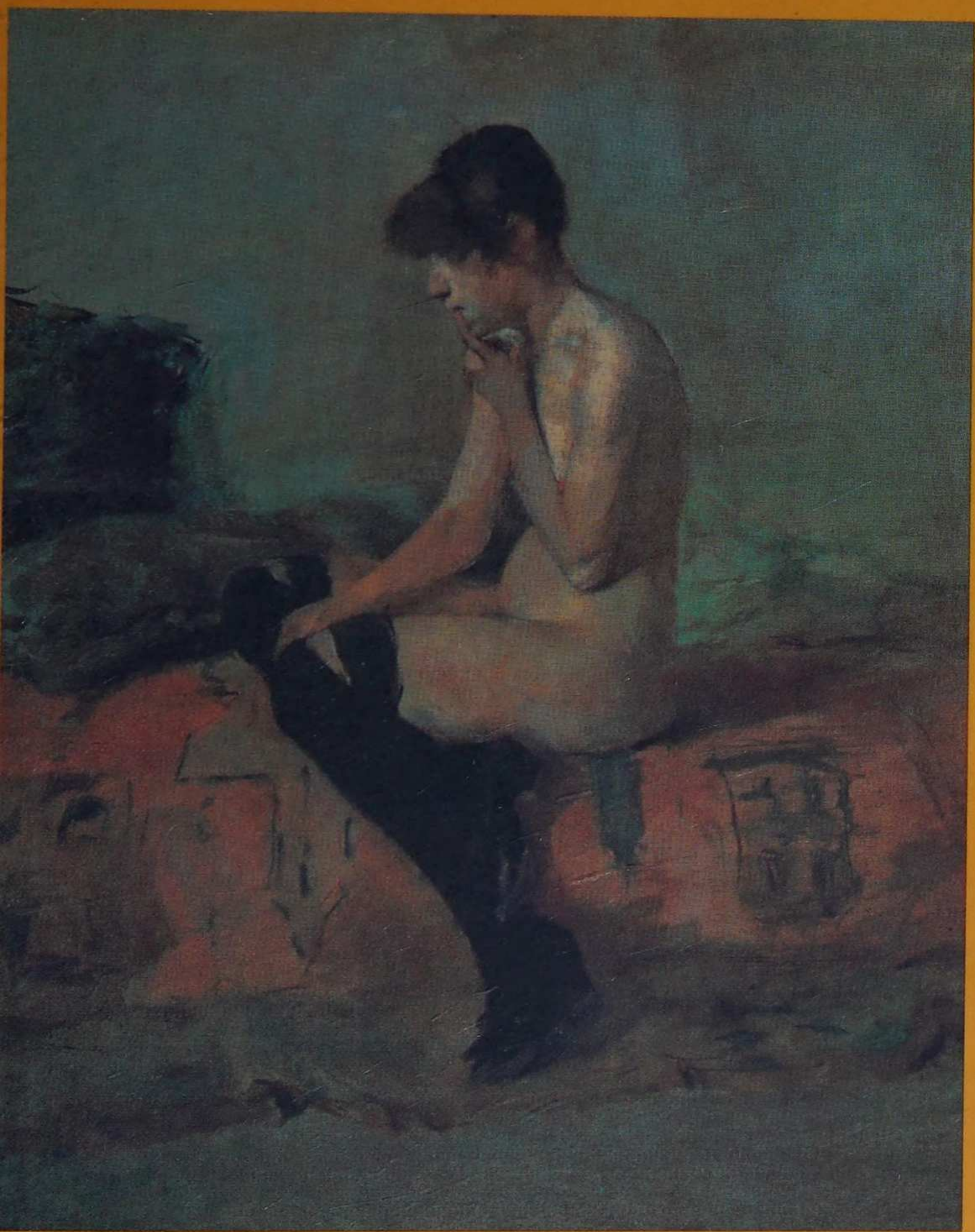


HELL HAS



NO
LIMITS

José Donoso

Translated by Suzanne Jill Levine

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*Translated from the Spanish by
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FAUSTUS

First will I question thee about hell:
Tell me, where is the place that men call hell?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Under the heavens.

FAUSTUS

Ay, so are all things else; but whereabouts?

MEPHISTOPHELES

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*

LA MANUELA forced open her bleary eyes, stretched briefly and, twisting away from the sleeping Japonesita, reached for the clock. Five to ten. Eleven o'clock mass. Sticky films again sealed her eyes as she put the clock back on the box by the bed. Half an hour at least before her daughter would ask for breakfast. She ran her tongue over her toothless gums: hot sawdust, and breath like rotten eggs. From drinking so much new wine to hurry the men out and close early. She gave a start—of course!—she opened her eyes and sat up in bed: Pancho Vega was in town. She covered her shoulders with the rumpled pink shawl from her daughter's side of the bed. Yes. Last night they came to tell her. Be careful, the truck had been seen around, his snub-nosed red truck, with the double tires on the back wheels. At first la Manuela didn't believe it because she knew that, thank God, Pancho Vega had other interests now, near Pelarco, where he was hauling grape-skins. But later, when she had almost forgotten what they said about the truck, she heard the horn by the post office on the next street. He must have honked it for almost five minutes, that hoarse, per-

sistent horn, enough to drive any woman crazy. He always honked like that when he was drunk. The idiot thought it was funny. Then la Manuela went to tell her daughter they better close early, why take chances, what happened last time might happen again. Japonesita warned the girls to finish up quickly with the customers or send them away: remember last year, when Pancho Vega came to town for harvest and invited himself in with a bunch of roughnecks, all of them full of wine...there might have been bloodshed if Alejandro Cruz hadn't arrived in the nick of time. He made them behave in a civil way, so they got bored and left. But they said that afterward Pancho Vega was real mad and went around swearing: "I'll screw the two of them, Japonesita and her fag of a father...."

La Manuela got up and started to put on her trousers. Pancho might still be in town.... Those hands, hard and heavy like stone, like iron, she remembered them all right. Last year the beast got it into his head that she had to dance flamenco. He heard that when the party warmed up with the new wine, and when all the customers were like pals, la Manuela would put on a pretty red dress with white polka dots, and dance flamenco. You bet! Big brute! Think I'd dance for you, just look at you! I do that for gentlemen, for my friends, not for stinking bums like you, stuck-up peasants who think they're big shots because they have a week's pay in their pockets...their poor wives in the shanties, breaking their backs over laundry so the kids won't starve to death, while the sports are out drinking wine and punch and

even hard liquor...no sir. And since she had one too many, that's exactly what she told them. Then Pancho and his pals got angry. They started by barricading the place and smashing bottles and smearing the bread and cold cuts and wine on the floor. Then while one of them twisted her arm, the others pulled off her clothes, and trying to force her into the famous flamenco dress they ripped it in two. They had begun to bother Japonesita when Don Alejo arrived, like in a miracle, as if they had invoked him. Such a good man. Why he even looked like the Good Lord, with his China-blue eyes and his snowy mustache and eyebrows.

She bent down to fish her shoes out from under the bed and sat on the edge to put them on. She had slept badly. It wasn't just the wine, which made her feel bloated. But also, God knows why, Don Alejo's dogs had been howling all night long in the vineyard.... She would be yawning all day long, with no strength for anything, and pains in her legs and back. She tied the laces slowly with double bows...if you got down on your knees, there, way back under the bed, was the suitcase. A cardboard job, with peeling paint and white mouldy edges, held together with rope: in it was everything she owned. And her dress, or rather what was left of her lovely dress. Today, when she opened her eyes, no, wrong, last night, when they told her Pancho Vega was in town, God knows why, she was tempted to take the dress out again. She hadn't touched it for a year. Who does she think she's kidding with her sour wine, dogs, rib pains? She had insomnia! Quietly, so she wouldn't upset her daughter,

she bent down again, pulled out the suitcase and opened it. A total loss. No use touching it even. But she did touch it. She examined the bodice...hey, it's not so bad, the neckline, armpit...it can be fixed. I'll sew the whole afternoon in the kitchen so I won't get stiff. Fiddle with the skirt and train, try it on so the girls can tell me where it has to be taken in since I lost six pounds last year. But I don't have thread. Tearing a strip from the end of the train she put it in her pocket. As soon as she served her daughter breakfast she'd drag herself to Ludovinia's to see if she could find the same color red thread among her odds and ends. Or something like it. You can't be choosy in a town like Estación El Olivo. She pushed the suitcase back under the bed. Yes, Ludo's, but before going out she better make sure Pancho was gone, and if he really had been in town last night. After all, the honking might just be a dream, like for the past year when she sometimes thought she heard his rough voice or felt his brutal hands, or it could be that she only imagined last night's honking, remembering the horn from last year. Who knows. Shivering, she put on her shirt. She wrapped the shawl around her, put the dentures in and walked out into the patio with the dress on her arm. Raising her little, wrinkled raisin face, her black and hairy old mare's nostrils flared as she detected the unmistakable aroma of the new harvest in the cloudy morning air.

Half-naked, carrying a sheet of newspaper in her hand, Lucy came out of her room like a sleepwalker.

"Lucy!"

Lucy's in a hurry: new wines are so treacherous.

She locked herself in the outhouse that straddled the sewer at the end of the patio, next to the chicken coop. No, I won't send Lucy. Clotilde's better.

"Hey, Cloty!"

...with her stupid face and skinny arms deep 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 unlucky whore. That's what she said to Japonesita when they took Clotilde in a little over a month ago. And so old. Who would want to go upstairs with her? But drunk, at night, flesh starving for other flesh, for any flesh that's hot and can be bitten and squeezed and licked, they don't know or care what they go to bed with—dog, hag, anything will do. And Clotilde worked like a dog, never complaining, not even when they made her haul the Coca Cola crates from one place to another. Last night she had it bad. The fat yokel was eager enough, but when Japonesita announced that she was closing up, instead of going with Cloty to her room he said he was going out to vomit and he never came back. Fortunately he had already paid for his drinks.

"I want her to do an errand. Don't you realize that if Pancho's around I can't go to mass? Tell Nelly to check every single street and to tell me if she sees the truck. She knows which, the red one. I can't miss Sunday mass!"

Clotilde dried her hands on her apron.

“I’ll go right now.”

“Did you start the fire in the kitchen?”

“Not yet.”

“Then treat me to a few coals so I can make the kid’s breakfast.”

Squatting over Clotilde’s stove to scoop some coals onto a flattened tin can, la Manuela felt her spine creak. 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, afraid of so many things, the way she coughed, the bile in her mouth and the cramps in her gums, the early morning when everything is so different than at night when she’s cradled in the sooty brightness of the carbon lamp and wine and dancing eyes, the conversations of friends and strangers at the tables, and the silver that falls dollar after dollar into her daughter’s purse, which by now must be good and full. She opened the door to the big room, set the coals on the ashes in the stove and put on the kettle. She cut a loaf of bread in half, buttered it, and while she got the saucer, spoon, and cup ready she sang soft and slowly:

...then dawn brought the day
your boat left the bay....
And now I dream
Aaaaaaaahhh me....

She might be old but she would die singing, and with her feathers on. In the suitcase under the bed, besides

her flamenco dress she had an old moth-eaten feather boa. Ludo had given it to her years ago as a consolation because some man had ignored 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 was no sweat off her back to put on the feathers even though they made her look like a scarecrow and didn't have anything to do with the flamenco number. Just to make people laugh, that's all, the laughter all around me and caressing me and the applause and compliments and lights, come have a drink with us honey, whatever you want, anything you want, just so you'll 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 start pawing you. And they leave everything smelling of engine oil and garages and cheap cigarettes and sweat...and at dawn the wine dregs souring in the bottom of the glasses on the seven dirty tables, the lopsided, scratched tables, everything too clear, too glaring this morning and every morning. And there's a puddle by the chair where Clotilde's fat man had been sitting because the lout spit all night long—an abscessed tooth, he said.

The kettle started to boil. Today without fail she would talk to Japonesita. She was too old to be fixing breakfast every morning after working all night, with gusts of wind blowing into the parlor through the cracks in the loose siding and where the shingles had fallen from the earthquake. Clotilde was having such poor luck in the parlor that they might as well use her for a servant. And Nelly

for the 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, the slut, and 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 real 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 soft, white thighs rubbing together when she dances. That that's what he pays for. Not like Japonesita who even if she wanted to be a whore, poor thing, she's so skinny she'd never make it. But as a manager, Japonesita is tops. There's no denying it. 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's hoarded. She never tells me, even though it's as much mine as Japonesita's. And what good did it do them, Japonesita is such a miser that no one gets any good out of it. She never buys herself a dress. A dress! Why, she wouldn't even buy another bed so that we can each have our own. Like last night la 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, at her age, sleeping with a pubescent female was no fun.

She put the saucer and bread on top of the steaming cup and walked outside again. Clotilde, scrubbing away, yelled to her that Nelly had gone to look. La Manuela

didn't answer or thank her. Instead, coming over to see if Clotilde was doing the other whores' laundry too, she raised those thread-thin eyebrows, leered in mock passion, and warbled:

Havanaaaaaa for a
Niiiiiiiiiiiiight

2

THE HOUSE was sinking. One day they realized that the sidewalk was no longer even with the dirt floor, but higher, so they tried to check it by installing a stone slab, with two wedges, in the doorway. It was no use. As the years passed, the sidewalk, God knows how, rose almost imperceptibly, while the floor kept sinking. Maybe it was from wetting and flattening it so much for dancing, or from the yokels grinding the floor into a dirt pit with their stomping feet. The stone slab, which was slowly wearing away, had never been level and now its cracks collected burnt matches, mint wrappers, scraps of paper, toothpicks, lint, and buttons. Sometimes grass sprang up around the edges.

La Manuela stooped in the doorway to pick up some scraps. She was in no hurry. It was still a half-hour before mass. A harmless half-hour, not a care in the world according to Nelly's report: not one truck, not even a car in the whole town. It was a dream, that's all. She couldn't even remember who told her about the truck. And the dogs. Why would they be running loose in the

vineyard now, when there's not so much as one bunch of grapes left to steal? Okay. Five minutes to Ludovina's, a quarter of an hour to find the thread, and five minutes for nothing special, to drink some tea or to stop and gossip with someone on the corner. And then, her mass.

