Blue

by

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Translated
by
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I

> "Can the transports of first love be calmed, checked, turned to a cold suspicion of the future by grave quotation from a work on Political Economy? I ask – is it conceivable? Is it possible? Would it be right? With my feet on the very shores of the sea and about to embrace my blue-eyed dream, what could a good-natured warning as to spoiling one's life mean to my youthful passion?"
>
> Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*

There was nothing especially attractive about the island, other than the great mass of red rock that soaked up the sun from dawn to dusk. Its eastern flank it fell sharply over the harbor, while on the west it dropped less steeply until it formed an arid and stony valley. From a distance it seemed to stand tall, like a watchtower, like a natural lighthouse sheltering the low hills covered with parched, thorny brush.

Most of the surface and the shoreline was so rocky that after many years, when no corner of the Mediterranean was left unexplored, there was only a small loamy beach left to save its scant and shabby population from tourist ostracism. It was, however, hard to get to, because the only access was by a narrow trail that climbed up among some ruins from the south pier, descended again and sometimes disappeared, or fooled the hiker by taking him onto dead-end paths between half-demolished, roofless structures, with empty windows and rubble-covered floors, from whose hidden entrails there grew, occasionally, a lonely and tortured fig tree. Getting back on the trail, or on what was left of it by dint of disuse, one could see in the distance the clear water and the sea bottom covered with sea urchins, but before getting there it spread helplessly into a marshy terrain and a short beach of coarse, hot red sand overgrown with weeds and littered with waste.

Except for the harbor, it was the only outlet to the sea. The rest of the coast had nothing but craggy rocks dropping down to the sea, cliff walls where the waves beat restlessly even when the sea was calm, so vertical that at high noon the entire perimeter of the coastline was surrounded by a narrow strip of shade, a relief on the opaque blue that, overwhelmed by sunlight, struggled to keep a minimal zone of coolness against the rocky mass.

After the bombings of the first years of the Second World War stripped it of its boats and its goods, of its houses and its churches, the existence of that piece of land seemed to have no reason for being other than becoming dry and drier, until it lost its color.

What should have been the principal attraction when the island was finally invaded by the destructive hordes of tourists was the Blue Cave, whose glories, along with a distorted history, were sung again and again by guidebooks and leaflets. For anyone who didn't know the arabesques of the coastline inch by inch, it would have been quite difficult to find it. Its entrance was almost at sea level, and when the current made the waves ripple, their height was enough to block the entrance with foam and crashing sounds. But for the few natives who were left there, no mistaking was possible. Even on days when the east wind angrily flailed the rocks, they knew how to use the undertow in order to slide the boat, rowing hard and carefully keeping their heads down almost at oarlock level, inside the cave with a precise shake.

Once inside, the water became viscous, dark, immobile. The confines maintained a cold temperature, a compact cold that did not penetrate, that remained like a bandage on the surface of the skin and transformed the roaring of the sea outside into a muffled echo of a giant seashell, into a velvety, embracing sound that enclosed the space even more forcefully than the very rocks that made it up. The vault could be seen only with the help of a lantern, and the smooth, oozing and dripping walls, of an intense dark blue, made iridescent by the refraction of the beam of light that was concentrated in the monumental horizontal ridge of the entrance, had nothing to do with the harsh, rugged, reddish appearance of the island's other face under the sun.

There was not much else on it: the little café with its three tattered tables under the mulberry trees with their decayed leaves in the corner of the little plaza that opened in the middle of the harbor, the row of recently built small houses on either side, their walls painted light blue like those flattened by the bombings, the ancient market with some marble columns and its sales counters still standing, the old power plant with its rudimentary generator on the north pier, which powered the few street lights on the banks, and, on the other side, beyond the beach with the urchin-covered sea bottom, a quarry that had last been used, years before, for the rebuilding of the Orthodox church whose outbuildings had spread out over the centuries, columns, cornices and domes clinging so tightly to the base of the main rock that they had become as one with it shortly before getting crushed by the bombs. A few years before, a mosque had been built on the cape that enclosed the harbor estuary on the south, and a small urban plaza had been developed on the very pier that, in winter, the northeast wind took care to sweep clean with its assaults.

This was all that could be seen from the sea, because the harbor, dominated by the red rock whose ridge still held some coppery remnants of the castle that gave the island its name, allowed only three or four jumbled rows of alleys, dark and untidy. And at noon, in the glare of the sun that in the course of its age-old history the rock had soaked up above the banks and the sheltered water of the bay, the heat was of the intensity of lead. And the barely two hundred people left in the town, wizened and stuck in time, slithered furtively in the shadows of its ruins or moved cautiously, oppressed by fear and confusion, as if they had crossed the threshold beyond which no return was possible, the way a string held taut an instant too long breaks in two or the way one caress too many becomes torment, or the way a love that goes beyond its bounds turns into hate, resentment and pain.

None of them had, however, heard about that island. Nor would they ever have known the lethargy of its burnt shores or the history – or the spell, who could know? – hidden by its ridgeless ruins, had it not been for an untimely engine breakdown. Leonardus might, at most, have run across it while consulting the chart, or perhaps on the way to Antalya they might have seen it from afar as yet another shadow whose profile would turn at dawn into a pink fortress hiding its secrets.

They had spent the previous night anchored in a cove enclosed by dark rocks, where they arrived at dusk after dodging a corridor of islets that were spread out at intervals in front of the coast, which they shielded from winds and currents. They dined once again under the awning, protected from the evening dew, and they let the hours go by, secure in the knowledge that nothing more was going to spoil that voyage that was coming to its end. Martín Ures had accepted the renewal of his contract with one of Leonardus' production companies for another six years – three films and six new television series; Andrea seemed to have recovered the color and perhaps a shade of the joy that her big blue eyes had once held, and Chiqui, though much younger than all the others, swore, roaring with laughter, that she had

never had so much fun. There had been no tensions, fights or accidents, the weather had been good, and they could go home in peace.

Tom, the Danish boy whom Leonardus had hired that summer, got up shortly after dawn. His long straight blond hair hung down over his forehead so that it covered his eyes, but without bothering to part it with his hand he stepped out of the aft cabin, leaving behind him the chaotic disorder of sheets, pillows, cassettes and T-shirts that had accompanied him since they started the trip ten days before, he slipped a loose knit sweater over his head, hopped into the dinghy that was attached to the sheet winch, loosened the knot and, holding on to the stern end with his hands held high he slid it over the gray crystal of the water to the rock where he had moored it the previous night.

