hell. Couldn't he and his buddy have a little bit of fun without having to hear about don Alejo this, don Alejo that. Misia Blanca can go to hell, Misia Blanca who had taught him to read and sometimes gave him sweets that she kept in a tea jar in the pantry. That pantry. Row after row of marmelade jars with white labels written in the angular script of nuns that he, Pancho Vega, was forever writing--Plum--Peach--Apricot--Raspberry--Choke Cherry--and the jars full of preserved pears and cherries in brandy and the plums floating in yellow syrup. And further on the rows of molds of white earthenware in the shape of a castle: apple or quince marzipan, and they always gave Moniquita the castle tower where the candy was clear and sparkling. They

can go to hell. Pancho's hand climbed up Japonesita's leg and no one said a word while Lucy's ears scanned the night, trying to discover another rider to revive her fear. He had paid off the whole debt and the truck was his. His red truck. Caress his red truck instead of Japonesita with her drygoods smell, and the harsh-voiced horn, just like his own voice Normita always said. His. More his than his wife. Than his daughter. If he wanted to, he could race it along the knife-straight highway, tonight, for instance, he could race it like a wild man, blowing the horn at anything he felt like, slowly squeezing the accelerator to invade the depths of the night and suddenly, just because, because don Alejo doesn't have any control over me now, I'd turn the wheel a little more, barely flex my wrists, but enough to make the truck go off the road, bounce and overturn and become a smear of smoking silent iron on the edge of the road. If I want to. If I feel like it, and I don't have to give explanations to anybody. Under his hand Japonesita's leg began to relax.

Japonesita was drinking a glass of wine. She hoped that Lucy would leave to dance with Octavio, so that she could drink it all on the sly. Wine. All of the men who came to her house smelled like wine and everything tasted of wine. During the vintage the wine odor invaded the entire town and then, the rest of the year, the heaps of grape pressings rotted by the warehouse doors. Revolting. She had the same wine smell, like the men, like the whores, like the town. There was so little else to do except drink wine. Like Cloty, who when she didn't have customers would say, listen Japonesita write me down for another bottle of the cheapest wine you have and then she got into bed and drank until the next day she was a total wreck, working like a mule from the crack of dawn, her nose red and her stomach queasy. But I never noticed the wine

smell on my mother. Although Big Japonesa was a great one for drinking, everyone knew that. She smelled like Flores de Pravia soap even though she had drunk quarts of wine in the parlor, and then my mother lit up like a torch and there was no stopping her from talking and laughing and dancing. How did she do it? Her warmth filled the bed when she fell into it and Japonesita had to undress her, she or Manuela. Even the tomb in which they laid her in San Alfonso was probably hot and she wouldn't ever feel that warmth again. Only Pancho's hand, abandoned on her thigh because he was dozing while Lucy danced glued to Octavio. But Pancho was drunk. Like every man she had seen in the house ever since she was born. And she played among pant legs under the table while they drank, listening to their crudeness and smelling their vomit in the patio, playing in the dirty sheets piled next to the wash tub, those sheets on which those men had slept with those women. But if Pancho's hand could excite her the way her mother could be excited, then she could get away from it all, her father told her. Who was that shadow who counted the dollars uselessly? The hand that moved along her thigh was telling her because now she wasn't afraid of it and Manuela had told her, had asked her who are you, and the hand that assaulted her thigh, while the man that it belonged to yawned, could give her the answer, that hand that was like the hands of all the men who had come to this house, it wanted to excite her, that blunt thumb with its eroded nail, yes, I saw it, those fingers covered with down and the square nail advancing and she didn't want it to but now yes, yes, to find out who you are Japonesita, now you'll know and that hand and that warmth from his heavy body and later, even if he goes away, at least something will remain from tonight . . .

"God but this is boring . . ."

Then he looked at the old man's face.

"Isn't that right, don Céspedes?"

He smiled.

"Listen, Octavio, let's go somewhere else . . ."

Don Céspedes asked him:

"Why?"

"There's no atmosphere here."

It was only then that he realized that Octavio was no longer there.

"What happened to Octavio?"

"He went inside with Lucy a little while ago."

He sat Japonesita on his knee.

"Well, I guess it beats eating mice."

She remained rigid. Pancho gave her a shove that almost toppled her to the floor.