Just to make sure, she looked up the street toward the poplar grove that marked the edge of town, three blocks away. Not a soul in sight. Of course. Sunday. Even the kids, who are always screaming their heads off, playing ball in the road, are probably waiting for handouts at the chapel door just in case some rich man's car drives up. The poplars trembled. If the wind blew any harder the town would be invaded by yellow leaves for at least a week and the women would be sweeping them all day out from everywhere, the street, the alleyways, doors and even from under the beds, to gather them in heaps and burn them...the blue smoke hovering in putrid clarity, creeping catlike against the adobe houses, coiling into the cavities of crumbling, weed-infested walls, the blackberry thickets 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 la Manuela's hand grasped the piece of dress like someone who rubs a charm to urge it to perform its magic.

Only a block more to the station, the end of this side of town, and then Ludo's house just around the corner, always cozy and warm with the stove lit since early morning. She hurried past the houses in that neighborhood, the worst in town. Very few were occupied because the

coopers moved their businesses to Talca long ago; now, with the good roads, you could get from the country to Talca in no time. It wasn't that the other side of town, where you have the chapel and post office, had better houses or more people, but after all, it is downtown. Of course, in better days this was downtown because of the railroad station. Now it's nothing more than a pasture divided by a line, a dead traffic light, a cracked concrete platform, collapsed among the fennels under a pair of crazy-looking eucalyptus trees, an antediluvian threshing machine on whose rusty orange iron the children played, as if with a tame dinosaur. Further on, behind the moldy wooden shed, more brambles and a canal separated the town from Don Alejandro's vineyards. La Manuela stopped on the corner to look at them for a moment. Vineyards, vineyards, and more vineyards, as far as the eye could see, all the way to the mountains. Perhaps they weren't all Don Alejandro's. If not, they were sure to belong to his relatives, his brothers and brothers-in-law, or at least his cousins. All of them Cruzes. The network of vineyards converged around the houses bordering the town, surrounded by 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. La 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 produce. And such a good man, Don Alejo. What would become of the townspeople without

him? Word has it that the gentleman is now going to see to it for sure that we get electric light in town. So cheerful and not at all pompous, considering he's a senator and all. Not like the others, who think a harsh voice and a hairy chest give them the right to insult a person. But who can match a man like Don Alejandro? It's true that in the summer, when he'd come to town to hear mass with Misia Blanca and they'd meet by chance on the street, he'd pretend not to see her. Although sometimes, when Misia Blanca wasn't looking, he winked at her.

Ludo served her tea and pastry. La Manuela settled into a chair next to the stove 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. And la Manuela had told her so many times not to be a dope and to go buy a new pair of glasses. But she never did. When Acevedo died, the moment before they sealed the coffin, Ludo almost went crazy and wanted to throw something in that would accompany her husband through all eternity. The only thing she could think of were her eyeglasses. Naturally. She had been Misia Blanca's servant when Moniquita died of typhus: the missus, desperate, cut off her blond braid that was down to her knees and threw it into the coffin. All of Misia Blanca's hair grew back. But for imitating her, stupid old Ludo lost her eyesight. For Acevedo's sake, she said, he was always so jealous. So that she'd never look at another man. When he was alive, he wouldn't let her have friends of either sex. Just la Manuela. And when they

kidded him by reminding him that no matter how things seemed, la Manuela was still Japonesita's father, the cooper just laughed in disbelief. But Japonesita grew up and there was no doubt about it: skinny, dark, bucktoothed, with stiff hair just like la Manuela's.

With the passing years Ludo had become forgetful and repetitive. Yesterday, Ludo told her that when Misia Blanca came to see her she brought a message from Don Alejo saying that he wanted to buy her house, funny isn't it Don Alejo mentioning that he's interested in my property again but I don't see why and I don't want to leave, I want to die here. And on and on. It's no fun gossiping with her anymore. She didn't even remember what stuff she stashed away in all those boxes, packages, bundles, tubes that she hid in her drawers or under the bed or in corners, covered with dust behind the dresser, stuck between the wardrobe and the wall. Why, she's forgotten everything, everything except Don Alejo's family, she knows all their names right down to his great grandchildren. And now she can't even remember who Pancho is.

"What do you mean, you don't remember. I talk about him all the time."

"You talk about so many men all the time."

"You know, that big hunk with the mustache and the red truck who came to town so much last year. 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 was such a pest. That time they tore up my flamenco dress."

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

"He owes Don Alejo some money."

La Manuela looked at her.

"Who?"

"The one you were talking about."

"Pancho Vega?"

"Yeah, that one."

La 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 Vega that passed away who was Don Alejo's head 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 looking to buy a truck, even though it had been a long time since the boy had been in town and his late father had passed away and Berta too, he told him to come around, this kid, and he lent him some money, just like that, without a signature or anything, so that the boy could pay the first installment for his truck...."

“So he bought the truck with Don Alejo’s money?”

“And he hasn’t paid him back.”

“Not a cent?”

“I don’t know.”

“He hasn’t been around 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. Or at least, as afraid. It was as if the word would help her break open a hard and sinister scab of Pancho’s, that would still be hard and sinister, but in a different way. What a pity all that honking was just a dream...then why fix her red dress? She uncoiled the thread on her finger. What was she going to do all afternoon? Rain. Her bones told her so. Go see Ludo? Why? If she spoke to her about Pancho Vega again she was sure to say:

“You’re too old to be thinking about men and traipsing around. Stay home and relax, woman, and wrap your feet up, don’t you know that at our age the only thing a girl can do is to wait for death to carry her away?”

But death is a woman like herself and 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’d shiver from vintage time until the

pruning season, she would start saying that she'd like to get married. And have children. Children! And yet here she is, over eighteen years old and she hasn't gotten her period yet. Amazing. And then Japonesita would say no. She didn't want to be pushed around. And since she owned a whorehouse she might as well be a whore too. But let a man touch her and she'd run like mad. Of course, with that face she didn't have much choice. La Manuela had begged her so many times to make up her mind. Ludo said that she'd be better off getting married, because if nothing else, Japonesita was a hard worker. She should marry a real stud who would get her glands worked up and make love to her. But Pancho was so rough and so drunk that he couldn't excite anyone. Nor could Don Alejandro's grandsons. Sometimes, in the summer, they'd get bored with their country homes and with doing nothing and they'd come in for a few drinks: unshaven, four-eyed, quiet, but very young and so busy thinking about their exams that they'd leave after barely drinking anything and without getting involved with anybody. 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. That was one destiny.

They didn't understand her, la Manuela told herself on the way to chapel, the red thread wrapped around her little finger again. She was going to take the dress in here, at the waist, and there, in the back. And if she lived in a big city, you know, where they say they have carnivals, and all the fags go out dancing in the street all

dressed in their finery and having a great time and no one says anything, she would dress up fit to kill. But the men here 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 the presence of mind to feel the brute over: he wasn't carrying anything. Idiot. They talk against poor fags so much and we haven't done a thing to them...but when he grabbed me with the other men and squeezed me hard, with good intentions of course, who's going to stop and think how ugly or how old a woman is. And him so mad because a girl's a fag, heaven knows what he said he'd do to me. Well let's see, scoundrel, swindler. It makes me want to put the dress on right in front of him, just to see what he'd do. Like if he were in town right now. I'd put on my dress and go out with flowers behind my ear, with makeup and all, and everybody in the street saying hello, Manuela, my, you're looking swell today sweetheart, want me to come along.... Triumphant. And then Pancho, real angry, runs into me on a corner and says you make me sick, go take that off, you're a disgrace to the town. And just when he's about to hit me with those paws 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 throughout 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, simply lovely, and they go get 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 lend you my room and anything you want, just ask, and don't you worry because Alejo is going to throw all the bad people out of town, just wait and see.

“Manuela.”

A crossing. Her feet in a mud puddle in the middle of the street. A white mustache, vicuña cape, China-blue eyes under the hat brim, and behind, four black dogs in single file. La Manuela drew back.

“Heavens, Don Alejo, how can you come out on the street with those beasts. Hang on to them. I'm getting out of here. Hang on to them.”

“They won't hurt you unless I tell them. Easy, Moor....”

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

La Manuela was backing off to the other sidewalk.

“Where are you off to? You just stepped into a puddle.”

“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 must be going to beg forgiveness for your sins, you shameless....”

“Sins! Wishful thinking! The spirit's willing, but look how skinny I am. A Saint: Virgin and Martyr....”

“Haven’t they been saying that you’ve got Pancho Vega under your spell?”

“Who said that?”

“He did. You better watch out.”

The dogs stirred behind Don Alejo.

“Down Othello, Moor....”

Water soaking her socks, 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 lean on him to keep from falling. From the other side she called to Don Alejo:

“Watch out for whom?”

“For Pancho. They say you’re all he ever talks about.”

“But he never comes to 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 Talca to see the doctor? And do you know what he told me?”

“The doctor, Don Alejo? But you’ve never looked better....”

“You just finished telling me I looked 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 for smart alecks on the street. It was too cold. God would forgive her this

time. She might catch cold. At her age, the most sensible thing was to get into bed. Yes. Get into bed. Forget about the flamenco dress. Get into bed, if Japonesita didn't have something for her to do, God knows she's always yelling at her to do something or other. Last year Pancho twisted her arm so hard he almost broke it. Now it was hurting her. She didn't want to have anything to do with Pancho Vega. Not a thing.

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

"Sure. You're not the one he's going to 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 nothing but the best, ah...."

Don Alejo, followed by his dogs, was walking a little ahead of la Manuela on the other side of the street and talking. The last call for eleven o'clock mass. He had to shout to make himself heard because he was near the Guerreros' wagon, 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 have to talk to her. I'll come by this afternoon. And I want to talk to you, too."

La 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.”

3

MISS LILA looked at Pancho Vega through the window grille, but in spite of the things he was saying she didn't lower her eyes; she had known him too long to be shocked. Besides, it's good to see this big clown again.

"Why you're just like a sailor now, Pancho, only on land, what with your truck and your freight trips: a woman in every port, I'll bet poor Emita never sees hide nor hair of you. 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 grille.

"Cut it out, silly."

Miss Lila motioned 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 inside 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 got off his bale and leaned on the doorpost opposite

Octavio, to watch the street. Across the road, a few people were hanging around the other shed, the one that was a chapel on Sundays and 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 upset the religious ceremonies: the present chapel space was more than enough for the parishioners, especially after harvest when the outsiders and the owners' families would leave. Pancho turned around and lit a cigarette.

"Did the priest from San Alfonso arrive?"

Don Céspedes shook his head.

"They probably had car trouble."

Octavio slapped the old man's shoulder.

"Don Céspedes, you old fool. That priest was probably sleepy this morning and stayed glued between the sheets. They say he danced all night long at old Wooden Heart's house in Talca...."

Miss Lila stuck her head out.

"Atheists! You'll go to hell for that."

Pancho laughed while Don Céspedes took his hand out of his cape and crossed himself. Octavio went and sat on a bale. Don Céspedes looked at the sky.

"It's going to rain."

He followed Octavio and sat higher up on the pyramid of bales, dangling his dark, dwarfed feet, deformed by scars and dirt in their muddy sandals.

Through the grille the conversation continued.

"Didn't you sleep with Japonesita last night?"

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

“Well, you do overdo it....”

“The worst part is that I’m in love.”

Miss Lila said sure, Japonesita was a good girl and all, but is she ugly, and no taste at all in clothes. She looks as if she came from an orphanage, with those baggy pants down to her ankles that she wears under her apron. Of course, it’s strange that she does that kind of work, since everyone knows she’s a decent girl. Yes, yes, she inherited the house from her mother, but she could sell it. When she was a kid, Big Japonesa sent her to school. It was right here, in the shed, before Don Alejo bought it. Anyway, my little sister told me that, even though the other girls and the teacher, too, were nice to her, she’d run and hide in the station until school was over and Big Japonesa never found out, and Japonesita never went out to play or anything and wouldn’t even talk to anybody.... All the decent folk feel sorry for Japonesita, such a queer little thing. And for the time being, Miss Lila keeps an eye out for Japonesita so that she can greet her as nicely as possible whenever she sees her on the street. It’s only fair, isn’t it?

“Yes, but I’m not in love with her....”

Miss Lila looked confused.

“Who is it then?”

“It’s la Manuela....”

Everyone laughed, even Lila.

“Pigs, bums. You ought to be ashamed....”

“It’s just that she’s so cute....”

The couple began to whisper again through the bronze bars. Don Céspedes got down from the bales

again and stationed himself in the doorway, looking at the sky.

“Christ! Here comes the rain....”

The people waiting near the chapel door took shelter under the eaves, plastered to the wall with their hands in their pockets, behind the curtain of rain that fell from the tile roof. The Guerreros' horse was soaked in a second; the Valenzuelas, who had just arrived, waited for mass in their Ford. Don Alejo came running into the post office, his four black dogs behind him. He brushed the water off his cape and hat. The dogs shook themselves violently and Octavio climbed further up to avoid being soaked too. Then they pranced around 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: the conversation had come to a halt, but he still had his back turned.

“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 his dogs before they could attack.

“Here, Moor....”

“Some joke, Don Alejo....”

“You could at least answer when someone speaks to you.”

“People shouldn’t make jokes like that.”

Octavio looked at them from the top of the bales, near the crossbeam that supported the roof. Don Alejo walked through the storeroom toward Pancho, surrounded by the leaping dogs. The only things alive in the whole place, where even the lime on the walls was brownish, were the blue of Don Alejo’s eyes and the red flames of his dogs’ slavering tongues.

“And how about your little jokes? Do they seem so trivial to you, you ungrateful bum? Do you think I don’t know why you came? I got you a job hauling grapes, but a few days ago, I personally called Augusto to tell him to take it away from you.”

“We’d better talk somewhere else....”

“Why? Don’t you want people to know that you’re an ungrateful scoundrel? Besides, it’s raining and I don’t want to get any wetter, the doctor told me to take care of myself. Don Céspedes, could you do me a favor and run to the butcher, the one just down a ways, and tell Melchor to send me a few good scraps so these dogs will quiet down. And who’s that?”

Octavio quickly jumped down from the bales. He cleared his throat while he dusted his dark suit and adjusted the tie that had slipped inside his shirt. Pancho answered.

“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 restlessness of the four black dogs, their

magnificent tails, and pulsating throats, filled the shed. Don Alejo's deft eyes withstood Pancho's black look, forcing it to stay fixed under the shadowy eyelashes. 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 an ungrateful scoundrel 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 let me talk to him like that. Now there was a man. The son who was going to take after him! I lent you that money for him and he's the only reason I haven't had you put away. Get it?"