Neither the gentle rocking of the *Albatross* after she was set free astern, nor, a little later, the metallic pounding of weighing anchor woke up either Martín Ures or Andrea, who was asleep at his side. But when the chain was stowed in the forefoot, like a serpent in a rocky cavity, and silence reigned again, he opened his eyes warily, fearful even of the milky light of dawn. He then sat up and looked around him to see what had awakened him. From the floor he picked up an empty whisky bottle that was rolling along with the swaying of the boat, he looked at his wife, and with the heaviness and slowness of a hangover he listened for a few minutes to her slow, steady breathing that sent forth a whistling sound like an animal's lament. Her head was thrown back and her hand was extended so that it hit the ribbing in a gesture of involuntary carelessness, and the sheet that was wrapped around one of her legs had acquired, in her sleep, the texture of a canvas. Her half-tormented eyelids barely hid the blue pupils and gave her an air even more absent than her deep sleep. She had slept restlessly, because she lay across the bunk and he perhaps would have woken up when he felt himself pushed against the wood. The cabin was small and followed the shape of the hull, narrowing towards the bow. He was going to put his hand on her thigh but he stopped himself. It was hot, and with every breath Andrea repeated the same tinny sound.

"She snores," Martín thought as he concentrated on the whistling, his vision dimmed and his mind confused. "She snores and she says that she doesn't snore."

He then fixed his look at the mist on the porthole, whose half-open curtain he drew back most carefully so as to avoid any noise or sudden movement. And, having lost all hope of going back to sleep, he stood up on the bed and put his head through the hatchway.

The engine was running and the *Albatross*, after some brief lurching, found her course and began to glide through the cool of dawn as it broke through the tame, shining waters not yet broken by the wind, while the engine's explosions broke the silence, and the rustle of the foam fled the hull and disappeared in the wake. She dodged the islets and left behind the dark curtains of the mountain range, and when she finally reached the open sea the huge red sun appeared in the sky and flooded the air with light of such force that the vista was left hazy and colorless.

Tom, with headphones on his ears, held the Coke can with one hand and moved the rudder back and forth with the other in order to stay on course, his eyes – almost covered by his straight white-blond hair that sun and salt had turned into tow – fixed on a point of the horizon.

They had sailed almost constantly with the engine. For, though Leonardus boasted of being a man of the sea, whenever the time came to raise the sails he gave confusing commands, became bewildered and ended up by telling Tom to haul them down, as a precaution, until conditions were favorable, he said. He was a corpulent man whom neither the years nor the watered-down whisky that he drank at all hours had deprived of the agility that he must have had when he was a young man trying to make a living in the port

of Sidon. He enjoyed talking about the days of his youth and, in order to give his words the greatest possible credibility, as he was doing it he took on a majestic air and the calm voice of an elder, all the while twirling the end of his thick black mustache with two fingers. He would dally on minute details about the humbleness of his dwelling, the number of siblings who slept in the same bed, the daily ruses for getting home with some coins, but except for having arrived in Naples stowed away between the timbers and bags of pistachios on a Cypriot freighter, no one ever found out how that scrawny boy who knew the most obscure corners of all the ports of the Levant had, twenty years later, become the international magnate – as he liked to call himself – with power and influence in all the channels of distribution and production of television programs, movies and videos – the world of the image, he would loudly repeat, distorting the words – whom Martín had met at Andrea's house years before. It was said that he was shrewd and skillful, capable of betraying his best friend without his finding out; that with his small, dark and penetrating eyes he could know the most recondite intentions of his adversaries and would get the upper hand in a negotiation with a quick and crafty maneuver. It was also said that he spoke an infinite number of languages perfectly and that he mangled and mixed them deliberately so that the others could speak without fear of being understood, that he kept women and children spread around the planet, that he owned private planes but used them only when he traveled alone, that movies and television were only covers to disguise his true condition as a businessman controlling hidden reaches of worldly power. He was known for always skirting danger, for knowing how to make himself indispensable by the strings he knew how to pull and for seeming, without ever succumbing to gossip or confidences, to be informed of any trifle that might happen in the most recondite area. And moreover, it was said, when things weren't going well for him he was an expert at landing on his feet. He always hopped from one city to another, from one hotel to another, with a woman at his side, never the same one, and though it was known that he had a family that lived in Pergamon and that he visited from time to time, no one had ever seen them or knew how many members there were, and Martín was convinced that, whether or not it really existed, it served his interests because, as Leonardus himself liked to repeat, there is always a solution for everything, a perfect solution that one must know how to find or, if not found, to invent.

And he was so unaccustomed to receiving orders and advice that, when he would order Tom to execute a maneuver that failed, he could barely abide Tom's silence, more admonitory than protests and quarrels. He tried to move under sail the first day, perhaps also the second, but after that, except a few calm times at dusk when the land breeze came in and the wind blew from aft, they had always sailed with the engine. On those rare occasions Tom yielded the helm to him, sat down astride the bowsprit and drank one Coke after another while he filled the silence of the sea with the music of his headphones.

"What's important isn't living, it's sailing!" Leonardus would roar, carried away with euphoria when the sail was full and they moved at top speed. And he repeated, shouting "Sailing! Sailing!" He would then draw Chiqui to his side and conscientiously run the hand that was not on the helm over her body so that the pleasure of sailing would be complete.

At that last daybreak the *Albatross* plied the calm water, barely rippled by the breeze that was rising with the day. And so they had decided to sail until they got to Antalya in the late afternoon. The weather forecast was good and everything seemed to be in order. Once in port they would sleep until dawn, at five in the morning a car would pick them up and for a few hours would retrace over the continuous curves of the coast the route that they had followed by sea during those days, and then would drop them at

the airport at ten o'clock for the flight to Istanbul. Leonardus would leave for London within the half-hour. The others expected to be in Barcelona by evening.

Martín looked at the sea without seeing it, half-closing his eyes so that he wouldn't be blinded by the reflection, like that on crystal, that had left the scene with opaque light. To one side the open sea, to the other the curtain of mountains, behind which stretched out Cappadocia, still asleep. A few more hours and the voyage would be over.

"Another glorious day," said Leonardus, mixing Spanish and English, as he stuck his head through the hatchway of the other aft cabin.

"Is she asleep?" asked Martín, pointing to the back of the cabin with his head.

"She's asleep," Leonardus affirmed with his head. "She's always asleep. But she's gorgeous, isn't she?"

Yes, it was true, Chiqui was gorgeous. But he could not remember how many times he had been forced to acknowledge that since they met at the Barcelona airport.

"Where did you ever find her?" Andrea had asked him then at a moment when the girl had gone to the newsstand.

"Isn't she gorgeous?" Leonardus asked without replying and looked ecstatically at how she made her way, haughty and distant, through the crowd of passengers and baggage. She had already approached the counter and with the same indifference, stroking the tuft of hair that was almost over her forehead and that gave her at least another four inches of height, she bought the packs of gum which she did not stop chewing during the entire trip.

It was true, she was gorgeous: her legs were long and tanned, and the skin of her neck and arms was peachy. Except for the tuft that she had tied up with a golden-flowered elastic band, her loose, curly blond hair came down to her waist, and everything about her had a little touch of vulgarity that made her even more attractive. Vulgarity in some disjointed, even heartless gesture, or in her unmodulated voice that maintained a monotonous, twangy high pitch, or perhaps those sayings that she constantly repeated to adorn the rudimentary vocabulary of her sentences. Or the way she laughed, coarsely, noisily and for no reason except to show off her scandalously white and perfectly arranged teeth.