"I'm fed up."

He started to walk around the tables.

"Shitpile of a whore house! There aren't even any whores. Where are the other girls? And that beat-up victrola. There's not even anything to stuff your gut. Let's look around a little. Bread: stale. Cold cuts . . . huh, half rotten. And what's this? Candy crusted with flies since the year one. Now Japonesita, dance for me at least. Get naked. Now how, when you're as stiff as a broom, how can you dance. Not like your mother, she was built like a barn but she was graceful. Like Manuela, they say . . ."

The same eyes. He remembered from last year Manuela's eyes looking at him and he looked back at those terrified eyes, shining between his hands that had clutched her neck and her eyes gazing at him like glowing orbs with the certainty that he was going to drown that shore of terror in the tides within him. He remained standing.

"And Manuela?"

Japonesita didn't answer.

"And Manuela, I said?"

"My father has gone to bed."

"Send for her."

"He can't. He's sick."

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Don't tell me the old whore is sick! Do you think I came here to look at your frigid little rabbit's face? No, I came to see Manuela, that's what I came for. Now, I said. Go call her. I want her to dance for me."

"Let go of me."

Pancho's eyes were scowling, his matted, confused, bloodshot eyes almost blind with rage. Tell her to come. I want to laugh. Everything can't be this sad in this town that don Alejo is going to tear down and plow under, surrounded by vineyards that are going to swallow it up, and tonight I'm going to have to go home and sleep with my wife and I don't want to, I want to have fun, Manuela has to come out and save us, there must be something besides this, she has to come out.

"Manuela . . ."

"You brute. Leave me alone."

"Tell her to come out, I said."

"And I said that my father can't."

"Don Alejo is your father. And mine."

But he looked at her eyes.

"That's wrong. Madame Manuela is your father."

"Don't call him that."

Pancho burst out laughing.

"At this late date, love?"

"Don't call him that."

XI

"And why not?"

Manuela walked to the center of the salon.

"Put "El relicario" on for me."

Back arched, one arm raised, snapping her fingers, she circled around in the empty space in the center, pursued by her shredded, mud-spattered red train. Applauding, Pancho walked over and tried to kiss her and hold her, laughing uproariously at this crazy old harridan, this raisin-wrinkled old queer, shouting yes, my love, now the party is really going to begin . . . but Manuela slipped away from him, snapping her fingers, weaving proudly among the tables before delivering herself up to her dance. Japonésita went over to stop her. Before Pancho slapped her away she managed to murmur:

"Go inside . . ."

"You dumb girl, how long am I going to have to put up with you? You go on if you want to. Isn't that right, Pancho? You're spoiling all the fun."

"Yeah, let her go . . ."

He dropped into a chair. From there he shouted that now it was starting to liven up, why weren't there more people, bring wine, pastry, a roast, everything they had, that he was paying for it all to celebrate . . . Lucy, my love, sit here and you buddy where have you been you left me all by myself at this funeral come on over don Céspedes don't be afraid

you'll get cold if you stay so far away and a whore came out attracted by the noise and she sat alone at the other table and revived the lantern flame and Cloty stationed herself beside the victrola to change the records staring at Manuela with astonished eyes.

"Dear God, what an old pro . . ."

In Talca they had told Cloty about Manuela's dances, but how could you believe it, the crazy thing was so old. She wanted to watch. They lit two lanterns on the table near the platform and then Pancho saw Manuela's eyes glow, flames, as he remembered them between his hands, and Japonésita's eyes glowed and he took a long drink because he didn't want to see and he poured more wine for Pancho, and for Lucy, everybody drink up, I'm paying. He held Manuela's head and forced her to take a long drink like his and Manuela wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Lucy was asleep. Don Céspedes was watching Manuela but as if he didn't see her.

"Go to it, Manuela my love, go to it . . . I want my farewell party to be a good one. And you're all going to be wiped out, whoosh . . . blown away, by you know who. Don Céspedes, you know that don Alejo is going to wipe out all of these imbeciles, just for the hell of it . . ."