"I didn't sign anything."

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

"You lying 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, I know you as if you were my own. It's obvious, they canceled your freight contracts. So you've come with your tail between your legs to pay me, so that I'll get them back for you. Give me the money, you ungrateful bum...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 the 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 slowly counted them. 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 on time, you understand. And listen, I want you to understand something anyone less stupid would already know: I pull a lot of strings, so be careful. You’re not getting away with anything just because you didn’t sign a piece of paper; if I gave you some freedom it was to see how you’d act, although knowing you like I do, I should have known better and let you sweat it out by yourself. Now you know. Next time tell me you can’t pay me on time, act like a man, and then 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 neighborhood, Don Alejo.”

“Another lie. When are you going to break that damn habit? They told me you were seen several times in your brother-in-law’s gas station on the north-south road. Would it have done you any harm to drive the mile and a half here or to the outskirts of town? Or don’t you know the way to the house where you were born?”

No. He didn’t want to have anything to do with that house or with this lousy town. It pained him to give his money to Don Alejo. It meant recognizing the old link,

and being chained again to everything he had managed to forget for a while, like a person who whistles to forget his fear of the dark; for five months he had the strength not to pay him, to resist him and save the money, to dream about using it for other things as if he had the right to spend it. It was a little extra money for the house that Ema wanted to buy in that new district in Talca, the one with the houses that looked alike, only painted different colors so that they don't look alike, and when Ema wants something there's no stopping her. Fortunately, Pancho didn't spend much time at home now with all his jobs, sometimes he even preferred to park the truck on the side of the road and sleep there. That's why, she was always saying, that's why I need the house, I almost never see you and how do I know what you're up to, the child and I should have some compensation.... And when I take to bed with my ulcer, a fire that burns me here, an animal that roots and gnaws and tears and sucks me, here, inside, and I can't sleep or talk or move or drink or eat, or hardly even breathe; sometimes when everything is hard and cramped and I'm afraid 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 moaning, repentant child, but she knows he'll still do the same things the same old way. That's why Pancho needs the house. Sometimes he drives by the neighborhood in his truck to see how fast the "For Sale" signs are disappearing. Now there are no more pink ones left, just

blue and yellow, and Ema wanted a pink one. What are a few hundred dollars to Don Alejo?

“So why don’t you call Don Augusto back so I can have those good freight routes again?”

“What was so hard about settling your accounts with me, if the freights were so good?”

Pancho didn’t answer. The rain was running the puddles together in the road: 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 had been born on his land.... They said he was Don Alejo’s son. But then they’d say that about everybody, Miss Lila, Japonesita, and God 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 so are my eyebrows, sometimes they take me for a Turk. I don’t owe him anything. As a boy his work was driving a tractor and later he learned, on the sly, to drive the car, stealing it from Don Alejo with the help of the gentleman’s grandsons who were the same age.... That’s all. Learning to drive was all that he owed Don Alejo. Plus the last payments for the truck. Until his debt was settled, keep it quiet. Let Ema wait. Maybe another neighborhood like that one, and then everything he wanted, freedom, being on his own, not having to make accounts to anyone...that’ll be the last of this lousy town for me. But the old man had to say I was behind in my

payments in front of Octavio. So that later Octavio might mention it and Ema's stuck-up brothers...no, not Octavio, he's my friend...the rest of them, yeah, they'll gossip about me all over the place.

"So? What was so hard about it?"

Don Céspedes came back 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 drooling, pimply palates, yellow eyes flashing in narrow faces. The men stuck to the walls. The meat devoured, the dogs began to dance, not around Don Céspedes who had fed them, but 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, black as wolf shadows with their bloody fangs and heavy ferocious paws of the purest blood line.

"No. Not until you pay me 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, just wait, we'll straighten this

thing out between ourselves. But boy, this old rooster was tough. 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 made poor Blanca very happy to see you so pious, such a pretty little boy. And those long confessions, we almost died laughing.... How about you, Don Céspedes?”

“Of course, boss....”

“See? Don Céspedes goes to mass.”

Pancho looked at Octavio, who shook his head.

“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.”

True. Better not start anything now. Better go to mass without arguing. Can’t do me any harm. When I’m home on Sunday, Ema dresses Normita 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 makes no 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:

“No. I’m not going.”

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

“Ah. I almost forgot. They told me you’ve been talking about la Manuela, saying you’re going to get her or something, don’t let me find out that you’ve gone to Japonesita’s to bother them, they’re good people. You’ve been warned.”

He walked out 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.

JAPONESITA couldn't guess at first why Don Alejo wanted to speak to her so urgently. When la Manuela gave her the message, she was surprised, the senator would always drop in without warning like a man in his own home. But soon she realized that so much protocol could mean only one thing: he was finally going to tell her the result of his efforts to bring electricity to town. He had been promising to get it done for a long time. But the answer to the request was always put off from year to year, who knows how many now, and it was never the right moment to approach the authorities. The Commissioner was always away on a trip or we're already spending too much 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 Place of Arms 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 talked he ate almost all of them himself, crushing the shells which stuck to the hair

of his vicuña cape as they fell, there where his belly protruded a little. He said this time for sure: everything was ready. He had an interview with the Commissioner in half an hour and he was going to throw the Commissioner's neglect of Estación El Olivo back in his face. Japonesita had wandered around the square 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 he didn't even pass through, not once. She resigned herself to wondering, and more waiting.

But today's the day. Finally. Japonesita stayed in the kitchen after lunch, while all the whores crawled back into their caves and la Manuela took Lucy to her room. Instead of adding another log to revive the remaining cinders in the stove, she kept creeping closer and closer to the fading fire, burrowing deeper and deeper into her shawl: my bones are blue from cold. It was already getting dark out. The rain kept coming and the water slowly covered the brick stepping stones that Cloty had placed across the patio. On the other side, facing the kitchen, Lucy's door was open and Japonesita watched her light a candle. From time to time she looked over to see what they were laughing about. The last outburst, the loudest yet, was because la Manuela, with his mouth full of hairpins from the modern hairdo he was giving Lucy, couldn't help laughing and scattered the pins on the floor, which kept the two of them on their knees quite awhile.

There was still some light outside. But it was reluctant, and too feeble to defeat the kitchen's darkness. Japonesita reached out to touch one of the burners: a trace of heat. All this was going to change with electricity. This awful weather. The water invaded the kitchen through the adobe wall, forming a mud that stuck to everything. Maybe then she could stand the aggressive cold that seized her body with the first winds, cramping and squeezing it. Maybe the humidity would stop mounting from May to June to July, until by August the scummy mildew seemed to completely cover her body, her face, her clothing, her food, everything. Electricity would bring the town back to life as in the days of her mother's youth. Last Monday, while she waited for Don Alejo, she wandered through a store where they sold Wurlitzers. She had often stopped at the window to look at them, separated from their colors and music by her own reflection in the glass. She had never gone in. This time she did. A salesman with colorless eyelashes and translucent ears waited on her, demonstrating, wooing her with pamphlets, assuring her of long-term guarantees. Japonesita realized that she was going through the motions without really believing that she could ever buy one of those wonderful machines. But she could. As soon as the town got electricity she was going to buy a Wurlitzer. Immediately. No, sooner. Because if Don Alejo was bringing her the news today that he had received permission to install the electricity or that he had succeeded in signing an agreement or document, she would buy the Wurlitzer tomorrow, Monday morning, the one

with the most colors, with the painting of a turquoise sea and palm trees, the biggest one of all. Tomorrow morning she would talk to the boy with the colorless lashes and ask him to have it delivered. Then, the first day the electricity went on in town, the Wurlitzer would go on in her house.

Better not say anything to la Manuela. She would only have to mention the project and he'd go crazy with excitement, jabbering, anticipating, not a moment's peace, until she'd end up deciding not to buy anything at all. He was undressing in the room across the way, to try on the red dress by candlelight. At his age he was no longer afraid of the cold. Just like my mother, may she rest in peace. Even on the worst days, like this one for instance, she'd always wear a low-cut dress, big and fat, her heavy breasts like bulging sacks of grapes. At the neckline's V 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 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 and nose, and especially around the low neckline. They said that Big Japonesa died because of some liver thing, from drinking so much wine. But that's not true. She didn't drink that much. My mother died of grief. Grief because Estación El Olivo was going downhill, because it was no longer what it used to be. All the talking she'd do to Don Alejo about the electricity. Nothing doing. Then they said the paved road, the north-south, was going to go

right through El Olivo, and that would make it an important town. As long as she had hope my mother thrived. But then they told her the truth, I think it was Don Alejo, that the road would only come within a mile and a half of the town, and then she began to lose hope. The north-south is silver-plated, straight as a knife: with one slash it cut the life out of Estación El Olivo, nestled in a cozy bend of the old road. They didn't ship the freight by rail anymore, but by truck, on the road. Now the train came through only a couple of times a week. Scarcely a handful of townspeople were left. Big Japonesa remembered, toward the end, how in the old days the midday summer mass would attract the most sumptuous wagons and carriages in the area, and the elegant young men from the country would meet at sunset in front of the post office, on purebred horses, to pick up the mail that came by train. The boys, so proper during the day when they escorted their sisters, cousins, or sweethearts, let their hair down at night at Japonesa's house, which never closed. And then just the road construction men came, traveling the mile and a half on foot, and then not even them, only the common laborers from nearby, the tenants, the peons, the outsiders who came for harvest. Another class entirely. 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 no time, and it was useless to try and compete with houses like Wooden Heart's. Not even electricity, she used to say, not even that, she was always complaining about so many things, about the fire in her stomach, monotonously, softly com-

plaining, bloated and hollow-eyed toward the end. But no, never, nothing, in spite of Don Alejo's telling her to wait just a bit more but one fine day she couldn't wait anymore 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 few run-down houses scattered by the geometry of vineyards which seem on the verge of swallowing them up. And what's he laughing about? What right does he have to ignore the cold that's shredding my bones?

"Father!"

She shouted it from the kitchen door. La Manuela stopped in the lighted frame of Lucy's doorway. Thin, small, he looked like a teenager, standing there in the doorway with one hip gracefully turned out and his face outlined in the dark. 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, sinking into it, drying her moldy clothing and her bones and everything....

"What?"

"Come here."

"What do you want?"

"Just come here."

"I'm busy with Lucy."

"I'm telling you I need you."

La Manuela, covering himself with the flamenco dress, crossed the lake in the patio as well as he could, paddling among the fallen leaves from the grape arbor. Japonesita sat down again by the dying fire.

“So dark here, child. Is this a wake?”

Japonesita didn't answer.

“I'm throwing 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 dark, like now, without the slightest nostalgia for light, although she would long for a little heat.

“All right.”

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

“I'll bet no one comes tonight.”

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

“How does it look?”

“Okay.”

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

“I'll bet no one comes tonight.”

“You know that Pancho Vega will come.”

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

“Me? That Pancho Vega's coming?”

“Of course. Why else are you fixing your dress?”

“But he’s not in town.”

“You told me last night you heard the horn....”

“Yes, but I don’t....”

“You know he’s coming.”

Why deny it. The girl’s right. Pancho will come tonight come hell or high water. She picked up her dress, the ancient percale, warm from the fire. The whole damn day raining like the devil and she fixing her dress, and herself. Let’s see if he’s the man he says he is. He’ll regret it. If anything happens tonight, the whole town will know, everyone, even the dead, we’ll see how much he likes saying things about poor fags. La Manuela laid the dress down and put the candle on the wash basin, below the piece of mirror. She began to comb her hair. So little left. Barely four strands to slick across my skull. I can’t do any hairdo with it. Those days are gone.

“Listen.”

Japonesita raised her head.

“What?”

“Come over here.”

She moved to a wicker chair in front of the mirror. La 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 is it being a woman if you’re not a flirt, 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 this way, look, this is how you do it, now it looks nice, with a bit falling over your forehead and the rest up in what they call a beehive; and

la Manuela untangles it for her and here they put a ribbon, don't you have a pretty ribbon? I think I have one stuck away in my suitcase, I'll lend 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 calmly gave in. Yes. He was sure to come. She knew it as well as la 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, which occasionally grazed her face, the memory pressed on Japonesita. He had seized her with his brick-rough hands, his square thumb, the corroded, oil-stained, wide, flat nail imbedded in her arm, hurting, a bruise that lasted over a month....

"Father."

La Manuela didn't answer.

"What do we do if he comes?"

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

"You have to protect me if Pancho comes."

La Manuela threw the hairpins on the floor. That was the limit. Why did she keep playing the fool? Did she expect her, la Manuela, to stand up to a hulking brute like Pancho? She's got to realize it once and for all and stop telling herself lies...you damn well know I'm just a hopeless fag, no one ever tried to hide it from you. And you're asking me for protection: when Pancho comes I'll 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 didn't want anything to do with the whole affair. What could he do. I've asked you I don't know how many times since Big Japonesa died to give me my share so that I can go, where I don't know, there'll always be some whorehouse 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 la Manuela liked her mother...but it's been four years since they buried her in the cemetery at San Alfonso because this lousy town doesn't even have its own cemetery, and they'll bury me there too, and in the meantime, here sits la Manuela. Not even a floor in the kitchen: plain mud. So why should Japonesita bother her? If she wanted someone to protect her, she should get married, or get a man. Why he wasn't even good for dancing anymore. Last year, after that Pancho thing, his daughter bawled him out saying she was ashamed of being the daughter of an old fairy like him. That of course she'd like to go somewhere else to live and start a new business. But that she wouldn't because Estación El Olivo was small and everyone knew them and were so used to them that they didn't even notice. Not even the children asked questions because they were born knowing it. There's no need for explaining, that's what Japonesita said, and one of these days the town is going to go up in smoke and you and me with it, this shitpile of a town that never asks questions and that nothing ever surprises. A store in Talca. No sir.

No restaurant, no cigar stand, no laundromat, no warehouse, nothing. For us El Olivo, to hide in.... Okay, okay, you crappy girl, then don't call me father. Because when Japonésita called him father, the flamenco dress over the washstand looked older, the percale threadbare, the red faded, the stitches showing, horrible, inane, and the long, cold, dark night reaching through the vineyards, clutching, choking this spark that had been cultivated in the deserted town, don't call me father, emptyheaded bitch. Call me la Manuela, like everybody else. And you want me to protect you! That's all I need. And what about me, who's going to protect me? No, one of these fine days I'm packing my wares and leaving for a big town like Talca. I'm sure Wooden Heart will give me a job. But he had said that once too often and he was sixty years old. He went on smoothing his daughter's hair.