Andrea had looked at her, smiling with a certain condescension that was perhaps directed more at Leonardus, but in her hazy glance there was, Martín realized instantly, an almost imperceptible shadow of peevishness. She would never have dared to wear black leather ankle boots, with no stockings, in the middle of summer, nor that bright-colored, seemingly bottomless bag that hung from her shoulder down to below her knees. Or perhaps her slight frown was hiding a concern, an anxiety over having to compete for more than a week, almost naked, with a woman, almost a girl, twenty years her junior.

Chiqui was always laughing, just because she felt like it or to fill a silence that she confused with boredom. And later on the plane, when he heard her from the back seat, Martín, his eyes shut so he wouldn't have to talk to anyone, observed in the back of his memory the crystalline, lilting, limpid, nuanced, radiant outbursts of Andrea's laughter when he first met her, a call that he never failed to heed, a mark for finding her at big parties, at concert intermissions, at book readings, at art openings – it was the time of their secret love – fully prepared accidental meetings in public places of the city in which he had arrived a few months before, where he got around with invitations that she furnished him, she, an intelligent, confident and attractive child of that world of professionals and intellectuals that had formed and coalesced at the time that the postwar years were fading away.

"You come from the darkness," she said to him then, always laughing.

Around nine o'clock Leonardus opened the door and settled down in the main cabin in order to arrange and put away the charts and maps. Martín again plopped down on the bunk and tried to sleep, but only managed to let himself be rocked to drowsiness by the undertow that was accentuated by the engine's vibrations.

But he must have fallen asleep later, because around ten o'clock he was awakened by the silence. The engine had stopped and Leonardus, who had already put his papers in his briefcase and had lain down next to Chiqui, found himself also sitting on the bed without understanding what was happening or where he was.

"Have we arrived?" Martín heard him ask, shouting, and almost immediately open the door and walk across the main cabin. Martín got up and followed him.

The *Albatross* was rocking with no rhythm or steering, the helm was spinning by itself, and Tom, who had lifted the hatch cover and was tinkering in the depths of the engine, paid no attention to Leonardus' questions. He finally came out and gestured to show that it was not starting, but in his matte-skin face there was hardly any sign of annoyance.

"We'll have to get into port and find a mechanic," he said. "Some transmission part is broken, I think." When he understood what was happening, Leonardus, who was struggling to get his caftan on, began to swear in mysterious tongues. He then returned to the cabin, bumped into the ladder, and took out once more the charts that he had already folded until he found the one he was looking for, and without fully unfolding and opening it, put on the glasses that he had hanging on a chain around his neck and began to study it thoroughly.

"How far is it to the coast?" Martín asked him.

"How do I know? Five miles, twenty, with this reflection nobody knows," he growled.

When after a while he went up on deck he no longer spoke anything but Italian, as if the bad mood that he was unable to hide prevented him from weaving the web of words and expressions that he knew so well.

"To Kastellorizo!" he ordered. "It's less than fifteen miles away and I don't want to turn back. It's Greek territory, so take down the Turkish flag and put up the Greek one." He sat on the bench of the bathtub, punched the wood hard with his fist, and, seeing the uselessness of his enraged gesture, howled at the blue sky: *"Porco Dio!"*

Without waiting for any new orders, Tom replaced the hatch cover and skipped over to untie the jib halyards. The sail unfurled, indecisively at first, until after two or three beats it took wind and, little by little, Tom, playing with the rudder, managed to steer the *Albatross*'s course again to the west, the sail swollen more than might have been expected in the still air of the morning. Only then did he begin to untie the mainsail halyards. The winch creaked and the sail began to climb up the mast till it reached the crosstrees. The boom shook a few times and then it too obeyed the rudder maneuvers. Tom let the wind fill the canvas of the mainsail while he held on to the foot of the jib; he then fastened the boom with the sheet, and once again silence reigned over the gentle rhythmic murmur of the bow as it made its way through the placid and silent waters of the morning. Lenoardus, sulking, paid no attention to Tom's movements and for once gave no orders. After a while Chiqui appeared on deck, unkempt, half asleep and almost naked, and began to smear herself with creams while glancing alternately at Tom and Leonardus without too much interest. Andrea and Martín were still in their cabin. In the immensity of the calm sea the *Albatross* seemed not to advance; only once in a while did Tom's tacking in order to

catch the scarce wind, the beating of the sails and the noise of the halyards give the hint of some movement. They sailed towards the island until noon, keeping to port the huge mainland wall, with no trace of villages or buildings that the sultry mists hid in the invisible streambeds and slopes of the mountains of Lycia.

Martín didn't like the sea. He had been aboard for over a week and he could barely hide that persistent feeling of anguish. If he stayed in the cabin reading he felt a weight in his stomach, a slight feeling of nausea that kept him from continuing; if he went up on deck he was overwhelmed by the sun and the constant hammering of the engine. Sometimes the wind was cold and even with the sun shining he had to go down to the cabin to get a sweater; most of the time, however, the heat was so stifling that he couldn't breathe even with the breeze. And when the cool air came at dusk, wherever he might sit down there would always be under his feet a rope, a cable they called it, that was absolutely indispensable at that moment, or Tom would be leaping over his knees to get to the bow, or would move him aside in order to get to a drawer hidden away exactly at the point where his legs were. And that odor, vaguely impregnated with diesel fuel, or the humidity that thickened as night fell and moistened seats, papers, even skin and face. When they would anchor in a cove the mosquitoes would pick him apart even before dinner, and if they slept in port the noises and voices of the pier kept him from sleeping. And when, after a sleepless night, he would finally get some sleep in the wee hours of the morning, "life at sea," as Leonardus would say while shouting on deck, demanded that he get up at dawn.

But above all he hated sailing, hours on end during which they moved toward a point that would come into view in slow motion, too long a shot to keep up interest. He restrained himself from asking how far they were, because he understood that one doesn't ask such things at sea. And when he saw them undertake an operation or cast anchor, all he did was stumble around on deck without knowing what was expected of him, because he did not understand the half-Italian, half-English seaman's lingo in which Tom and Leonardus communicated, nor did he realize that they had arrived at their destination, because he didn't know what the destination was, or the program, or the very point of sailing. Most of the time he lay face up on the bunk of his cabin, hoping to get to land, where nonetheless that annoying swaying sensation – that he couldn't shake even while sleeping – didn't go away for at least half an hour after stepping on the pier, and hearing Leonardus shouting, while standing in the bow with his whisky glass raised against the sky, "Who loves the sea loves the routine of the sea!" *Where did this mythologizing of the sea, of sea life, of sailing, come from? What was the difference between this routine and boredom?* thought Martín, perhaps because he never managed to adapt his thinking to the rhythm and counter-rhythm of sea, nor had he ever found that different tempo at which all the others seemed to be living. At times, when they were sailing with the sun in front of them, he watched them from the bench by the pool where he found shelter in the errant shade of the sail. Chiqui, ever inert, would stretch only to daub more ointment on herself; she was so inert and flattened against the floor that her naked body followed the boat's movements without ever separating from the deck. Leonardus, a cigarette constantly in his mouth, went up and down the ladders to check the compass and the navigation charts or to fiddle with the radio to hear the weather forecast, and as he passed her he would slap her naked thighs, always provoking the same reaction: "Cut it out, you oaf!"