In the fields that surrounded the town, the outline of the vineyards and the night under the moon were perfect: don Céspedes, his eyes opened wide, saw it. The methodical striation, the orderly pattern that controlled the village of demolished walls, the confusion of this place that the vineyards were going to erase--and this house, this small point where they, together, barely bruised the inflexible night: Manuela on the platform in her incandescent dress has to amuse them and kill the dangerously mercurial time that wants to devour them, Manuela demented on the platform: they applaud. They tap their heels on the dirt floor,

they slap the lame tables where the lanterns quiver. Cloty changes the record.

Pancho suddenly becomes quiet watching Manuela. Watching that thing dancing in the center of the room, all eye sockets, hollows, spasmodic shadows, that thing that is going to die in spite of the cries that it emits, that incredibly repulsive thing that gives sustenance to the party, that dances for him, he knows that he must touch it and caress it, he wants that writhing thing not to be alone there in the center but against his skin, and Pancho devotes himself to watching and caressing from a distance, that old queer who is dancing for him and he surrenders himself to her dance, and now it isn't funny anymore because it's as if he too were gasping for breath. Don't let Octavio know. He can't know. No one must know. They musn't see him being touched and fondled by Manuela's contortions and frantic hands that don't touch him at all, letting himself go, but from here, from the chair where he's sitting no one can see what's happening under the table, but it can't be it can't be and he takes one of Lucy's sleeping hands and puts it there, where it burns. Manuela's dance caresses him and he would like to grab her like this, like this, until she breaks, that corrupt body fluttering in his arms and me with Manuela who quivers, pressing her against me so she doesn't move so much, so she calms down, holding her, until she looks at me with those terrified flames and sinking my hands into her hot slimy viscera, clawing, leaving her flattened, harmless, dead: a thing.

Then Pancho roared. After all, he was a man, he was supposed to feel everything, even this, and no one, not Octavio or any of his friends would think him a freak. This was a party! A fling. He had met too many whorehouse fags in his life to be frightened by this ridiculous old woman, and they always fell in love with him--they felt his biceps, they

felt the harsh hair that grew at the base of his neck under his shirt. He had relaxed under Lucy's hand.

The music stopped.

"The victrola's wrecked."

Octavio went to try to fix it. He quickly dismantled it on the counter while Lucy and Japonesita watched. It didn't look as if it would work again. Manuela, sitting on Pancho's lap, gave him a glass of wine. She begged him to go away from here, no, no, that the three of them continue the party somewhere else. What were they doing here. Wasting time, getting bored, eating and drinking badly. Even the victrola was broken and who knows if anyone would ever be able to fix it. They didn't even make those prehistoric machines anymore, let's go, please let's go. In the truck they could go anywhere to continue the party, in a few minutes they could be in Talca and there, in Wooden Heart's house . . . no, let's go, love, take me away because I can't stand it anymore. I'm dying of boredom in this town and I don't want to die under a sagging adobe wall, I have a right to see a little bit of light, I've never left this hole, because they tricked me to make me stay telling me that Japonesita is my daughter, I ask you, how could I have a daughter when Japonesita is almost as old as I am, we're just girls. Take me away from here. They say that at Wooden Heart's house they have a spread about this time and they always have something good to eat, even ducks if the clients ask for them, and there are singers, I don't know if the Fariás sisters are there, I don't think so, because they'd be older than I am, somebody else, but it's all the same, as good with a harp and a guitar as the Fariás sisters used to be, may they rest in peace. Let's go now, take me away, look how that cruel girl tells everyone that she's my daughter to force me to stay, you saw how she treats me, like a servant

and I'm her own mother, and she never lets me go out except to go to Mass and to see Ludo. I want to go away with you and have the party somewhere that's fun and where we can laugh for a while . . .

"It's all screwed up."

"What's wrong with it?"

"The spring broke."

"Listen buddy, just leave it and we'll go somewhere else."

"Here?"

"Look at don Céspedes, he looks like a mummy. Wake up, old man . . ."

"Let's go to Wooden Heart's . . ."

They talked for awhile and paid Japonésita.

"Where are you going?"

"What's it matter to you, you mackerel?"

"Where are you going, Papa?"

"To whom are you speaking?"

"Don't play dumb."

"Who are you to give me orders?"

"Your daughter."

Manuela saw that Japonésita said it spitefully, to ruin everything and make them remember. But Manuela looked at Pancho and the two of them laughed so hard that they almost put out the lanterns.