"What am I supposed to protect you from? Don't be a fool, go to bed with him. He's splendid. The best stud around and he has a truck and everything and he could take us for rides. And since you'll have to be a whore someday...."

...let him have her. Tonight's the night, even if there will be bleeding. With Pancho Vega or anyone else, she knew that. But today it's Pancho. For a whole year she'd been dreaming of him. Dreaming that he beat her and raped her, but in that violence, beneath it or within it, she found something that beat the winter's cold. Last winter, because Pancho was cruel and brutal and had twisted her arm, had been the warmest winter since Big Japonésita died. And la Manuela's fingers, touching her

head, patting her cheek near the ear while fabricating a flirtatious curl, they weren't so cold...he was a child, la Manuela. She could hate him, like a minute ago. And not hate him. A child, a little bird. Anything but a man. He himself said he was very much the woman. But that wasn't true either. Anyway, he's right. If I'm going to be a whore I may as well start with Pancho.

La Manuela finished doing Japonesita's hair up in a beehive. A woman. She was a woman. She would get Pancho. He was a man. A poor old queer. A fag who was mad for parties and wine and rags and men. It was easy to forget, sheltered here in town—yes, she's right, we better stay here. But then Japonesita would suddenly call him that and his own image would blur as if a drop of water had fallen on it and then he'd lose sight of herself, himself, myself, I don't know, he doesn't know, he can't see la Manuela anymore and there's nothing, this anguish, this helplessness, nothing else, this enormous blot of water in which he's shipwrecked.

As he gave the finishing touches to the hairdo la Manuela sensed through her hair that his daughter was warming up to him. As if she had really surrendered her head so that he could make it beautiful. This kind of help he could and wanted to give her. 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. Japonesita softly touched her own reflection in the piece of mirror. She turned around:

“Do I look all right?”

Yes, if Pancho wasn't such a beast Japonesita might fall in love with him and they'd be lovers for a while until he left her and went away with someone else because that's the way men are and then she'd be different. And maybe not so stingy, thought la Manuela, 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 leaves, but what did that matter, if she, and la Manuela too, would feel easier.

It was one of those nights when la Manuela felt like going to bed: bundle up, take a pill, and, another day. She didn't want to see anybody because she had given all her warmth to Japonesita, leaving herself with none. Outside the clouds chased around the vast sky that was beginning to clear, and in the patio the kneading trough, chicken coop, outhouse, everything, even the most insignificant object acquired volume, flinging precise shadows over the water wasting away under the speckled sky. Maybe Pancho wouldn't come after all...it was probably one of Don Alejo's jokes, him being so fond of jokes. Maybe not even Don Alejo would come in this cold—he himself said he was sick and that the doctors were pestering 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 either 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 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 was young and a woman whose hope, as she looked at herself in the broken mirror, wasn't a grotesque lie.

“Do I really look good?”

“Not bad...for an ugly thing like you....”

5

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

“Easy, Negus...easy, Moor....”

La Manuela also sat at the table. She poured herself a glass of wine, the kind her daughter reserved for special occasions and never let her drink. Cloty, Lucy, Elvira, and another whore were drinking tea in a corner where the wind, blowing in through the cracks in the doors and roof, wouldn't get them. Pour me some more. No one's coming tonight. They were yawning. She'll probably close up as soon as the gentleman leaves and then we can go to sleep. Elvira, change the record, put on “Bésame Mucho,” no 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 with a rag, straightening the pile of records next to it.

Don Alejo brought bad news: they weren't going to install electricity in town. Until who knows when. Maybe never. The Commissioner said 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 then and we'll see if things have cleared up any. It was the same as a flat no. And that's what Don Alejo told Japonesita, in no uncertain terms. He tried to convince her that it was logical the Commissioner would think that way, he gave her reasons and explanations even though Japonesita didn't utter a single 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 hardly even stops here anymore, just on Mondays, so you can get on in the morning and come back in the afternoon when you go to Talca. Even the wine cellar at the station is falling down and it's been so long since I've used it that not even the smell of wine is left.

“Even Ludo told me this morning when I went to ask for red thread, before I met you, Don Alejandro, that she was thinking about moving to Talca. It's only natural, what with her Acevedo buried there, and mass every day, and her sister and all....”

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

“Of course, Acevedo bought it for her when....”

Then la 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 looked away, and glancing at the whores she motioned them to come over by the stove. 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 you like so well. Why even you don't have any of this left....”

“No thank you, dear. I'm on my way. It's getting late.”

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

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

La 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, as if expecting a verdict, looked at Japonesita. Huddled in her pink shawl, making the slow steady motion of negation with her head that la Manuela knew.

“Don't be silly. Go to Talca and set up business with la Manuela. You have plenty of money in the bank. I know because the other day I asked the manager, my cousin, about the state of your account. I wish it were mine...that's what he told me, a lot of holdings and a

lot of debts, but Japonesita has it all cleared up. 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, people you know. Cheer up, girl, can't you see, this isn't living. Right, Manuela?"

"Certainly, Don Alejo, help me convince her...."

"Why ask him when all he wants is to fool around?"

"The money belongs to both of you, in equal shares, that's how I see it. Isn't that how Big Japonesa left it?"

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

Don Alejo let scarcely a minute elapse.

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

His eyes were turned down, staring at the hairpin floating in the wine. And on the back of the generous hand that sheltered Japonesita's golden hairs flamed. But she, la Manuela, was very sharp, and he wasn't going to fool her. She had known him too long not to realize he was plotting something. She had always wanted to catch him at one of those shady deals his political enemies accused him of. Of course, when they elected him deputy almost twenty years ago, he sold the voters a lot of cheap land, on long terms, here in Estación, because this town is on its way up, there's a big future here, in these parts, and the people started painting and fixing their houses, because naturally, values were going up around here...yessiree, not even a sewer, and barely a couple of streets of flattened ground. What do you want to do to us now? Don't you think you've done enough already? What's gotten into your head now, want to buy the few

houses in town that aren't already yours. Don't come around telling her, la Manuela, stories. Don Alejo didn't come to tell them the bad news about the electricity, he came to offer to buy the house. His blue eyes had sparkled at the mention of Ludo's house. And now this house...he wanted to take it away from them, hers and Japonesita's house. What did it matter if Don Alejo made them jump through hoops and lose all their money, as long as they went to live in Talca!

"You don't like this business, you never liked it, not the way your mother did. I'll get you the money tomorrow if you want, and we can draw up the sales contract at the notary's, if you decide. Give her a little push, Manuela. I can help you find a convenient locale in Talca, a good one, a really good one. Are you taking 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 carbon lamp fluttered with the cape's motion. The dogs began to pace around outside, thirstily smelling the air of the room through the door hinge. La Manuela and Japonesita followed him to the door. He reached for the latch. With his other hand he put on his hat; it shadowed his face. He spent a few moments talking to them, repeating that they should think it over, if they wanted they could talk about it again another day, he was at their service, they knew how fond he was of them, if they wanted the house appraised, he knew

an honest authority and was prepared to pay the appraiser's estimate....

When he finally opened the door, went out into the air and the stars, and closed it again, the Wurlitzer behind Japonesita's frowning eyes shattered into a million pieces. She and the town faded into darkness. What did it matter if everything went downhill, it made no difference as long as she didn't have to move or change. No. She'd stay here, surrounded by the things she knew, surrounded by this obscurity in which nothing happened that wasn't a degree of slow, invisible death. No. The electricity and the Wurlitzer were nothing more than mirages which for an instant, a blessedly short one, made her 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 be the same forever. She went back to the table and sat in the chair warm from Don Alejo's cape. She leaned over the stove.

"Lock the door, Cloty...."

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

"Are we going to close up?"

"Yes. No one's coming now."

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

"The roads are probably filled with mud."

"But...."

"...and there's a frost coming."

La Manuela went to sit on the other side of the stove, and also leaned over it. Cloty put "Black Flowers" on

the Victrola and the record began to shriek. The other whores disappeared.

“Why don’t we think about what Don Alejo said?” she said.

Because suddenly she saw that Don Alejo, just as he had created the town, had other plans now, and to carry them out he needed to get rid of Estación El Olivo. He would tear down all the houses, he would wipe away the crude mud streets and cow dung, he would reunite the adobe of the thick walls with the land it came from and he would plow that land, all for some incomprehensible purpose. She saw it all. Clearly. The electricity would have meant salvation. Now....

“Let’s leave, daughter.”

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

“Stop the record, Cloty, I can’t hear.”

“Will you need me?”

“No.”

“Well, goodnight.”

“Goodnight. I’ll close up later.”

They were alone in the parlor huddled over the stove.

“...let well enough alone. What would we do in a big town? People laughing at us...no friends, living in another house. Here there’ll always be peasants who are horny or who feel like getting drunk.... We won’t die of hunger or shame. Every Monday when I go to Talca I get back to the station early to wait for the train so people

won't look at me—sometimes I wait for over an hour, sometimes two, and there's almost no one at the station....”

When Japonesita started talking like that la Manuela felt like screaming, it was as if his daughter were drowning him in words, slowly encircling him with her flat voice, that monotonous singsong. Damn the town! Damn the girl! Believing things were going to change and his life would improve because Big Japonesa made him her partner and house proprietor after the bet that, thanks to him, she won from Don Alejo. Of course things were better then. Even the carbon lamps 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 Don Alejo offering to help us so that we can go to Talca and start a business, the two of us happy, no troubles, she'd like dry goods since rags was something she knew about, but no, the girl would start in talking and never stop, like now, slowly building a wall around la Manuela. Japonesita turned the screw to put out the lamp.

“Leave it alone.”

She stopped for a moment but then continued turning the screw.

“Fuck you, I said leave it alone....”

La Manuela's scream startled Japonesita, but she kept turning down 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 whorehouses from Chanco to Constitución, from Villa Alegre to San Clemente, prin-

cess of all the whorehouses in the province, she would kick the bucket and the old woman of death would come to carry her off forever. Then no trick or lie would convince the stinking old witch to let her be for a little while longer, why do you want to stay, for God's sake, Manuela, let's go, business is much better on the other side, and they would bury her in a niche in the San Alfonso cemetery under a stone that would say, "Manuel González Astica" and then, for a while, 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 loneliness
your soul will tell me
I love yoooooooouuuu....

La Manuela stopped the record. She put her hand on the black turntable. Japonesita had stood up too. 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, insistent, red flame that got closer and closer. A horn. Again. Playing the fool, the idiot, 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, honking and honking because he's probably drunk. La Manuela smiled, the fragments of her face neatly arranged.

"Turn off the lamp, you fool."

Before it went out, la Manuela made out a smile on her daughter's face—fool, she's not afraid of Pancho, 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. And important that he not come in, that he think everyone in the house was asleep. That he knew 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-striped land there was nothing that could stop it. In the dark la Manuela went to the door. She opened the latch. Scoundrel, waking up the whole town at this hour! She remained by the door while the horn summoned and aroused every muscle, every nerve and left them alive and suspended, ready to receive wounds or blows—that horn wouldn't stop. Here he comes, yes, in front of the house...her ears ached and Japonesita closed her eyes and covered her ears. But like la Manuela, she was smiling.

"Pancho...."

"What are we going to do?"

6

THE WOMEN of the town agreed not to complain for having to stay 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 schoolmaster's wife: they all knew their men were going to celebrate Don Alejandro Cruz's victory, and they knew exactly where and how they'd celebrate it. But because the party was in Don Alejandro's honor and anything that had to do with him must be good, they didn't say a word.

That morning they had seen the three Farías sisters step off the train from Talca: Fat and squat like barrels, their flowered silk dresses girdling their beefy flesh like steel bands; they were sweating from the effort of carrying the harp and guitars. Two younger women also got off, and a man, if you could call him that. The women, watching from a careful distance, discussed what he might be: skinny as a broomstick, with long hair, his eyes were made up almost as much as the Farías sisters'. Standing near the platform, knitting to not waste time, surrounded by kids whom they had to keep scolding so

they wouldn't 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 actor, look at that case he's carrying."

"He's a queer, that's what he is...."

And the kids trailed after them on the dusty road to Japonesa's house.

The ladies, back home for lunch, chided their husbands to not forget a single detail of what went on that night at Japonesa's house, and if there were any delicacies, could they possibly save some tidbits for them in their pockets when no one was looking, after all, they had to stay home alone and bored while the men would be doing God 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 it was important that they stay close to Don Alejandro so he'd see them at his celebration, and they could remind him offhand as if they really didn't want to, about the land deal, and the barrels of wine he had promised to sell them at a discount, yes, let them sing together, dance, and paint the town red, today it didn't matter as long as they were with Don Alejandro.

For months the town was wreathed in green, sepia, blue posters of Don Alejandro's face. Barefoot boys ran everywhere hurling flyers or kept handing them out to the same people on the street, while the rest of the children, the ones who hadn't been trusted with the politi-

cal propaganda, collected them and made paper boats 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 ringleaders met, from there came the orders, the projects, the assignments. Now no one went to the house 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 approaching victory inflamed the proprietress' gift for speeches and made her forget everything but her political passion, she would serve her wine generously to any visitor whose political leanings were precarious or ambiguous, and in the course of a few hours she'd either resolve his doubts or clear up the ambiguities, leaving him with a keen sense of duty.

The election took place ten days ago but Don Alejo had only recently returned to town. Japonesa's salon and patio were plastered with pictures of the new congressman. Only the select few in the district received invitations, the chosen citizens of El Olivo, administrators, majordomos, and vineyard keepers from the nearby estates. And from Talca Japonesa commissioned her friend Wooden Heart to send a reinforcement of two whores,

the Farías sisters, so there'd be music, and la Manuela, that funny queer who does flamenco dances.

“It's going to cost me plenty. But why shouldn't I please myself too. This is for the bright future that the pride of our county, that brilliant congressman Don Alejandro Cruz, here with us, has promised us....”