Someone who was born beside the sea, who – even without seeing it – relies on the blue edge of the horizon and is accustomed to the moist, salty breeze that comes in at dusk, configures his world between limits from which the landscape is flattened and reaches out to infinity. And when he wanders inland he

searches, behind every hill, the blue line that will reorient him so that he will not feel lost among mountains and plains, among streets and squares, so that he will know where he is and find the way out. But Martín didn't get to know the sea until well past adolescence and never stopped viewing it as a strange, mysterious and menacing element.

Andrea, on the other hand, though she was no longer able to leap onto the pier by herself and had to be given a hand in order to cross the gangway, even with the attacks of vertigo that had begun a few years before, with the obvious weakness in her face and in her transparent and somewhat flaccid arms, lived on board without experiencing the least discomfort and moved around the boat with complete normality. When they sailed under a bright sun, with her straw hat crammed on her head down to her eyelashes in order to protect her skin, she would sit in the bow with an arm around the mast and, inert as a figurehead, would fix her stare at a distant point for a long time until she suddenly seemed to discover that Martín was on deck. She would then get up and, holding on tightly to the stays, walk from bow to stern to meet him. Martín was once again opening his book and trying to hide that mixture of tedium and seasickness that had not left him since the start of the voyage. He was sure that neither Leonardus nor, all the less so, Chiqui had noticed it, but he knew that Andrea had guessed it, though if she had hinted at it to him he would never have acknowledged it.

She had indeed been born beside the sea and from childhood her father had taught her how to move around boats' decks in fair weather or foul. On the first day of the voyage, in Marmaris, when Martín and Chiqui were drinking lemonade on the terrace of the harbor bar while waiting for Leonardus and Tom to return from the errands needed for setting sail, she had found time to buy some line, hooks, feathers and lead weights and every day at dusk she would sit astern behind the rudder and cast the troll that she had concocted herself. She would fix her gaze at a distant point of the sea and concentrate on the tension of the line against the finger which would transmit to her, from the depths of the sea, the movement of the hook hidden by the feather, and when she felt it she would give it a pull and then rhythmically take the line in so that it would form an almost perfectly piled-up, sinuous tangle of fibers, without tiring, pausing or accelerating the cadence of the intake. And when the end came, she would grab the fish and force it with one hand to open its mouth so that, with a deft stroke of the other hand, she could remove the hook without hurting the fish and, in the face of Chiqui's screams of horror and disgust, throw it into the bucket. Then, without bothering to contemplate it, she would cast the troll again and at the same time untangle the web that had gathered on the floor. When they would anchor in a cove, if there was still daylight, as soon as she felt that the anchor was no longer clawing at the sea bed and saw Tom letting out the chain, even before he jumped into the dinghy in order to tie the stern rope to a rock or to a tree trunk that the beatings of the sea had left white and naked, she would settle down in the bow with the creel and, bent over the railing, her glasses sliding down on her nose, she would hold on to some rigging with one hand and cast the line with the other. The western sun would swoop down, as though bypassing the sea, on the rocks of the coast, and the reflectionless waters took on a chiaroscuro transparency that kept her attention on the agitation of the fish in the depths without noticing the humidity that was gradually dampening the deck and curling her dark hair even more. Nothing, not even Martín's voice, could distract her at such a time. And she didn't pull in the line until the sun, as it hid away, took away with it the occult transparency of the water. And, in the last light that remained suspended on the horizon, she cleaned the knives, stuck the hooks into corks, put them in the creel to have them ready the next day at the same time, took the bucket with the fish to the kitchen as she had probably done in all the summer evenings of her childhood – and was still doing it so naturally that none would have guessed that she had

gone for at least eight years without fishing or sailing or even seeing the sea except from the distance of her hillside apartment in the city – and with no further delay she joined the others under the awning and poured herself her first glass of whisky.

Martín had first met her by the sea, on the small bay opposite her house on the coast. It was less than a year before that he had finished his military service, and, instead of returning to Sigüenza where his family lived, thanks to a comrade from his battalion who had recommended him to his uncle, he got a job as second cameraman in the small film and television production company that the uncle had in Barcelona. That day was a Saturday and, after some takes in the port that were left over from the previous day, Federico, the producer, asked him to go with him to a publisher's house in Cadaqués, a seaside town north of the city. As he told him, this was a rich man who was interested in investing a considerable sum in the television reportage series that they had begun that spring. Martín accompanied him because he felt he had to, nor did he have much to do in the humid dog days of the empty city. They drove for more than four hours over a road that got steeper and narrower as they progressed. In the final curves, when they were already descending between hills covered with olive trees under a blasting sun, Martín, who had barely had any breakfast, closed his eyes so as not to feel worse and didn't even notice that they were approaching the sea, which stretched out, blue and motionless like a dark mirror, to the horizon. When they parked the car it was after two, and they entered the house from a street running parallel to the sea. Sebastián Corella, who was waiting for them, made them cross to the terrace.

It was a luminous July day, and though they were shielded by the shade of the awning, the reflection of the sun blinded them for an instant. At their feet a calm sea was breaking up in waves over the black stones of the small bay enclosed on both sides by rocks with the shine of mica under the iridescent sparkle of the sun, so gentle that the transparent foam barely transmitted a slight murmur. Someone was swimming to shore, breaking the water rhythmically, leaving behind a wake that grew with each sharp stroke of the arm, like the shape of a flock of seagulls in the October sky.

"It's Andrea, my daughter," said Sebastián Corella as he put ice in the glasses he had just poured. Martín took his and leaned on the railing in order to follow the cadence of the dark spot that, upon reaching the beach, stopped without taking its head out of the water, took a pirouette-like dive and in one fell swoop got out of the water, making it splash around her like a fountain. She was only a few meters away; minuscule drops remained suspended on her body, glinting in the sun before sliding down the matte of her dark skin, and the hair that she threw back with a precise movement – something Martín was never to forget, any more than that half-open-eyed, opaque, lost, sweet and vaguely unfocussed glance of the near-sighted – was still trailed by a trickle of water. Once she had adapted to the light she opened her eyes to their full width and showed her pale blue pupils, to which the reflection of the water lent a slightly violet tinge. Or perhaps her eyes were like those of a chameleon, because not once in all the days and nights that he spent beside her that summer, looking at her over the heads of the drinkers or among the other men and women on the beach who for him were never anything more than the vague figures in a summer show, or in the passion – or the distance – with which the subsequent years followed one another, was he able to guess what tinge the blue of her glance would take on when she would stop focusing on an object and wrinkling her eyelids, and she would let come into the open the brightness of her huge pupils, which nonetheless carried inside it the charge of a certain enigmatic expression, the shadow of some reserve that he would never be capable of fully unveiling.