"Sure, I'm your mother."

"No. My father."

But they were already leaving, Manuela, Pancho and Octavio, arm in arm and stumbling. Manuela was singing "El relicario," the others singing the chorus. The night was so clear that the walls cast sharp clear shadows over the puddles. The thicket grew next to the path and the blackberry's eternally renewed leaves covered the bulky shapes with their

graphics; precise, obsessive, maniacal, repetitious, minutely exact. They made their way to the truck parked on the corner. They walked on either side of Manuela, holding her waist. Manuela swayed toward Pancho and tried to kiss his mouth while he laughed. Octavio saw it and let go of Manuela.

"Come on, buddy, don't you be a fag too . . ."

Pancho also let go of Manuela.

"I didn't do anything. . ."

"Don't give me excuses, I saw . . ."

Pancho was afraid.

"Do you think I'd let this cruddy fag kiss me, you're out of your mind, buddy, would I do something like that? Let's ask Manuela, did you kiss me?"

Manuela didn't answer. It always happened with men like Octavio, why the hell did he have to snoop and why doesn't he clear out of here. He's going to ruin everything.

"Come on, fag, answer."

Pancho loomed over Manuela threateningly.

"Let's find out."

His fist was clenched.

"Don't be silly, boys, let's get on with the party."

"Did you kiss him or didn't you kiss him?"

"It was just a joke . . ."

Pancho hit her in the face while Octavio held her down. The blow wasn't well aimed because Pancho was drunk. Manuela looked around frantically, seeking the right moment to run.

"It's one thing to celebrate and live it up, but slobbering on my face is something else . . ."

"Stop. You're hurting me."

Standing in the mud in the road, paralyzed by Octavio, her arm twisted awry, Manuela woke up. He wasn't Manuela. He was Manuel González Astica. He. And because he was he they were going to hurt him and Manuel González Astica tasted terror.

Pancho gave him a shove that staggered him. Octavio, letting go of him, slipped and fell in the mud while Pancho leaned over to help him up. And Manuela, gathering his skirts up around his waist, fled toward the station. Familiar with the street, he evaded the ruts and stones while his pursuers stumbled with every step. Maybe they would lose sight of him. He had to run this way, toward the station, toward the outskirts of El Olivo because there on the other side of the town's limits don Alejo was waiting for him, and he was the only one who could save him. His face ached, his frail ankles, his bare feet that were cut by the rocks or a piece of glass or a tin can, but he had to keep on running because don Alejo promised him that he would be all right, that he would take care of him, that he needn't be afraid anymore if he stayed near him, it was a promise, almost an oath, and he had stayed and now they were coming to kill him. Don Alejo, don Alejo. He can help me. To the other side of El Olivo. Cross the vineyard like don Céspedes and tell him that first these wicked men try to take advantage of a girl and then . . . Tell him please defend me from the fear you told me nothing would ever happen to me that you would always protect me and that's why I stayed in this town and now you have to keep your word and protect me and take care of me and comfort me, I've never asked you before and I've never forced your word but now I do, you're the only one, you're the only one . . . don't ignore me don Alejo now that they're trying to kill me and I've come running to ask you to keep your promise . . . this way,

through the thicket behind the shed like a fox so that don Alejo can defend me with his shotgun. You can kill this pair of sick bastards and no one will say anything, after all you're a great man and you can do anything and fix it up later with the police.

He crosses the blackberry-covered fence without knowing that the thorns are destroying his dress. He crouches at the side of the canal. Further on is the vineyard: the filthy current separates him from the symmetrical safety of the vineyards. He has to cross it. Don Alejo is waiting for him. The houses of El Olivo surrounded by oaks and a tall pine like a belfrey there where the vineyards converge, waiting for him, don Alejo waiting for him with his sky-blue eyes. He has to rest a little. He listens. They aren't coming. He can't go further. He drops into the grass. Nothing, silence: even the natural sounds of the night have stopped. Manuela is panting, Ludovinia would say you're too old to be trotting around like this and it's true, true because his whole body aches--oh, his shoulder, how it hurts him, and his legs and suddenly the cold of the entire night, of the leaves and the grass and the water at his feet, if he could only cross this river, but how, how if he can barely move, sprawled out on the ground.

"My pretty little love . . ."