Naturally Japonesa was pleased with it all. She wasn't a kid anymore, no doubt about that, and the last years had fattened her so that the accumulation of fat around her cheeks stretched her mouth perpetually into what seemed to be—and almost always was—a smile. Her myopic eyes, which had earned her the nickname “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 their affair was 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 either in his country vineyards, not returning to his city home until after harvest, or on the pruning or spraying. So he was often away from his wife and family, which was very boring for him. But at night, after dinner, he'd escape to Estación for a few drinks and laughs with Big Japonesa. In those days she took it upon herself to have a special girl for Don Alejo, a girl that only he could touch. 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, the chief mechanics and sometimes even the smaller landowners, and their sons who had to be kicked out when their fathers appeared, all would come to Japonesa's house. 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 downing a bottle or playing a hand of cards in a cheerful but safe atmosphere, because Japonesa didn't open her doors to just anybody. Only refined people. Only people with money in their pockets. That's why she belonged to Don Alejo's political party, the historical, traditional, organized party, the party of decent people who paid their debts and stayed out of trouble, the people who went to her house for amusement and whose belief that Don Alejo would do great things for the region was as unshakable as Japonesa's.

"I have a right to do what pleases me."

The great pleasure of her life was giving the party that night. And she took over la Manuela almost the moment he arrived. 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 tried to compete with the women when the clients got drunk: a big mess. Since la Manuela came 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 on the platform.”

La Manuela took the decorating into his own hands: not so many branches, he said, the Farías sisters are too fat and with harps and guitars and boughs to boot, you won't see them. If you just put branches up there it's better, yellow willow branches with colored paper that looks like green rain, and at the foot of the platform the biggest picture of Don Alejo you can find, framed in weeping willow branches too. Japonesa was thrilled with the results. Manuela, help me hang the paper wreaths, Manuela, where's 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 Japonesa's every order or request, la Manuela would suggest something that would make things prettier or the barbecue sauce tastier. By late afternoon Japonesa, half-drunk, fell into a chair in the middle of the patio, still shouting orders but relaxed because la Manuela was doing everything so well.

“Manuela, did they bring the strawberries for the burgundy?”

“Manuela, let's put more flowers there.”

La Manuela ran, obeyed, corrected, suggested.

“I'm having a marvelous time.”

Wooden Heart had told him that Japonesa was nice, but not this nice. So unpretentious, being a proprietress and all. When Japonesa went to her room to dress, la Manuela went with her to help: soon after she came out looking elegant for sure with her black silk dress coming to a low point in front, and all her hair gathered in a

discreet but coquettish chignon. The wine flowed as soon as the first guests arrived, while the aroma of the pigs, starting to brown, and of the oregano, hot garlic, onions, and cucumbers soaking in the salads' juices, floated into the patio and salon.

Don Alejo arrived, quite bombed, at eight. During the applause he hugged and kissed Japonesa, whose eyeliner had run either from perspiration or from sentimental tears. Then the Farías sisters climbed up to the platform and the music and dancing began. Many of the men took off their jackets and danced in suspenders. The women's flowered dresses darkened under the arms with sweat. 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 congressman 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.

"See, Don Alejo? Look at that rump, feel it, go on, just what you like, soft, pure affection. I brought her down just for you, I knew you'd like her, shouldn't I know your tastes by now.... Come on, let me be, 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 like kids...."

The congressman squeezed the proffered buttocks and then sat her 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 at the exclusive service of 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. La Manuela walked over to Japonesa.

“How’re things?”

“Have a seat.”

“And Don Alejo?”

“All right. He hasn’t said a word.”

“Good.”

“Did you help yourself to everything?”

“It was delicious. 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 bit.”

“Yes, that’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 owner of the house where I stayed knows you. Her name is Olga and they say she’s half German. Which isn’t surprising since she’s full of freckles, here on her arms. No, I’m from around here, I was born in the country near Maule, that’s right, ah, so you’ve been there too. Hah...we’re countrywomen. No.

I moved into town and later worked with a girl and traveled all the towns in the south, yes, she did well, but don't think 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 that didn't work out at all. I prefer this kind of work. Of course, a girl gets tired of moving around so much, all the towns are alike. No. Wooden Heart is getting 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. One of the prettiest I've seen. Red. A girl who worked in the circus sold it to me. I guard it like a saint's bone, it's real class and since I'm so dark the red looks magnificent on me. Hey...Now?"

"Wait."

"How much longer?"

"About an hour."

"But shall I change?"

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

"All right."

"God you're in a hurry."

"Of course. I like to be the belle of the ball."

Two men who overheard the conversation started to laugh at la Manuela, trying to touch her to see if she had breasts. Hey honey...what have you got here? Let's have a feel, get out of here you drunk bastard, don't come around here trying to feel me. Then they said it was too much having queers like this around, it was a disgrace, they were going to talk to the policeman sitting in the

corner with a whore on his lap, and he'd put la Manuela in jail for being immoral, for being a degenerate. Then la 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 la Manuela was well known in Talca and on good terms with the police force. I'm a professional, they paid me to put on my show....

Japonesa went to get Don Alejo and hurried him over so that he'd 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.

"Well 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. What's this ignoramus bothering me for? Who's he to call a girl names, huh? They brought me here because they wanted to see me, so.... If they don't want the show, fine, pay me for tonight and I'll go, who wants to dance in this shitpile of a town full of starving beggars...."

"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 away someone who wanted to sit with them, and sat Rosita on one side of him and

la Manuela on the other: they toasted with the newly imported burgundy.

“May you be ever triumphant, Manuela....”

“The same to you, Don Alejo.”

When Don Alejo got up to dance with Rosita, Japonesa moved her chair next to la Manuela’s.

“The man’s taken a liking to you, honey, that’s easy enough to see. Nope, there’s no one like Don Alejo, he’s one of a kind. He’s like God here in town. He does whatever he wants. They’re all afraid of him. Don’t you know he owns all the vineyards, all of them, as far as the eye can see? And he’s so good that when someone offends him, like the guy who was bothering you, he immediately 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 homes, he says, with easy payments, and when he’s sold all the lots he’s going to have electricity brought to town and then we’ll be riding high for sure. They’ll come from all over; my house, you know, already has quite a reputation; they’ll come from Duao, from Pelarco.... We’ll expand and my house will be more famous than Wooden Heart’s. Ah, Manuela, what a man he is, I was so in love with him. But he doesn’t let himself get tied down. He has a wife, of course, a pretty blond, very ladylike, distinguished I’d say, and another woman

in Talca and who knows how many more in the capital. And all of them working like dogs for him during election. You should 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 profit by it. And on election day he even came with a truck and anyone 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 were going to be more elections. Of course they would have voted for him anyway. He's the only candidate they know. The others just from the propaganda posters while Don Alejo, him they really know. Who hasn't seen him on that gray horse of his, on his way to the bazaar in San Alfonso every Monday? 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 to San Alfonso in the truck again, they all said he was such a nice man, but later on he disappeared because he had to go back to the capital to see how things were going.... Look how the mayor is dancing with that blond...."

Japonesa squinted her eyes so she could see the far end of the patio: when she couldn't see something, she'd tell la Manuela to check and see if the blond was still dancing with the same man, and who was Sergeant 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 delft blue doll's eyes, the earnest eyes of a saint's statue, he looked at la Manuela who trembled as if all her will power had been absorbed by the gaze that surrounded and dissolved her. How could she help feeling ashamed of meeting those marvelous orbs with her grizzly little eyes and skimpy lashes? She lowered them.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

La 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 grew more intense, or multiplied into chills that circled her legs and her whole body, while those eyes remained fastened to hers...until they dissolved into a laugh. And la Manuela's chills subsided with Don Alejo's friendly slap on the shoulder.

"No, woman. It was just a joke. I don't go in for that...."

And they drank together, la Manuela and Don Alejo, laughing. La Manuela, still swaddled in a blanket of sensations, took short sips; she smiled a bit, gently. She couldn't remember ever having loved a man as much as at that moment she loved Congressman Don Alejandro Cruz. Such a gentleman. So suave, when he wanted to be. Even when he made jokes the others made, with their thick, gross 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. La Manuela laughed, drinking what was left of her burgundy, as if trying to hide the flush that climbed to her plucked eyebrows be-

hind the greenish wine glass: right then, as she raised the glass, she forced herself to admit that anything besides 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. What for. Better not to think about it.

Don Alejo was kissing Rosita, his hand under 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 make the sheds near the station bigger if he was elected, certainly, and of course, remember the electricity as soon as possible and the business about enlarging the police force, especially during harvest, because of the outsiders who wandered around the vineyards looking for work and sometimes stealing, of course he'd remember, this victory isn't going to give him a swelled head, don't forget about us Don Alejo, we helped you when you needed us, after all, you're the town's mainstay, its support, without you it would die, yes sir, pour yourself a little more Don Alejo, I'd be hurt if you didn't, and pour your girl a little more too, look how thirsty she is, why if you don't take good care of her, she's liable to go off with someone else, but as I was saying, sir, all the sheds leak and they're so small, you can't say no after we've helped you, you said you would. He answered stroking his mustache from time to time. La Manuela winked at him because she saw he was trying not to yawn. She was the only one who realized he was bored, humming along with the singing Farías sisters:

that isn't any kind of talk for a party. Men are so tiring with their business talk, isn't that right Don Alejo, la Manuela said to him with her eyes, until Don Alejo couldn't hold back a monstrous wet yawn that displayed his epiglottis and the whole of his pink palate ending in the tunnel of his trachea, and the men, while Don Alejo yawned in their faces, shut up. Then, when he managed to close his mouth, his eyes watering, he searched for la Manuela's face.

“Hey, Manuela....”

“What, Don Alejo?”

“Weren't you going to dance? This is getting dull.”

7

LA MANUELA whirled in the center of the platform raising a cloud of dust with her red train. The moment the music stopped she plucked the flower she wore behind her ear and tossed it to Don Alejo, who rose and caught it in the air. The crowd broke into applause as la Manuela dropped panting in the chair next to Don Alejo.

“Let’s dance, sweetie....”

The sharp twanging voices of the Farías sisters took command of the patio again. La Manuela, head thrown back and body arched, pinned herself to Don Alejo and together they danced a few steps surrounded by the cheering men forming a circle around them. The postmaster came forward and snatched la Manuela from Don Alejo. They managed one turn around the floor before the mayor took her away from him and more and more came from the circle that closed in on la Manuela. Someone stroked her while she was dancing, another rubbed her leg. The vineyard boss of a neighboring estate tucked up her skirt, and when they saw that, the men grouped around her, trying to carry her off, helped raise the skirt over her head, binding her arms as if in a strait jacket.

Embarrassed and choking with laughter, they felt her skinny, hairy legs and lank backside.

“She’s hot.”

“She’s steaming.”

“Let’s throw her in the canal.”

Don Alejo stood up.

“Let’s go.”

“We’ve got to cool her off.”

Several of them lifted her up. Squawking trills, and flapping her arms, la Manuela let them carry her off. In the street’s light they marched 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 reached the canal that bounded his vineyards and separated them from Estación.

“One...two...three...heeeeeave....”

And they pitched la Manuela into the water. The men who were watching her from above, standing between the blackberries and the canal, 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 on the bank, she dared them, taunted them, insisting she liked them all each for himself, don’t be cowards in front of a poor woman like herself. One of the men tried to piss 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 la Manuela’s dance. When they finally gave them a hand so they both could

climb onto the bank, la Manuela's anatomy startled them all.

"What a stud!"

"Hey, this guy's well-hung...."

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

"Don't let the women see that or they'll all fall in love with you."

La Manuela, teeth chattering, answered with a laugh.

"I only use this thing to pee."

Some of them went back with Don Alejo to Japonesa's house. Some went home without being missed by the party. 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 back to the platform to sing, and sat with some cronies at a table littered with leftovers, some cold bones and a greasy knife. Japonesa joined them to listen to the details of la Manuela's bath.

"And he says he only uses it to piss."

Japonesa raised her tired 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 a while.

Japonesa became excited. Her swollen breast rose and fell with the passion of her conviction: yes, la Manuela could do it, if she were handled in bed in a special way, you know, with a little care, delicately, so she wouldn't be afraid, yes, Big Japonesa was sure that la Manuela could. The men felt the wave of heat that emanated from

her body, sure 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 la Manuela no matter how queer he is, there wasn't one who wouldn't have given anything to be in la Manuela's place. Japonesa dried her forehead. She ran the tip of her pink tongue over her lips, which were shiny for a minute. Don Alejo was laughing at her.

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

"Bah, the older the wiser...."

"But la 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 and get that queer hot for you. If you manage to excite him and he performs like a man, fine, 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 keep singing 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 I wouldn't give it to you. Ask for something that I can give you."

"Or that you would want to give me."

"No, that I can...."

There was no way of breaking him down. Forget it.

“All right then....”

“What?”

“This house.”

When the bet was first mentioned she had thought of just asking for a few barrels of wine, the good kind that she knew Don Alejo would send her without 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, me the owner of this house where I started working as a girl. She had never dreamed of owning it. Only now, because it angered her that Don Alejo should count on what he called her “intelligence” to take advantage of her. If he wanted to laugh at la Manuela, and at everybody, 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 almighty that he could push them around like that.

“But the house is worthless, Japonesa.”

“Didn’t you say that property values are going up here in Estación?”

“Yes, of course, but....”

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

“You’re on, then.”

While the onlookers applauded, Don Alejo and Japonesa touched glasses and emptied them. Don Alejo got up to dance with Rosita. After that they went inside

to spend some time 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 la Manuela?”

Most of the women had already paired off with the men they’d stay with 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 he was there next to the black, but still hot stove.

“Manuela...Manuela?”

She sensed him shivering near the coals. The poor thing was wet and tired from so much revelry. Feeling that la Manuela was there, Japonesa drew near the corner and touched him. He said nothing. Then she leaned her body against la Manuela’s. She lit a candle. Thin, wet, diminished, revealing the truth of his miserable structure, his feeble bones, as a bird is revealed to someone who plucks it to throw into the pot. Shivering by the stove, wrapped in a blanket someone had lent him.

“Are you cold?”

“They’re such boors....”

“Like animals.”

“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 if they know I’m just a fag. At least they only threw me in the water, usually it’s worse, you should 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 get it. How could you think of such a dirty thing?”