Without dropping the hand that kept back the mop of her wet hair, she lifted her head and waved to them with the other hand. Martín had never seen a creature more radiant, a woman more beautiful, a pair of eyes more blue. She slid her feet through the water and walked on the hot, black, jagged stones as though she were beginning a dance step that she already knew; then she bent down to pick up the towel she had left on a rail, not with the intention of drying herself but simply to put an end to her swim, or perhaps only to crown the splendor of her figure, because she threw it over her shoulder – as she had done with her hair – and disappeared under the terrace.

He did not see her again until half an hour later. The door in the back of the room was open, and he could see the stairs from where he was. First one foot appeared, then the other, and finally the whole body. She was walking down slowly, buckling her watchstrap. Her hair was still wet but it was looser and more ruffled; she was dressed in white and wore sunglasses. Just then her father had entered the living room, and began looking, among the magazines piled on the table, for the last review of a film in whose production he had been involved. She passed beside him, gave him a haphazard kiss on the cheek, and went out on to the terrace while still fiddling with the watchstrap.

"My name is Andrea," she said, and offered her hand first to Federico, then to Martín. She turned around to pour herself a glass, and when her father approached Federico with the newspaper, she turned her head, lowered her eyeglasses down to the point of her nose, and over them glanced at Martín, fleetingly smiled at him with curiosity and a certain mocking air, and before he could respond and return her smile, she had already pushed the black frame of her glasses back up and had turned around again.

Martín acknowledged later that he had blundered, he acknowledged it to himself because he would not have been brave enough to tell any one how that simple glance had affected him, to the point that he hardly paid any attention to the entrance of Andrea's mother, or to that tall, dark-complexioned man who came with her and stayed for lunch with them, or to his name; nor – later – to the perfect arrangement and the artful design of the silverware, the dishes and the glasses, nor to the chilled cream of zucchini and the baked fish and the various desserts that were served, all of which would have dazzled him if that woman had not been seated at the table, and next to him to boot. He could hear nothing except what she was saying, nor pay attention to any sound other than her voice, but without noticing the content of her talk, as if her words were losing their meaning, one after another, as she pronounced them and all that was left of them was the intonation, the tone, the inflection, the melody, the rhythm, and the gestures and smiles that accompanied them; or her way of staying attentive to the comments of whoever had interrupted her, with her head forward, her mouth ajar and the silverware immobile in her hands, ready to take up the thread of her own argument as soon as she could. And though he tried to make his self-absorption not too obvious and made huge efforts – unsuccessfully – to understand what was being talked about, in the excitement and the loneliness of the following week he could hardly recall anything from that lunch other than Andrea's huge eyes barely glimpsed behind the dark glass, the peculiar way in which she continually took off and put on her glasses, and that wordless song of her lark-like voice.

Then, when after lunch he saw her go out on the terrace by herself, he too got up and followed her.

At that moment a boat's engine was reverberating in the torpor of the afternoon. The sun, which had begun to hide behind the house, had left the terrace and the little black-stone beach in the shade, and in that light the golden tone of her skin had darkened, as if she too had remained in the penumbra. She stood with her back to the sea, a cup of coffee in her hand and a lost gaze; she had lifted one knee and bent the leg back behind her, with the other leg now bearing the full weight of her body, which, due to the

displacement to which the posture had forced her and with the face now denuded of the animation of speech, had acquired in indolent, somewhat languid aspect.

She did not move when he came to her side; she did not even lift her elbows from the railing and she kept stirring the coffee with the spoon.

"What do you do?" she asked without looking at him.

"I work in film. And you?"

"I'm a journalist." And she drank her coffee with slow sips.

"Where are you from?" she asked him after a while.

"I'm from Sigüenza, or rather from Ures, a village near Sigüenza. Why?"

"For no reason, just out of curiosity." She now looked at him, half-closing her eyelids, and smiled.

Martín did not know what else to say. Without knowing why, he wanted, for once, to get out of his tongue-tiedness, to overcome his shyness and to talk, to tell her that he had been born in Ures, in Guadalajara province, in the center of Spain. That his real name was Martín González Ures, but that he had always been known as Martín Ures, for his mother's family name. That even his father, the teacher who had come from Sigüenza and had married miller Ures' daughter, was called Señor Ures. That, from the time they were little, he and siblings bore the name of the village as if they were descendants of the founders though they knew quite well – because their father told the story at school year after year – the village had been originally a convent, built in the fifteenth or sixteenth century for a congregation of Basque nuns and still there, though dilapidated and almost in ruins. That it was called Ures because it was the only place around that had *ur* ('water' in Basque). that the river that brought the water down from the Pozancos mountains ran right under the window of his room in the basement of the mill and that at night, before falling asleep, as he was shivering between the blankets because the walls were oozing moisture, he would let himself be lulled by the gentle noise of the water, and that by day he would lean out to watch the river pass by, rapt in the successive variations and images, just as, years later, he would be fascinated by watching television, or, later still, time and again by the same sequence of a film. That he didn't remember and couldn't say how the water made the mill grind the wheat, because by the time he was born it was no longer working; that in the village square there was a pipe sticking out of a cement basin, which they called the fountain, where every evening men and women met under the shade of a gigantic linden tree; that the boys who went into the military service didn't come back and the village was growing empty, until even the school was almost deserted, and that this was why they left the mill house and the village and the whole family moved to Sigüenza, where his father had been transferred. He would have liked to tell her how, in the darkness of that new and noisy apartment in Sigüenza, he had missed the kids of the Ures school and the creaking of the rusty locks of the mill when the door was shut at night, and the poplar grove on the edge of the road that extended endlessly to the tableland, a landscape with no horizon other than the vague snow line, barely distinguishable from the sky in winter or the slopes of wheat steeled by the infrequent gusts of torrid air in summer, and the tortured fig trees and the crabs in the river, and the mice that, over the sound of the river, gnawed at the beams of the attic. And he would have explained to her the emotion with which he went every week to see the two films that were shown in the rectory hall and how one evening, when he was barely twelve, not even understanding what matter the stories he was seeing were made of, he swore that he, Martín Ures, would also one day make films, and how from then on he looked down on the other kids, convinced that by some mysterious but irresistible force he had been chosen among them for a calling far more important than climbing trees in order to rob nests or playing hide-and-seek in the hollows of the mountain. That all that he had done since that

revelation had been inspired by that same profound conviction that overcame him that evening in Ures, and that nonetheless at that moment the only thing about his life's story that tempted him was the unlikely eventuality that some time he could relate it to her and she would sit beside him and never move again.