"Now you're going to get it . . ."

"No . . . no . . ."

He didn't have a chance to move before the men, bursting out of the blackberry bushes, threw themselves on him like starving creatures. Octavio, or maybe Pancho was the first, lashing at him with his fists . . . perhaps it wasn't them, but some other men who had pierced the thicket and found him and thrown themselves on him, their hot bodies writhing, gasping over Manuela who could no longer even scream, their bodies heavy,

stiff, the three of them one glutinous mass squirming like a fantastic animal with three heads and multiple limbs, wounded and seething, the three fused there in the grass by the vomit and the heat and the pain, looking for the one to blame, punishing him, punishing her, punishing them, the shuddering gratifications, the excruciating confusion, Manuela's frangible body doesn't resist anymore, it breaks under the weight, now it can't even moan from the pain, hot mouths, hot hands, slavering hard bodies wounding his, bodies that howl and insult and grope, breaking and tearing and raking and probing, that monster of three tortuous bodies, until now nothing is left and Manuela scarcely sees, scarcely hears, scarcely feels, sees, no, doesn't see, and they escape through the thicket and she is left alone by the river that separates her from the vineyards where don Alejo waits, benevolent.

### XIII

"That's Sultan."

Another bark, more distant.

"That's Moor. He likes to stretch out at night beside the wall of the black smith's shop because it gets hot in the sun and retains the heat . . . but there was no sun today. I wonder why he's roaming around there now."

Japonesita had sat down facing don Céspedes on the other side of the lantern's guttering flame. She reduced it until it was barely a point in the lamp's innards. She, too, listened to the dogs. Last night she and Manuela heard them so often that they could hardly sleep, but it was different now. Because after the rain the sky had cleared above the round moon and the dogs howled at it steadily, as if they were crying to it or begging it for something or serenading it, and since the moon was too far away to hear the, don Alejo's dogs kept on howling.

"That's Sultan again."

Everyone had gone to bed. Cloty had left the victrola on the table in front of don Céspedes, who kept unscrewing, opening, cutting with a kitchen knife that had a greasy wooden handle. They don't make parts for this kind of machine anymore. You ought to throw it in the canal. It's not good for anything.

"But we can't get along without a victrola."

"It won't be long before they put in the electricity."

"They're not going to now. Don Alejandro came to tell me today."

Don Céspedes sank into his chair, smaller than ever. He shoved aside the disorder of worn sprockets, screws, nuts, wires, and slid his glass nearer. It was almost empty. Only a couple of red fingers there in the bottom where the lantern flame was multiplying its reflection.

"It looks like one of those things that churches have."

"What things, child?"

"Those red things with light inside."

Better be getting back. Don Céspedes drank what was left. It was late. Or maybe it wasn't, because time had this eerie ability to stretch itself out, today seemed short, tomorrow endless, and at night you never knew the hour.

"Tomorrow I'm going to Talca to buy another one."

"Another what?"

"Another victrola. From one of those places that sells things second-hand, because in the downtown stores I'll never be able to find one like this that you have to crank. This one was my mother's. I know a place where they sell used ones and they don't charge much at all. The gentleman who owns it, I think someone brought him here one night. I'll see if he'll make me a good price."

"Negus . . . no, Othello . . ."

They listened. Now it was easy for Japonesita to sketch the whole countryside in her imagination, as if, like don Céspedes, she had suddenly acquired the power to unroll the country like a carpet so that it filled her head entirely.

"They're uneasy tonight."

Because there's a moon Japonesita said to herself, or maybe she said it aloud, or maybe don Céspedes leaning over the hearth said it, or maybe he just thought it and she sensed it.

"Why does he turn them loose?"

"He's in a funny mood. Last night he didn't go to bed. He spent all night roaming around the walks and under the oak. I watched him from the gate house in case anything happened, you know how bad people are and so many have sworn to get him. I stayed there without his seeing me, and he kept walking around and around and around, looking at everything as if he wanted to fix it all in his mind, hungrily I'd say, until when it was almost dawn Misia Blanca came out and said why don't you come to bed and then before he followed her in he turned the dogs loose in the vineyard."

"Yes. It was dawn when they started to bark."

"Who knows what's wrong with him."

"He's probably worrying about people like Pancho . . ."

"No, this was yesterday."