But Japonesa kept talking to him. She casually took his hand. He withdrew it, but while she talked she took it again and this time he didn’t object. No, he didn’t have to do anything if he didn’t want to, she wasn’t going to force him, it was just a matter of playacting. 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 matter 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. Flabby breasts, excess fat, fat that things sink into and disappear in forever, those hips, those thighs like two huge mountains that fuse 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 must have this house, that I want it more than anything else, because the town’s expanding and the house and me along with it, and I can do it, this house that used to be the Cruzes can be mine. I’ll fix it up. Don Alejo wasn’t at all happy when I asked for it. I know why,

they say the north-south highway will come right through here, right by the door. He knows what the house will be worth and he doesn't want to lose it, but he was scared that the others heard the bet and he had to put up or shut up...and then he said okay, it can be mine. I would bring in performers, you, for example, Manuela, I'd always bring you in. Yes. I'll pay you. For just being naked in bed with me for a while. Just a little while, a quarter of an hour, no, ten minutes, no, five...and we'll have a good laugh, Manuela, you and I, I'm tired of those big studs I liked before when I was young, they stole my money and two-timed me with the first woman who came along, 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, the playacting, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. Do you want me to pour you some tea, you're shivering, I'll drink some with you, no, I don't like tea, I'll just have some now to keep you company: damn you 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, the rest of the women yes but not me, see how good the tea is, in a few minutes you won't be cold. But la Manuela kept saying no, no, no, no....

Japonesa put the tea kettle back on the fire.

"And if you were my partner?"

La Manuela didn't answer.

“As my partner?”

Japonesa saw that la Manuela was thinking.

“We’ll split everything. I’ll sign you as a partner, you too as owner of this house when Don Alejo transfers it to me before the notary. You and me, partners. Half of everything. The house, the furniture, the business and everything we’ll have....”

...and that way, as a proprietress, no one could throw her out, because the house would be hers. She could give orders. So many whorehouses they’d thrown her out of because she always went wild when the party got going and her mug hot from the wine, the music and everything, and sometimes the men started fighting because of her. From one whorehouse to another. Ever since she could remember. One month, six months, a year at the most...it always had to end because the owner got mad, because, she would say, la Manuela added fuel to the fire by being so scandalous...to have my own room, mine forever, with cute pin-ups on the wall, but no: always from one house to another, ever since they threw him out of school when they found him with another boy and he didn’t dare go home again because his father had an enormous riding crop that drew blood when he beat the horses, and then he went to the woman’s house who taught him flamenco dancing. And then she threw him out, then others, always from house to house, not a nickel in his pocket, nowhere to rest when his gums hurt, those pains he always had, ever since he could remember, and he’d never tell anyone about it and now at forty my teeth are falling out and I’m afraid of spitting them out when

I sneeze. Big deal. It was just for a few minutes. I don't like beans but when there's nothing else to eat...big deal. Me a proprietress. No one can throw me out, and if it's true this town's on its way up, maybe life won't be so bad, and there's hope even for an ugly fag like me, and then my misfortune wouldn't be a misfortune but would turn into a miracle thanks to Don Alejo, and things could be wonderful, singing, laughing, dancing in the spotlight every night forever.

"Okay."

"Is it a deal?"

"But you 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 was beating fast.

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

Japonesa looked out the door.

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

They sat by the stove in silence. La Manuela took his hand away from Japonesa's, who let go because now it didn't matter, that person was all hers now. La 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 decorating and clothes and meals, yes, she wasn't bad, better to be partners with la Manuela than with some other man who would make her suffer. La Manuela would never make her suffer, a friend, just a

friend, the two of them 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 say no, never again, 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 never would have decided to try him.

Exciting him is going to be easy. And making him fall in love with her. But no. That would ruin it. Complicate things. It was preferable that la Manuela never forget his place in the house—the queer of the whorehouse, 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 you fall in love with me....”

8

“THAT’S ALL that counts, buddy, don’t be a jerk: money. Don’t you think you’d be as good as him if you had it? Or do you think Don Alejo is something special? No, no two ways about it. You’re afraid of the old man because you owe him money, period. No, of course I won’t tell anybody. You think 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...no, pay me whenever you can, there’s no hurry, you’re one of the family. I’m not a two-faced heel, I won’t treat you like he does. The things he calls you, my God! I told you not to worry about it, I’m loaded. People like him make me furious.... Why should you do what he says and not go to Japonesita’s house if you feel like it and pay your bill? Does Japonesita 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 we’ll go wherever we feel like going. Right? Pay him his money and good-bye.... Come on, Pancho, cheer up, it’s no big deal....”

The truck went by Japonesita’s house without stop-

ping. It turned the narrow corner slowly and went back around the block past Japonesita's house, not honking this time, Octavio persuading him, going around and around the block.

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

"Don't worry. Don't you know that all the trucks from around here go by my gas station and I know where the best jobs are in the area? Don't worry. I'm telling you you're not the old man's slave.... Okay. I'm sick of the whole thing. Let's 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 go."

Pancho spun the truck around in the narrow street and headed the other way, toward the El Olivo estate, past the station. He knew his truck, and on the road past the blackberries and 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 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 going through a narrow passage of blackberries. He had to move very slowly, squinting his eyes, his head bent over the windshield. To see the rocks and potholes. He knew the road well, but better to be careful anyway. He even knew the

noises: there behind the thickets, the Palos canal split into two and the branch that flowed toward Los Lagos pasture gushed through a wooden spout for a stretch. Now you couldn't hear it. But if you went on foot, like he did as a boy, you'd start hearing the noise of the water in the wooden spout right here, passing the crooked willow. This was the road on which he used to run barefoot to school every day 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, the university maybe. You bet. I was the dunce of all times and I never went to the next grade 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 no good at studying, just let him learn the numbers and reading so they can tell him from the animals and then let him help out in the fields, let's see what we can do with him, why waste time in school if he's so stubborn. Every rock. And further on, the concrete landmark that's always been broken. Who knows how it got broken. It must be hard to break a concrete landmark, but it's broken all right. Every hole, every rock: Don Alejo made him learn them by heart, back and forth every day from the estate to the school and back to the estate until they said enough, what good was it doing. But Ema wants Normita to go to nuns' school, I don't want her to be 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, you know you liked me 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 it would have been different if you'd studied what does studying mean, Mamma, and what are nuns? I want the girl to study something quick like obstetrics, what's obstetrics, Mamma? And he didn't like her to ask, she's too young 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 has nothing to say about it, nothing to do with me. I'm my own boss. Except, of course, the family, like Octavio, who's my buddy so I don't mind owing him and he won't do anything if I'm a little behind on my 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 two plane trees and turned into an avenue of palm trees. Warehouses on either side. 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 multicolored canvas chairs—watching them from the other side, but not when he was little because he and Moniquita would play together among the giant hydrangea, the two of them alone, and the grownups would laugh at him asking if he was Moniquita's boyfriend and he'd say yes, and then they'd let him in, but not later, when he was bigger: they'd read magazines in strange languages, napping in the faded canvas chairs.

The dogs lunged toward the truck, which was approaching through the palms, and attacked its shiny body, scratching and muddying it as soon as it stopped at the gatehouse.

“Let’s get out.”

“How, with those mongrels?”

The dogs’ leaping and growling kept them inside. Then Pancho, because they made him angry, because they frightened him, because he hated dogs, started to honk the horn like a madman and the dogs leapt higher scratching the red paint that he polished so often, but now it didn’t matter, now nothing mattered except honking the horn, honking enough to knock down the palm trees and the oak, to pierce the night from one end to the other until nothing is left, honk that horn, and the dogs howl while a light goes on in the hall and figures come to life among the shadows and in doorways, yelling at the dogs, running toward the truck but Pancho keeps on, he has to, the furious dogs ignoring the peons who are calling them. Until Don Alejo appears at the top of the porch 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, anemic, as if he had used up all his strength. Octavio nudged him, but Pancho remained mute.

“Bah. Coward.”

Pancho opened the door and leaped to the ground.

The dogs lunged at him but Don Alejo managed to call them off while Pancho scrambled back into the truck. Octavio had turned off the lights and the landscape of darkness loomed, the black oak, the palm leaves, the mass of walls, the roof tiles were all suddenly etched against the deep empty sky.

“Who is it?”

“Pancho, Don Alejo. Why don’t you take care of your mutts?”

“What’s this damn racket you’re making? You must be drunk to think you can come to my house at all hours making noise like that, you good-for-nothing. You—put the dogs away, go on Moor, Sultan, over there, Othello, Negus...and you, Pancho, wait on the porch while I look for my cape, it’s getting cold....”

Cautiously Pancho and Octavio climbed down from the truck, and trying not to fall into puddles, they worked their way to the porch. At the base of the driveway that circled the estate they saw some lighted windows. They looked in. The dining room. The family gathered around the lamp. A boy with glasses—grandson, Don Jorge’s son, what’s he doing here when he ought to be away at school? And Misia Blanca at the head. White-haired now. She used to be blond, with a long braid she wrapped around her head and cut off when he gave Moniquita typhus. He saw Misia Blanca do it in the stuffy chapel—she raised her arms, her hands grasped her heavy braid and she cut it straight off, 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. Let me have Pancho for a while: she came to ask his mother 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's daughter. Now she was like an old lady. She ate in silence. And when Don Alejo finally joined them on the porch, wearing his hat and vicuña cape, Pancho thought he looked so tall, as tall as when he used to look up at him, a boy barely up to his knees.

"What a surprise, 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 paid me this morning. You don't owe me a thing until next month. What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

They paced around the U of the porch. From time to time the image of Misia Blanca presiding at the long and almost empty table reappeared, once, stirring her medicine, another time closing the cheese crock, another,

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, 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, there's a piece of juniper leaf on it, that 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 bigger and you have to take care of her. And the colossal hydrangea there in the shade, next to the drain with its dusk-colored velvety bricks, he was the doll's father and she 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 ever to come back but I have to because they feed me and dress me but I prefer going 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 boss's daughter's sweetheart and sissy, sissy because of the dolls. Until one day Don Alejo sees me spying 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 vicuña. And he drags me through the bushes and I hang onto his cape because it's so soft and so hot

and he drags me along and I tell him they didn't give me permission to come, liar, he knows everything, you're a liar Pancho, don't pull away, who's going to take care of her except you, and he pushes me toward the big park and I have to look for her in the briar bushes, and I run and my feet get tangled in the periwinkles but what's the reason for running so hard, she's where she always is, in the hydrangea, in the shade by the wall embedded with shiny pieces of broken bottles, and I find her and touch her and from the tip of my body, after running and breaking through the underbrush, the tip of my body drips something and wets me 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's cutting off 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 eyes 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 to stop them from giving him shipments. 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 not afraid of the old man. And because he didn't want to answer he didn't. They made a complete turn around the porch without speaking. The park was quiet but alive, and the silence in the wake of their voices was heavy 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 bare jasmine spikes piercing raindrops, the slow footsteps that halted at the house door.

"It's cold...."

"Of course. There's a lot of fresh air here."

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 Octavio handed him.

"Tons of it...."

"What did you say?"

"Tons...of fresh air...."

Pancho cut his brother-in-law off before he could continue, inspired by his victory. Or was it a victory? Don Alejo seemed too calm. Maybe he hadn't heard.

"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. She's well, I hope."

Don Alejo walked to the end of the porch to see them

off. Crossing the mud on their way to the truck they turned and saw the four dogs beside him.

“Easy with the dogs....”

Don Alejo laughed out loud.

“Get ’em Sultan....”

The four dogs shot after them. They barely had time to leap into the truck before they started clawing the doors. As they turned toward the exit the headlights lit up Don Alejo’s figure at the top of the steps for a moment and then the advancing lights gradually swallowed the palm trees along the lane. Pancho took a deep breath.

“That’s that.”

“You didn’t let me call him a bastard to his face.”

“Aw, the old goat isn’t so bad.”

But he’s an operator. Octavio had been telling him that on their way into town and he believed him then, but now it was harder to believe. He said even the stones on the road to Estación knew it. Don’t be an idiot the old man never intended to bring electricity to town, it was all lies, on the contrary, now it suited him better that the town never had electricity. Don’t be naive, that old man’s a shyster. The times he went to talk to the Commissioner were just to irritate him, so he’d never give the town 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 everybody to move out of town. And since he owns most of the houses, if not all of them, what can he lose by having another chat with the Commissioner so that he’ll grant him the land the streets are on, it was his

to begin with, and then he'll tear down the houses and plow the town, rich, fallow land, and plant vineyards as if the town had never existed, hell, that's what he's after. Now that his plans for making Estación El Olivo an important town have fallen through, because he thought the highway would come right by his door....

Leaning over the wheel Pancho studies the darkness because he has to 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 those trees that I'm abandoning forever. I thought all this would keep some trace of me, so that later I could think about these streets I'm driving along, but now they won't exist and I won't be able to remember them, because already they 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 Nonnita. I'd like to have a place to come back to, not really to come back to, but to have it there in case, that's all, and now I won't. Because Don Alejo's going to die. The certainty of Don Alejo's death drained the night and Pancho had to clutch the steering wheel to keep from falling into that abyss.

"Octavio."

"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 a place to go back to and didn't care. He was the best man in the world because he made his own way and now he owned a service station and a little café on the north-south highway where hundreds of trucks

passed. He did what he wanted and his wife gave him spending money, not like Ema who took all the money as if he owed it to her. Octavio was a great man, really great. It was a stroke of luck that he married his sister. It was good to have someone to back you up.

“We settled the score. Better not to have anything to do with him. They’re a bad lot, pal, I’m telling you, you don’t know the trouble I’ve had with those sons of bitches.”

They were coming into town.

“Where are we going?”

“To celebrate.”

“But where?”

“Where do you think, old buddy?”

“To Japonesita’s.”

“To Japonesita’s it is.”

9

JAPONESITA put out the lamp.

“It’s him.”

“Again?”

After they slammed the truck doors, a dense moment of waiting passed, so long that it seemed the men had gotten lost in the night. When they finally pounded on the door, la Manuela clutched her flamenco dress.

“I’m going to hide.”

“Papa, wait....”

“He’s going to kill me.”

“And what about me?”

“Who cares. He swore he’d 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 protection, let her protect herself, if she wanted to give in to him, let her give in to him, she, la Manuela, wasn’t in the mood to save anybody, barely her own skin and much less Japonesita, who called her “papa,” papa when la Manuela was afraid Pancho would

kill her for being a fag. The best thing was to sneak away and spend the night with Ludovina, warm in her bed, a nice double bed, no, none of that getting into bed with a woman, now that she knew what could happen to her. But maybe Ludo had some leftover pastries from lunch and could heat them over the coals and serve some tea and they could talk about nice things, Misia Blanca's hats when they used to wear hats, and forget all this, because she certainly wasn't going to tell Ludo about it, she didn't want her to ask questions she'd have to answer. Until this thing let up and faded into the darkness, until she could say to Ludo how do you like that, maybe she could tell her about it tomorrow, how do you like that, the girl finally made up her mind and took him to her room, she's finally come down off her high horse, everything's going to be okay now, and darkness would surround everything until it would be time to go to sleep and she could fall drop by drop by drop into the puddle of sleep that would spread until it completely filled Ludo's warm room.