But he said nothing and, facing her blue-eyed gaze, he limited himself to shrugging his shoulders as if to signify that no one chooses the place of his birth.

Suddenly Andrea straightened up, felt her pockets and asked, "Where are my glasses?", and left without waiting for an answer. Martín tried to follow her with his eyes but it was difficult. A group of people had entered the room and she appeared, seated in a sofa and searching in the cracks between the cushions, or disappeared, hidden by a face or a shadow. Until, in the same way that those strange characters had entered, they all left and the room remained silent and almost in the penumbra, as if, with their laughter and their movement, they had taken away the light and with it Andrea.

Only Sebastián and Federico were left, each one in the corner of a sofa, checking papers and numbers, strangers to the comings and goings of the crowd. On the table they had piled up the files that Federico was pulling out of his briefcase, the ashtray was full of butts and the cognac bottle's level signaled the passage of time. Martín sat down with them.

At first he dared not decline the glass that Sebastián poured him and then, as the hours passed, with that rhythm that is different from the one that short, steady drinking imposes on us, he was left outside their conversation, to which he listened with the enjoyment of someone who nods off to sleep with the background voices of the television, and he let himself become enveloped in the mist of well-being and weightlessness that the day was bringing on him.

Underneath the voices, the slight waves were breaking, one after another, on the dark stones that he had seen on the beach, a church clock struck eight, and steps were heard from somewhere in the house; every now and then the murmur of the conversation was broken by the sound of a motor of a boat that was approaching or going away, or the lost barking of a dog, a distant voice, sounds separate from one another, with precise limits, like echoes that burst forth in the summer in the rosy twilight of the sea.

He was so unaccustomed to drinking that, when they got up after picking up all the papers and Sebastián led them to the upper story on the same stairway on which Andrea had come down some hours before and left them each in his own room – "this way you can rest a little before dinner," he said – he grabbed the handrail to keep his balance, and once in the room, he let himself drop onto one of the two beds without undoing the white bedspread and without looking out the window, which looked over the terrace and the sea and from which, following the crown of lights along the seashore that had just been turned on he would have been able to check the outline of the bay with the same precision as on the famed map that he had discovered in the foyer of the house that same morning, already so far away. And when Federico came to pick him up for dinner he rose with a leap, not knowing what time it was or where he was or why his head felt so heavy and his mouth had the same bitter taste as his childhood awakenings with the flu. He took a long shower with the hope that the cold water would clean his mind as well. And then, from the top of the stairs, he focused sharply on the hall and the terrace, once again full of people, and though he had to concentrate hard and scan the setting more than once because his mind was still confused by the afternoon's cognac and remote from the sleep that had obstinately stuck to his eyelids, he didn't find Andrea anywhere. She did not have dinner at home with them when the others had already left again, nor did he see her later in the beach bar to which he went with Federico, Sebastián, Leonardus – the sallow-complexioned man who had appeared at lunch time – and Camila, Andrea's mother, a tall and overly thin woman, who did nothing but put one cigarette after another in her mouth without

bothering to light it, confident that one of the men around her, if not all of them, would bring the flame of his lighter to the end of her cigarette with such precision that it would hit the mark without her even having to move her body. Martín watched her, entranced, wondering where that confidence of hers had come from, while he was once again drinking cognac, which, after the aperitif and the wine of the dinner, and contrary to what he had expected, had actually revived him. Nevertheless he was plagued with heartburn and nausea during the night, or what was left of it, because Sebastián, just as he had told them when he left them at the doors of their rooms, came to call for them at dawn in order to go out fishing and then spend the morning at sea. He was hardly aware of when and how he got dressed, or at what moment he went down the stairs and out to the street. He vaguely remembered the dark shoreline, going towards the pier, lit only by some lights that were too high and too metallic to keep the three of them from looking, under these lights, like phantasmagoric creatures.

Almost asleep, he had boarded the *Manuela*, a green-painted wooden boat that swayed under his footsteps, made even more unstable by the unpleasantness of the dawn still stuck to his body, bewildered by the beats of his own feet on the wooden planks and by the slight beatings of the sea, in the rocking that carried him to the edge of dizziness and nausea. The boat left the pier. Sebastián was at the helm and Federico by his side. Neither of the two spoke now. It was still night but over the sea's horizon a vague hint of light, the tremor of a gust of air, foreshadowed the daybreak. He remained motionless, seated at the place that had been assigned to him on the pool bench, his hands in the pockets of the overcoat that Sebastián had lent him, the collar turned up. As they moved along, the coolness that had caught him unawares when he left the house turned into cold and he stoically faced the air that swept over his face and moved through the openings in his clothing to torment his straggling body that had not yet lost the warmth of the bed. The wood was reverberating in his head, tortured by the confusion of the series of hangovers that were forming with the swaying motion, and his thighs quaked with the rhythm of the motor that was breaking the stillness of the night. The *Manuela* moved slowly away from the sleeping town and the crown of lights became a continuous line, a low-speed photograph that broke the darkness and marked the limits of the sea: on the west the dark profile of the hills and the church, and on the east the uncertain light of daybreak. As they came out to the open sea there appeared the profile of an island in the imprecision of the first light, and soon thereafter the speed diminished and the snore of the motor calmed down, as they began to move around the island. He was not conscious of all the movements that then began, of the baskets being moved from the cabin to the deck, of the preparations for fishing or of the fishing itself, and neither of the other two seemed to care, just as the preceding day no one had cared if he wanted to stay or go, if he wanted to drink, eat or sleep. And he, who just barely held back his seasickness and could scarcely open his sleepy and hung-over eyes, when, in the course of one of Sebastián's comings and goings to the cabin, he noticed the two bunks, convinced that now they would also not pay attention to him or if they did they wouldn't disapprove, slipped inside and plopped onto one of them, let himself be rocked by the strokes of the motor muffled by the closed door, and fell deeply asleep.

When he awoke he was stifled by heat and the brilliant, dry and knife-sharp light hurt his eyes. They were getting into a cove and though the speed was now almost completely cut down, the *Manuela* was stopped short by crashing against the rocks, and Martín, who had come out on deck with the overcoat still on him, blinded by the light he lost his balance and bumped into Federico, who was holding the helm lever while Sebastián was dropping the anchor rope.

"Lazybones, all you do is sleep," Federico, who just barely managed to keep his balance, shouted laughing. In the confusion of his fall Martín wondered what he was doing in that unfriendly place, at this impossible hour and in this lamentable state.

He collapsed on the beach, the overcoat off, his head covered with the undershirt that he had taken off and stoically putting up with the stones that served as his mattress, while he watched how they managed to make a fire. He saw them empty a bottle of water into a pot, clean the fish in the bucket and pour themselves some wine – which made him close his eyes in disgust – into crystal glasses. The sun had taken over the sky. Not a cloud, not a breath of air, not a single tree in that inhospitable cove, made of stones whose sharp edges he could not attenuate even with the several folds of the towel that Sebastián had thrown to him.