"It's the same thing. You can't trust anyone anymore."

The old man yawned. And Japonésita yawned. Tomorrow she was going to Talca. Like every Monday. Now she couldn't daydream about the Wurlitzer. So much the better. Try to be like don Céspedes who never daydreamed about anything, watching to see if anything happened, alert, hidden in the shadows. Alert, that's all, but no more about the Wurlitzer. Just the secondhand victrola to replace the one Pancho Vega broke. No, Pancho didn't break it. He had gone. He was never going to come back. Even better: he left tranquility behind, no expectations at all, which was better than tranquility, here in Estación El Olivo, until they finally plowed the whole town under. Except her house. Because no matter what don Alejo said she wasn't going to sell it. No sir. He can do whatever he wants to with the rest of the town but I'm staying here, right where I am. Even if fewer and fewer people come and everything comes to an end.

Endings are peaceful, and if things don't change they end, they always do. The terrible thing is hope. I'm going to Talca just like I do every Monday to make a deposit in the bank. And I'm going to come back after lunch with the week's groceries, the same things that I always get, sugar, tea, noodles, red chili, the same things that I always get.

Don Céspedes stood up, listening. Japonésita gathered up the screws, the sprockets, the broken spring, and tied them all up in her handkerchief to save. Who knows when she might be needing them.

"I have to go."

"Why?"

"I have to go see. They're barking a lot."

Japonésita smiled at him.

"How much is it?"

"Ten cents."

Don Céspedes paid. She put the money away. She knew everything, she saw everything, everything that she needed to see and know. This house. In the dusky adobe walls the spiders nestled in small holes filled with tapestries of pale slime.

"And Manuela?"

Japonésita shrugged.

"Nothing can happen to him?"

"What could happen."

"He's old."

"He might be old but every day he gets fonder of chasing around. Didn't you see him leave with Pancho and Octavio? He clutched at the party like a dying man. He was burning up inside. I know him. He's done this to me before. The men buy him drinks, he dances, he goes crazy and leaves with them . . . the wine excites him and they go to Talca and

sometimes further. One of these days something is going to happen to him, I tell myself that every time, but he always comes back. After three or four days. Sometimes after a week when he's wandered around going to whore houses in other towns where they know him, triumphing as he says, and he comes back here with a black eye or a pair of broken ribs because when the men get drunk they hit him because he's a queer. Why should I worry! He has nine lives like a cat. I'm tired of the whole thing. And as good as Pancho Vega is at celebrating they'll be roaming around for at least a week. The police know him and don't say anything and they bring him back without telling anyone about it and I give them a few drinks and it's like nothing has happened. But there might be a new policeman, one of those who clamps onto an idea and doesn't let go of it. And then, a couple of weeks in bed and I have to take care of him. Crying the whole time, saying he's going to die, that he's too old for these things, to forgive him, that he won't do it again, and he says he's going to throw away his Spanish dress that you saw, it's a rag, but he doesn't throw it away and he puts it in his suitcase. And then it's the same old story about the men here, the men there, they're all bad because they hit him and laugh at him and then my father cries and says what a horrible fate and he tells me what would become of me without my beloved daughter, his only support, and not ever to leave him. My God, don Céspedes! If you could see how he cries! It breaks your heart! And then of course after a few months he goes off and I lose him again. Now it's been over a year since he did it. I thought he wasn't going to leave again because the poor thing is such a wreck, but you saw what happened . . ."

Don Céspedes was listening to something else.

"What?"

Japonesita scrutinizes him, trying to divine what he hears.

"No, nothing, don Céspedes . . ."

She walked him to the door. She opened it a little, hardly at all, barely a crack for don Céspedes to slide through. A little wind and some stars filtered in and she huddled up in her pink shawl. Then she bolted the door shut. Kneading her hands she walked among the tables, putting out the lamps one by one.

" . . . three, and four . . ."

She's told them that she doesn't like for them to light so many lamps when there are so few people, they can't make a profit. The air is stained by the reeking carbide. Of course, the dance . . . oh well. She went out onto the patio. She doesn't know what time it is, but those devils keep howling out there in the vineyard. It must be around five because she hears Nelly cry and Nelly always whimpers a little before the dawn. She went to her room and got into bed without even lighting a candle.