The light in the parlor went on again. A man appeared in its rectangle. The Victrola needle began to rasp against a record. Octavio leaned against the door frame. La Manuela stepped back, opened the henhouse grid and hid under the water dispenser next to the perch bleached white by chicken shit, and Lucy's turkey began to strut and bristle its feathers, all swelled up and angry. La Manuela tried to warm one of her hands under her shirt but every crease in her musty skin seemed like frosted cardboard, so she took it back out.

Japonesita crossed the rectangle of light, clinging to Pancho Vega.

La Manuela knew they'd soon begin to search the house for her. If only Japonesita were woman enough to keep them busy to divert their virility toward herself, she who needed it so much! But no. They were going to search. La 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, dishes, glasses, their clothes, the women, and her too if they found her. That's why they came. They can't fool me. Those men didn't just appear out of the night to rush into the house, go to bed with just any woman and drink a few bottles of just any wine, no, they came for her, to sacrifice her, to make her dance. They knew she had made it 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, la Manuela knows it. For the present he settled for dancing with Japonesita. But he'd come looking for her. Yes, I should have gone to Ludo's. But no. Japonesita was dancing, strange, because she never danced, even when 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 dripping over Pancho, his black mustache hidden in Japonesita's neck. His dirty mustache, the bottom hairs tinged with wine and nicotine. And clutching the bottom of her buttocks, his hands stained with nicotine and car grease. And Octavio stand-

ing 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. La Manuela's hand, back between her skin and her shirt, right where her heart beats, clenches until it hurts, as if she'd 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 again, I don't have fists to protect you, I only know how to dance and to shiver here in the henhouse.

...But one time I didn't shiver. Big Japonesa's naked body, oh, if I had that warmth now, if Japonesita had it so she wouldn't need other heat, Big Japonesa's naked, 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 didn't know they existed, heavy and red tipped by the lamp light that we didn't put out so 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, that drunken woman's mouth searching for mine the way a pig roots in a swamp though we agreed 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 refused, shriveling it tight, biting her greedy lips, hiding my face in the pillow, anything, because I was terrified to see Japonesa violating our agreement, something was beginning to stir and I didn't...I didn't want 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 and ghastly act, that there was no harm done but...and Don Alejo watching us. Could we fool 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 drinking it I spilled half the glass on the pillow next to Japonesa's head whose flesh was wooing me, and then another glass. After that she hardly said 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 this is monstrous, unnecessary, they're betraying me, oh how clearly I saw 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 in the triangular vegetation between 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 beasts, and that boiling so different from mine, my foolish doll's body, depthless, everything on the surface, useless hanging, while she caresses me with her mouth and sweaty palms, her eyes closed terribly so I won't know what's happening inside, everything open inside, passages and channels and caverns and me there, dead in her arms, in her hand that's urging me to live, yes, you can, and me nothing, and on the box next to the bed the lamp hissing lightly near 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 this, and she begins to murmur again, like the lamp, in my ear, and I hear laughter in the window: Don Alejo watching me, watching us writhe, knotted together and sweating 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 those watching, Don Alejo and the others who are laughing at us, don't hear what Big Japonesa is slowly saying in my ear, this is so sweet, honey boy, don't be afraid, we won't do anything, it's just an act to make them believe it, don't worry honey and her voice is warm like an embrace and her wine-stained breath all over me, but now I'm not so worried because no matter how much her hand touches me I don't have to do anything, nothing, it's just an act, nothing's going to happen, it's for our house, that's all, for our house. Her smile stuck on the pillow, etched in 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; tell me I'm the first, the only, so I can have you all to myself my pretty little girl, my love, Manuelita I'm going to have you, I like your terrified body and all your fears and I want to destroy your fear, no, don't be afraid Manuela, no, not destroy them but gently smooth them away to reach a part of me that she, poor Big Japonesa, thought existed but doesn't exist and never has, it never has existed despite your touching and caressing me and murmuring...it doesn't exist, stupid Japonesa, don't you

understand, it doesn't exist. No honey, Manuela, as if we were two women, look, see, our legs wound together, sex in sex, two identical sexes, 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 panties and loosening your brassiere so your breasts will be bare and I can play 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 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 devouring me, me, a me that doesn't exist, and she helps me, laughing with me because I'm laughing too, the two of us choked with laughter to cover the shame of our waves of emotion, and my tongue in her mouth and what does it matter that they're watching us from the window, that makes it better, sweeter, until I shudder and am mutilated, bleeding inside of her while she screams and clutches me and then falls, my precious little boy, what a sweet 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 in a dream: my sweet girl, my sweet boy, her words muffled in the pillow. We can't tell any-

body, 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 never again, Japonesa, oh God how disgusting, swear to me, partners yes, but this no, never again because what I'm needing so much now no longer exists, that you and that me I'd like so desperately to call to from this corner of the henhouse, while I watch them dance, there in the parlor....

...the fists he doesn't have are useless for everything curling themselves up in the faded percale of his dress. Kill Pancho with the dress. Hang him with it. Lucy went out to the patio as if she had been waiting for the moment.

"Ssssttt."

She looked around.

"Lucy, over here...."

In the parlor the record keeps repeating.

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

"Go on into the parlor."

"I'm going. Is anyone there?"

"Pancho and Octavio."

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

"Is she alone?"

"Go on, I said."

What right does that damn whore Lucy have to criticize her because she's hiding in the henhouse? Tomorrow she'll make her pay the money she owes her for a dress, she's been pretending she forgot about it. Since men prefer her, she thinks we have to put up with her.

She's here on charity like all the rest. And Japonesita too. So what right do they have? Right to what? Papa. What do you mean papa. Please, it only hurts 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 until they forget their sniveling wives while she, the artist, receives applause, and the light bursts into an infinity of stars. Why think about the scorn in the laughter that she knows so well, it's all 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 is, she's still more woman than all the Lucys and Clotys and Japonesitas on the face of the earth...arching her back and pursing her lips and tapping furiously, they'd laugh harder and their wave of laughter would carry her up, up into the lights.

Let Japonesita scream in there. Let them make her learn to be a woman, as they had made her. Lucy is dancing with Octavio, but she's the only one capable of turning the party into something thrilling, because she's la Manuela. Even though she might be trembling here in the dark surrounded by chicken shit that's so old it doesn't even smell anymore. They 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 on the stairs. And his shoes...yes, bare feet like a real gypsy. He removes his pants and he's naked 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 dainty little gypsy girl, a mere child about to dance, that's why she doesn't have breasts, almost like a little boy, but she's not, she's feminine, with her curved figure and all.... La 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 with Japonesita. What does she have to do with it. She's just the great artist who's come to Japonesita's house to do her number, she's a fag, 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 in style. Let them, let thirty men do whatever they want to her. If only I were younger and could take 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 a big girl now, poor thing, she doesn't know what she's missing, Pancho's hands squeezing my pretty girl, don't be silly, don't waste your life, I'm your friend, I, la Manuela, I'm going to dance so that everything will be lively 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. La Manuela walks 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 muddy feet and she removes a vine leaf clinging to the muck on her heel and goes 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.

10

DON ALEJO would give Don Céspedes all the wine he could drink, drink, Don Céspedes, he'd say again and again, that's what it's for, but Don Céspedes was a moderate man. Sometimes a small glass before going to bed on the pile of sacks among the wooden barrels cured by harvests and harvests of wine. It was the same wine that Don Alejo would sell to Japonesita wholesale, 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 were always bothering some part of his body, he'd put on his sandals, throw a blanket over his shoulder, walk through the vineyard, cross the Palos canal on a fallen willow trunk, and poking through the barbed-wired blackberry thicket laced with gaps known only to himself, he'd reach Japonesita's house where he'd silently install 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 gatehouse.

Octavio saw him come in. Japonesita 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 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 at one fixed point in the darkness, as if it contained a detailed blueprint of the night.

"The dogs...."

"What did you say, Don Céspedes?"

"They turned the dogs loose in the vineyard."

They listened.

"I don't hear a thing."

"Me neither."

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

A flock of geese flew over the town.

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

Japonesita and Octavio tried to listen to the night, but they couldn't penetrate its obstreperous music, nor glean the country's atoms of noise and faraway gusts of information. Octavio poured himself a glass of wine.

"And who let the dogs loose?"

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

"Why does he?"

"When he's in a strange mood...and tonight he was. Tonight, when he came to the gatehouse, he told me he was going to die, a doctor told him so. He said strange

things...that he seemed to be leaving nothing behind because all his projects had failed....”

“Greedy bastard...if a millionaire like him is a failure, where does that leave us poor people?”

“I’ll bet anything he’s in the vineyard with them.”

“And why does he turn them loose if there wasn’t a grape left after harvest and there’s no reason to break in?”

“Who knows. Sometimes people come for other reasons.”

“Like what?”

“You’ve got to be 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 from the other side of the carbon lamp, 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. Once someone told her that Don Céspedes didn’t even eat anymore, that sometimes Don Alejo’s house servants would remember his existence and look all over for him, in the warehouses and sheds, and they’d take him some bread or cheese or a hot plate of food. But then they’d forget him again and who knows how the old man would feed himself, sleeping on sacks in the warehouses, lost among the plows and machinery and bales of straw and clover, on top of a pile of potatoes.

Pancho and Lucy sat down at the table.

“What is this, a funeral....”

No one answered.

“Cheer up, pal, 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 dark as Don Céspedes. Pancho 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 let her alone right then and there. But why should he? Because the old man told him to, because Don Alejo warned him not to go near her? We’re not outlaws, Don Alejo, we’re as good as you, so don’t look down on us, don’t think that....

“Let’s dance, honey.”

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 vast, stretched time 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 howling 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 into the interior of her ears until he remained fixed there. She smiled at Octavio because she saw he was annoyed.

“God it’s boring....”

Don Céspedes yawned and listened.

“That’s Sultan....”

“How do you know which dog?”

“I trained them for Don Alejo, I’ve known them since they were pups. 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 has injured his paw, we shut ourselves up, Don Alejo and I, with the dog, and he shoots him.... I hold him so the bullet will hit the right spot and then I bury him. And when the bitch we keep locked up at the far end of the orchard is in heat, we give the dogs a stimulant, and Don Alejo and I, we shut ourselves up again with the dogs in the shed, and the beasts fight over the bitch, they go mad, sometimes they’re wounded, 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. It makes Doña Blanca furious, 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, always have 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 he kills kept on living, Don Alejo’s four dogs, always per-

fect, he likes them 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 Japonesita sat down and listened.

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

"He's going to die...."

"Enough with Don Alejo!"

Enough. Let him die. Don Alejo and his charming wife could go to hell as far as he was concerned. Couldn't he and his friend have some 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 marmalade jars with white labels written in the angular nun script that he, Pancho Vega, was forever writing—Plum—Peach—Apricot—Raspberry—Chokeberry—and the jars of preserved pears and cherries in brandy and plums floating in yellow syrup. And further on, the rows of white earthenware molds in the shape of castles: apple or quince marzipan, and they always gave Moniquita a 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 for 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 who smelled of clothing, and the harsh-voiced horn, just like Daddy's voice Normita always said. His. More his

than his wife. Or daughter. If he wanted, he could race it down the knife-straight highway, tonight, for instance, he could race it like a wild man, blowing his horn at anything he felt like, slowly pressing 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 could turn the wheel a little more, barely flexing my wrists, but enough to make the truck go off the road, bounce and overturn and become a smear of silent, smoking iron on the edge of the road. If I feel like it. And I don't have to explain anything to anybody. Under his hand Japonesita's leg began to relax.

Japonesita was drinking a glass of wine. She wished Lucy would go dance with Octavio so that she could drink it all on the sly. Wine. All the men who ever came to her house smelled of wine and everything tasted like wine. During harvest the wine odor invaded the entire town, and the rest of the year, heaps of grape pressings rotting by the warehouse doors. Disgusting. She had the same wine smell, like the men, like the whores, like the town. What else was there 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'd get into bed and drink until she was a total wreck the next day, working like a mule from the crack of dawn, her nose red and her stomach queasy. But I never noticed the smell of wine on my mother. And Big Japonesa was a great one for drinking, everybody knew that. She always smelled of Flores de Pravia soap even though she had drunk quarts

of wine in the parlor, and then my mother would light up like a torch and there was no stopping her from talking and laughing and dancing. How did she do it? Her warmth would fill the bed when she'd fall into it and Japonésita would have to undress her, she or la Manuela. Even the tomb in which they laid her in San Alfonso was probably hot and she would never 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 since she was born. And she played among trouser legs under the tables while they drank, hearing their obscenities 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 dollars uselessly? The hand moving along her thigh was saying that, because now she wasn't afraid of it and la Manuela had told her, had asked her who are you, and the hand that assaulted her thigh, while the man it belonged to yawned, could give her the answer, this 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 hair, the square nail advancing and she didn't want it to but now yes, yes, to find out who you are Japonésita, now you'll know, that hand and that warmth from his heavy body and afterward, even if he

goes away, at least something will remain from this night....

“God this is boring....”

Then he looked the old man in the face.

“Right, Don Céspedes?”

He smiled.

“Hey, Octavio, let’s go somewhere else....”

Don Céspedes asked him:

“Why?”

“This place has no atmosphere.”

It was only then that he realized 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 stiff. Pancho gave her a shove that almost knocked her to the floor.

“I’m fed up.”

He started to walk around the tables.

“Shitpile of a whorehouse! Doesn’t even have whores. Where are the other girls? And that beat-up Victrola. Nothing to stuff your gut with even. Let’s see.... Bread: stale. Cold cuts...huh, half rotten. And what’s this? Candy crusted with flies from the year one. Japonesita, dance at least. Do a striptease. Dance? How the hell can you if you’re as stiff as a broom. Not like your mother, she was built like a barn but she was graceful. Like la Manuela, they say....”

The same eyes. He remembered from last year la

Manuela's eyes looking at him and he looked back at those terrified eyes, shining between his hands that squeezed her neck and her eyes looking 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 la Manuela?"

Japonesita didn't answer.

"And la Manuela, I said?"

"My father has gone to bed."

"Send for her."

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

He grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her.