Later he had a little rice soup, a hot fish broth that calmed his stomach, and in a fit of courage he even dared to jump into the sea once he heard them go back to the previous day's conversation, with the water at their waist as if they didn't dare go further, or as if, captivated by their own words, they had set aside their first purpose. He walked a few steps but he did not plunge; instead he crouched in the water until it came up to his neck, he splashed his eyes and face, and came out as if shrunk in order to hide the pain that the sharp stones inflicted on the soles of his feet. Then, his skin still cold, he lit his first cigarette of the day, plopped again with the undershirt on his face, let himself be carried away by the drowsiness that had entered him after the hot broth or perhaps the cold water, and followed from afar the voices, the sound of the water, the footsteps on the stones and finally the motor again. Only then did he stand up, with a certain energy, sure that the time of return had come, that now he could again see Andrea who was probably swimming toward the house as she had yesterday and that if they hurried they might still have time to sit on the terrace before she emerged from the water like a dolphin and would look at him again with those blue eyes whose smile had persisted through the depths of his hangover.

Sebastián put up a green canvas awning and, despite the sun's oppression and the lacerating glare of the sea, the breeze and the shade sweetened the torrid noonday heat. They sailed homeward for more than half an hour, but, as they rounded the cape in order to enter the inlet, they did not steer for the small pier of the house but, following the voices coming from another boat anchored in the bay, they stopped and tied up to it, and Federico and Sebastián jumped across, leaving him alone aboard the *Manuela*.

For over an hour he devoted himself to gazing melancholically toward the coast and to looking, through the iridescent tremor of the air, for Andrea's house. He was already going to get up and rejoin Sebastián and Federico when he noticed, still far off, a black spot that, as on the previous day but in the opposite direction, was swimming toward them in a line so straight, with such a steady rhythm, and leaving such a perfect wake in the calm of the huge bay under the sun, that he quickly understood that the miracle was about to happen again.

Someone called him from the other boat, but he didn't respond and remained watchful, and when the arm strokes were almost touching the *Manuela*'s hull he leaned over the gunwale. At that moment Andrea was getting her head out of the water and lifted one hand that she put beside his. She breathed hard, as if she now needed the air that she had used up in that mile, half-closed her eyelids and looked at him through her lashes, still full of tiny drops.

"Hi," she said, and began to climb up the rope ladder. But before jumping onto the deck she stopped and, as if responding to a question that Martín would never have dared formulate, she slid her index finger over his hand in a caress without nuances or surprises, so that the meaning would be borne only by the

words she was about to say, and this time, with her eyes fully open and her pupils colored turquoise, she said:

"My eyesight is good when I have my glasses on," and she pointed at the far-off terrace, "and besides" – she stopped for a moment – "I'm very impatient." And, leaving him alone with the words, she jumped onto the deck and went into the hatchway to look for a towel. Then, barely giving him another look, she joined the others on the other boat.

It must have been quite late already when almost all of them threw themselves into the water, except for him, who remained seated on the pool bench. Andrea had dived with them and he did not see her get out until she appeared at the bow of the other boat, behind his back. "Come into the water," she shouted, addressing him for the first time since then. And she plunged again, swam a few meters and called him again, but he did not move. Though he had no greater wish than to respond to this new call and jump into the sea, he was still immobilized by anxiety, complementing a dream that had tormented him since childhood, but this time, instead of him being the one who was moving through muddy clay trying fruitlessly to reach a goal that he desired but never got to know, his feet were paralyzed on the ground and she was the one moving away. Because, as much as that woman attracted him, he felt incapable of jumping into the water while barely knowing how to swim. She moved away toward the rocks and he lost her from sight.

A couple of hours later, in the car, while hearing Federico's endless speech about the projects with Sebastián, almost concluded in the course of laborious conversations that had lasted more than twenty-four hours, and while looking at the town, growing ever smaller after every bend in the road, he was determined to go back the following weekend and every free day that he would have until the day he died.

But neither that hot, windless summer, such as the town's old folks had not seen since their childhood, when the sea did not swell up on a single day and the east wind did not come in mid-September, when an overcoat was already needed outside because it was cold; nor the quiet evenings, seated at the beach bar while Andrea's voice and laughter mixed with splashing of the waves as the blue background of her stories, managed to dislodge from Martín's mind the conviction that the sea was a foreign, threatening element, too present at all hours, too obvious. Perhaps, as he told her several weeks later as he was saying good-night, when she already knew the tale that he had not ventured to tell her the first day and many other tales that he remembered as he talked to her, he was a landlubber who knew no immensity other than that of the upland plains and no waves other than those made by the wind on the wheatfields.

And yet it was that same Martín who now, almost ten years later, had accepted for the first time the invitation that Leonardus extended every summer. Andrea had agreed at first, but when she found out that one Leonardus' girls, whom she did not even now, was included in the cruise, she lost interest, as if that project, which Martín had accepted only for her sake, had nothing to do with her, though, truth be told, she had not put up any resistance either.

"You'll get your color back," he told her in the evening when he gave her the dates and came with the plane tickets. And he added cautiously: "We've hardly been on the sea in the last few years." She did not break the silence into which she had sunk for days, and, as he looked at her out of the corner of his eye in order to find out exactly at what point they stood, he could not find the words that would get her down from her vexation. Only after a while he insisted:

"With the air and the sun you'll look and feel better, you'll see," he said timidly, for he expected her any moment now to leave her passivity and get angry, and he was sure that, without letting him finish, she would roar, like other times, "It isn't air and sun I need, only that you don't lie to me." But that evening she remained silent, hardly varying the somewhat washed-out expression of her blue eyes, of a blue so intense in the light of dusk on that huge terrace above the city that it accentuated even more the ivory paleness of her Madonna's face.

"Weren't you going out?" she said at last in a neutral tone, looking down on her motionless hands which held her glasses on her knees. She looked frail and distant and the penumbra accentuated the dark shadows under her eyes.

"I'm not going out," he said and approached the armchair. He crouched down in front of her until their faces were at the same height, and with his finger he forced her chin up.

"Look at me, Andrea. You haven't talked for days. I've asked you to forgive me. What else can I do? You know that I don't love anyone but you, that I don't know how to live without you, that I don't want to live without you, that my life begins and ends with you."

He spoke haltingly, in a monotone, as though reciting a rosary of strange and magical words and caring only about the results.

She let him speak and, with hardly any reaction, looked away, half-closed her eyelids, and turned her head, which he was keeping up the tip of his index finger, away.

"Yes," she said after a while, "I know that."

That evening they dined in silence, and when she stood up in order to go to the room that she had been occupying alone for more than two weeks, he repeated:

"You'll see how the air and the sun will bring your good color back. Like back then," he added clumsily.