"Don't tell me the old whore is sick! Do you think I came to look at your frigid little rabbit's face? No, I came to see la 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. It can't be all so damn sad in this town Don Alejo's going to tear down and plow under, surrounded by vineyards that are going to swallow it up, and tonight I'll have to go home and sleep with my wife and I don't want to, I want to have fun, that nutty Manuela has to come out and save us, there must be something better than this, she has to come out.

"La 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.

“You’re right. Madame Manuela is your father.”

“Don’t call him that.”

Pancho burst out laughing

“At this late date, honey?”

“Don’t call him that.”

“AND why not?”

La Manuela stopped in the center of the parlor.

“Put on ‘El Relicario’ for me.”

Back arched, arm raised, snapping her fingers, she circled around the empty space in the center, pursued by her muddy, shredded red train. Applauding, Pancho tried to kiss her and hold her, laughing his head off at this crazy old harridan, this dried prune of a queer, shouting yessir, darling, now the party really starts...but la Manuela slipped away from him, snapping her fingers, weaving proudly among the tables before delivering herself up to her dance. Japonesita went over to stop her. Before Pancho slapped her away she managed to murmur:

“Go inside....”

“You dumb girl, how much longer do I have to put up with you? You go inside if you want. Right, Pancho? You’re spoiling all the fun.”

“Yeah, go away....”

He dropped into a chair. From there he shouted that now things were moving, why weren’t there more people,

bring wine, pastry, a roast pig, everything they had, he was paying, to celebrate.... Lucy honey, sit here and you pal where have you been you left me stranded at this funeral come on over Don Céspedes don't be afraid you'll catch cold if you stay so far away and a whore came out to the noise and revived the lamp's flame and Cloty stationed herself beside the Victrola to change the records, staring popeyed at la Manuela....

“Good God, look at this old pro....”

In Talca they had told Cloty about la Manuela's dances, but how was she to believe it, the crazy thing was so old. She wanted to watch. They lit two lamps on the table near the platform and then Pancho saw la Manuela's eyes glow, like flames, he remembered them between his hands, and Japonesita'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, drink up everybody, it's on me. He held la Manuela's head and forced her to take a long drink like him and la Manuela wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Lucy was asleep. Don Céspedes was watching la Manuela but as if he didn't see her.

“Go to it, Manuela my love, go to it.... Let's make my farewell party a good one. And anyway you're all going to be wiped out, whoosh...blown away by you know who. Don Céspedes, you know Don Alejo is going to wipe out every one of these ball-busters, just for the hell of it....”

In the fields surrounding the town, the vineyards and night were perfectly sketched under the moon: Don

Céspedes saw it with wide-open eyes. The methodical stripes, the orderly pattern that contained 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: la Manuela on the platform in her glowing dress must amuse them and kill dangerous, mercurial time that wants to devour them, demented Manuela on the platform: they applaud. They tap their heels on the dirt floor, they slap the lame table where the lamps quiver. Cloty changes the record.

Pancho suddenly becomes quiet watching la Manuela. Watching that thing dancing in the center of the room, all eye sockets, hollows, spasmodic shadows, that thing which is going to die despite its cries, that incredibly repulsive thing that, incredibly, is the party, and dances for him, he knows he aches to touch it and caress it, he doesn't want that writhing thing to be alone there in the center but against his skin, and Pancho lets himself watch and caress from a distance that old queer who is dancing for him and he surrenders to her dance, and now it isn't funny anymore because it's as if he too were gasping for breath. Octavio mustn't know. He can't know. No one must know. They mustn't see him being touched and fondled by la 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. La Manuela's dance handles

him and he would like to grab her like this, till she breaks, that corrupt body fluttering in his arms and me with a quivering Manuela, pressing her against me so she doesn't move so much, so she stays still, holding her, till 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 rough hair that grew to where his shirt opened at the neck. He relaxed under Lucy's hand.

The music stopped.

“The Victrola's broken.”

Octavio got up to try and fix it. He quickly took it apart on the counter while Lucy and Japonesita watched. It didn't look as if it would work again. La Manuela, sitting on Pancho's lap, gave him a glass of wine. She begged him to go away from here, no, no, the three of them should 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 don't even make those prehistoric machines anymore, let's go, please let's go. With 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, take me away, honey, I can't stand this any longer. 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 bit of light, I've never left this hole, because they tricked me into staying 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 there's always something good to eat, even ducks if the customers ask for them, and there are singers, I don't know if the Farías sisters are there, I don't think so because they'd be older than me, it's all the same, somebody else who's as good with the harp and guitar as the Farías sisters used to be, may they rest in peace. Let's go now, take me away, look how that cruel girl tells everyone she's my daughter to make me stay, you saw how she treats me, like a servant, her own mother, and she never lets me go out except for mass and to see Ludo. I want to go away with you and have a party somewhere that's fun, where we can laugh for a while....

"It's a mess."

"What's wrong with it?"

"The spring broke."

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

"Where?"

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

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

They talked for a while and paid Japonesita.

“Where are you going?”

“What’s it 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.”

La Manuela saw that Japonesita said it spitefully, to ruin everything and make them remember. But la Manuela looked at Pancho and the two of them laughed so hard that they almost blew out the lamps.

“Sure, I’m your mother.”

“No. My father.”

But they were already leaving, la Manuela, Pancho, and Octavio, arm in arm and stumbling. La 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 underbrush grew along the path and the blackberry’s eternally renewed leaves covered that mass of things with their precise, obsessive, detailed graphic lines. They made their way to the truck parked on the corner. They walked on either side of la Manuela, holding her waist. La Manuela swayed toward Pancho and tried to kiss his mouth while he laughed. Octavio saw it and let go of la Manuela.

“Come on, pal, don’t you be a fag too....”

Pancho also let go of la Manuela.

“I didn’t do a thing....”

“No excuses, I saw....”

Pancho was afraid.

“You think I’d let this cruddy fag kiss me, are you out of your mind, pal, would I do something like that? Let’s ask Manuela, hey, did you kiss me?”

La 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 threateningly over la Manuela.

“Let’s find out.”

His fist was clenched.

“Don’t be silly, boys, let’s get on with the party.”

“Did you or did you not 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. La Manuela looked around frantically, for 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, paralyzed by Octavio who was twisting her arm, la Manuela woke up. He wasn’t la Manuela. He was Señor 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, slipped and fell in the mud while Pancho bent over to help him up. And la Manuela, gathering his skirts

up around his waist, fled toward the station. Familiar with the street, he avoided the ruts and stones while his pursuers stumbled at 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 cut by the rocks or a piece of glass or a tin can, but he had to keep running because Don Alejo promised 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 protect 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, 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, 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 will defend me with his shotgun. You can kill these sick bastards and no one will say a thing, after all you're a great man, you can do anything and fix it up later with the police.

He crosses the blackberry-covered fence without realizing that the barbed wire is tearing his dress. He crouches beside the canal. Further on is the vineyard: the dirty water 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 belfry there where the vineyards meet, 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 any further. He drops on the grass. Nothing, silence: even the natural sounds of the night have stopped. La 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, and his legs and suddenly the cold of the entire night, of the leaves and grass and water at his feet, if he could only cross this river, but how, how if he can barely move, sprawled on the ground.

“My little darling....”

“Now you're really going to get it....”

“No...no....”



Before he could move, the men burst through the bushes and fell upon him like hungry animals. Octavio, or maybe Pancho first, started lashing at him with fists...perhaps it wasn't them, but other men who had pierced the thicket and found him and thrown themselves upon him, their hot bodies writhing, gasping over la Manuela who could no longer scream, their heavy, stiff bodies, the three of them one sticky mass squirm-

ing like some fantastic, three-headed animal with multiple limbs, wounded and seething, the three fused there in the grass by vomit and heat and pain, looking for the one to blame, punishing him, her, them, shuddering gratifications, excruciating confusion, la Manuela's frail body resists no more, breaks under the strain, can't even moan from the pain, hot mouths, hot hands, slavering, hard bodies wounding his, bodies that howl and insult and grope, that monster of three tortuous bodies, breaking and tearing and raking and probing, until nothing is left and now la Manuela scarcely sees, scarcely hears, scarcely feels, sees, no, doesn't see, and they escape through the blackberry bushes and she is left alone by the river that separates her from the vineyards where Don Alejo waits, benevolent.

Image captures
change toward increasing
complexity.

“THAT’S Sultan.”

Another bark, further away.

“That’s Moor. He likes to lie beside the wall of the blacksmith’s shop at night 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 lamp’s dwindling flame. She turned it down till it was barely a point inside the lamp. She, too, listened to the dogs. She and la Manuela heard them so often last night that they could hardly sleep, but this was different. Because the sky had cleared up around the moon after the rain and the dogs were howling steadily at it, as if they were talking to it or begging it for something or serenading it, and since the moon was too far-away to hear them, 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. May as well throw it in the canal. It's no 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 never going to. Don Alejo came to tell me today."

Don Céspedes sank into his chair, smaller than ever. He pushed the mess of worn cogs, screws, nuts, and wires aside, and slid his glass nearer. Almost empty. Barely a couple of red fingers at the bottom where the flame multiplied its reflections

"It looks like one of those things 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; time had an eerie way of stretching itself, today seemed short, tomorrow endless, and you never knew in what part of the night you were.

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

"Another what?"

"Another Victrola. From one of those places that sells things secondhand, in the stores here I'll never find one like this that you have to crank. This was my mother's. I know a place where they sell used ones, 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 can make me a good price."

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

They listened. It was easy for Japonesita to sketch the

whole countryside in her imagination now, as if, like Don Céspedes, she had suddenly acquired the power to roll out the country like a carpet so that it filled her whole head.

“They’re restless tonight.”

Because the moon’s out Japonesita said to herself, or maybe said out loud, or maybe Don Céspedes, bent over the stove, 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 roamed all night around the walks and under the oak. I watched him from the gatehouse in case something happened, you know how bad people are, so many have sworn to get him. I stayed there without his seeing me, and he kept walking 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 barking.”

“God 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 anybody these days.”

The old man yawned. Japonesita yawned. Tomorrow she was going to Talca. Like every Monday. Now she couldn’t daydream about the Wurlitzer. So much the

better. Try and be like Don Céspedes who never day-dreamed about anything, just watching to see if anything happened, alert, hiding in the shadows. Alert, that's all, no Wurlitzers. Just a secondhand Victrola to replace the one Pancho Vega broke. No, Pancho didn't break it. He had left. He was never coming back. Just as well: he left tranquillity behind, no expectations whatsoever, which was better than tranquillity here in Estación El Olivo, until they finally plowed the whole town under. Except her house. No matter what Don Alejo said she wasn't going to sell it. No sir. He can do whatever he wants with the rest of the town but I'm staying here, right where I am. Even if less and less 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 I always get, sugar, tea, noodles, red chili, the same things I always get.

Don Céspedes stood up, listening. Japonesita picked up the screws, cogs, the broken spring, and tied them all in her handkerchief to save. You never know when you might need them.

"I have to go."

"Why?"

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

Japonesita smiled at him.

"How much?"

"Ten cents."

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

“And la Manuela?”

Japonesita shrugged.

“Can’t something happen to him?”

“What could happen?”

“He’s old.”

“He might be old but every day he gets fonder of chas-ing 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, goes crazy, and leaves with them...the wine excites him and they go to Talca and sometimes even further. One of these days something’s 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 of wander-ing around whorehouses 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 for being a queer. Why should I worry! He has nine lives like a cat. I’m tired of the whole thing. And with Pancho’s talent for celebrating they’ll be roaming around for at least a week. The police know him and don’t say anything, they bring him back without telling anyone about it, I give them a few drinks, and it’s like nothing happened. But there

might be a new policeman, one of those who gets an idea and doesn't let go. 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, forgive him, he won't do it again, and he says he's going to throw his flamenco dress away, you saw it, it's a rag, but he doesn't throw it away, 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 father cries and says what a horrible fate and says what would become of me without my beloved daughter, his only support, and don't ever 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. It's been over a year now 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 studies him, trying to guess what he hears.

"No, nothing, Don Céspedes...."

She walked him to the door. She opened it just a bit, barely a crack for Don Céspedes to slide through. A little wind and some stars filtered in and she huddled in her pink shawl. Then she bolted the door. Rubbing her hands she walked among the tables, putting out the lamps one by one.

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

She's told them she doesn't like them to light so many

lamps when there are so few people, they can't make a profit. The air is full of reeking carbon. Of course, the dance...oh well. She went out to 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 dawn. She went to her room and got into bed without even lighting a candle.

JOSÉ DONOSO

Born in 1924, José Donoso is recognized as one of the major writers of the South American "Boom" generation, which he, himself, helped to define. Among his many novels translated into English are *Coronation*, *This Sunday*, *The Obscene Bird of Night*, *Taratula* and *Still Life with Pipe*, *The Garden Next Door*, *A House in the Country*, and *Curfew*. *El Lugar sin Limites* (*Hell Has No Limits*) was first published in 1966, and is considered one of his outstanding achievements. *Coronation* won the William Faulkner Foundation Prize in 1962.

Donoso lived for eighteen years away from his homeland, Chile, first in the United States and, later, in Spain. Several years ago, he returned to Chile, where he now resides.

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HELL HAS NO LIMITS

José Donoso

Translated from the Spanish by Suzanne Jill Levine

With its stark atmosphere, powerful characterizations, and dazzling alterations of perspective in time and gender, José Donoso's early masterwork, *Hell Has No Limits*, anticipates the qualities of better-known works of this Chilean magic-realist such as *The Obscene Bird of Night*.

Originally published in 1966, this grimly vivid novel evokes the sweetness and despair during one fateful day in the collective existence of Estación El Olivo, a decayed community marked for doom as surely as Donoso's central character, the transvestite dancer/prostitute. The novel's marginal daughter operates the brothel.

La Manuela is menaced by his would-be protector, the local politician/land baron who wants to raze Estación El Olivo for his expanding vineyards, and by a coldly vengeful trucker, nursing a lifetime of hurts, deprivation, and suppressed sexual ambiguity. The lives of this trio—past and present—are indelibly forged in the novel's stunning climax, which combines a shocking act of violence in the present with a bizarre erotic encounter from decades before.

Author of *A House in the Country*, *Coronation*, *This Sunday*, *Curfew*, and numerous other works, Donoso is one of the great Latin American "boom" novelists. This first single-volume edition of *Hell Has No Limits* makes this important work available in a revised translation by Suzanne Jill Levine for the first time in twenty years.



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