But they had been at sea, and in full sun, for more than a week, and Andrea's skin had barely acquired a pale pink tone. True, she almost always wore her hat down to her glasses and she seldom removed her T-shirt, because already on the first day she had burned her nose, knees and back, and that night, when she saw her face in the mirror hanging from a frame, horrified by the harsh red color that she could not make go away even with creams, she declared melancholically that she would never get a tan again. Martín heard the veiled rebuke in her voice but did not answer. For the first time in several weeks she would be able to shut herself up in her room and though she kept distant he knew that she was just as upset as he was. And when he saw her lie down face down and remain motionless with her eyes shut, wearily repeating "I'll never get a tan again, I'll never get a tan again," he understood that the monotonous singsong was not due to the three whiskies she had drunk before dinner or the two more that she had poured herself after, but that the moment had come when in the artifice of her drunkenness there appeared a narrow opening that would allow a single instant of resignation. Because of this, moved, he sat down silently beside her, paying almost no attention to the syncopated rhythm that that strange one-note melody was taking on, he confined himself to putting oil on her back, concentrated on the need to advance to his own goal and to the delight of recognizing every hollow, every crack, every relief; and gently he let his hand glide toward the curve of the glowing shoulders and the narrow grooves on either side of her spine, and he moved up again until he reached the hardened muscles of the neck and the nape, stopping over at the beginning of the hairline and every so often adding oil, which the hot skin had absorbed, and he bent down to kiss the white nape and the closed eyelid that her posture left in sight only when he noticed that

she had not been singing for a while and, in a gesture of forced distraction, as if she had changed the position of the hand that was resting on the pillow for no apparent reason, she had put it on his knee. Then he lay down beside her and, without ceasing to trace the outlines of her shoulder blades with his oiled hand and then to bury his fingers in her sides, whiter than her shoulders, shaded zones where the sun had not left its imprint, with the other hand he pressed the switch, so that the only light was the lukewarm light of the crosshead entering through the hatchway and giving her skin the moonlike quality of a desert.

II

The first thing they saw when they rounded the cape were the still and silent cormorants on the rocky cliff, their black and green plumage opaque through the mist, with their beaks pointed at the sky, like solitary sculptures flanking the entrance to the island, and behind them, at the far end of the bay, there appeared the harbor, withdrawn into itself, like a vague strip of light between the shining sea and the parched, copper-toned earth. The rocky mass discharged its incandescence over it and, at water level, the shimmer of the hanging air trembled, overcome by the power of the sun, diluted in the heat, blurring lines and colors. The suffocating heat disfigured the atmosphere and the landscape, refracted by the midsummer heat, lay squashed and distorted like a fuzzy backdrop.

A few months later, when not even a memory, other than one preserved in a photograph, would be left of the summer and the heat, when everything that began in that motionless moment would have been diluted, transformed and almost forgotten, during the rare reminiscences that would suddenly show up through the cracks of his memory Martín Ures would wonder, on more than occasion, if everything had not happened because the place was bewitched. Because, for no apparent reason, the sails flapped, the *Albatross* lost power, and, unable to overcome the leaden resistance of the inanimate morning, she pitched slightly and then remained inert on the crystalline water as though in that range there were no room for inertia. And at the same moment all the sails collapsed onto the deck.

Because of the sudden motionlessness or perhaps because of the same thick consistency of the suffocating air, all four poked their heads through the hatchway, startled by a sudden malaise. And, blinded by the light and the heat, they contemplated the harbor and the hillsides without understanding what happened or, as yet, making out the contours of the hills. Little by little they adapted to the steely, tremulous light. There then appeared remains of debris, rusty like the stone from which they were made, almost hidden behind some vegetation that was straggly, sunburned and parched, that was born and kept making its way among them, first one shadow, then another and yet another, spread out over the hills, until the huge ruin, rising above the sea like a mountain of rubble that time, erosion and growth had leveled, revealed itself.

“How awful!” said Chiqui, suffocated by this sudden and unexpected temperature rise, the total lack of air and the moonlike landscape that silently bemoaned the immobility of its own collapse. “Why aren’t we going?”

No one answered.

Andrea wiped her forehead, which had become filled with tiny drops of sweat, like her neck, her upper lip, her back and her legs.

“I won’t be able to take it,” she said.

Leonardus advanced slowly toward the helm, his ever-spotless white caftan now soaked, and said, almost not daring to raise his voice, “What are we doing now?”

Tom shrugged his shoulders and continued to turn the rudder, more in order to test how useless it was to try than in any belief that he could straighten the sails and move the *Albatross*.

“Maybe the current will take us to the pier,” said Leonardus.

"There is no current," said Tom.

In the estuary, the mosque trembled behind the iridescent air like the image of a faraway oasis in the desert. A lone figure, a woman leaning against the whitewashed wall, her head covered by a broad-brimmed hat, stood out against the misty background of that incandescent landscape, as though emerging from some forgotten time. She had taken shelter in the narrow shade of some eaves and remained motionless facing the trail leading up to the promontory, flanked by a couple of large houses that had either survived the destruction or been rebuilt.

He had not known a feeling of helplessness like that of that June morning when he took the flight to New York, not so much in search of new horizons as in order to break off the relationship he had begun with Andrea a little more than a year before. The plane had taken off on time and until that moment he had felt sure that she would come to see him off if only to wave good-bye. He was the last one through customs, and from the bus that took them to the plane he kept scanning the airport terrace to see if he could find her, but she didn't show up. And with that unshakable obstinacy of deep desire mixed with despair and of not understanding how one could be otherwise, when the plane began its course over the secondary runways and the takeoff strip, he still kept his gaze fixed on the terminal building. Only when he saw the sea from on high and the gridiron geography of the city appeared under the wing, when they went through the thick fog that had covered it since morning and he found himself in the sunlit space over a layer of whitish clouds, did he feel the full helplessness of his solitude. He was blinded by warm tears but could still keep his cheeks immobile. He made an effort to contain himself, and in a last attempt to control the trembling of his lips he noisily blew his nose out of shame before himself, perhaps, or the others, and when he believed to have his crying under control, suddenly the tears flowed and forced him to open his mouth and to breathe as best he could through his nose and the corners of his mouth in an unstoppable grimace that did not manage to stifle a groan so deep that his neighbor looked at him stupefied. Then he cast all reserve aside and wept silently.

Contrary to their agreement, once in New York he sent her letters to her office, brief message that only she could understand, an eyeglass band decorated with tassels and colored stones that a Somali was selling at the corner of his apartment house, and a red maple leaf that he picked up from the ground on one of his rare, melancholy walks through the park. He sent her newspaper clippings and short sentences in his rudimentary English in order to show her his progress, not noticing, or not wanting to notice, that no replies were coming. Only once in a great while, during the nights of longing and loneliness when he couldn't even get a hold of his memories because they meant nothing compared to his desire, did he realize that her determination was unyielding. But even so he kept hope alive and though he knew from the outset that he would get nowhere languishing of love, he could only see the city through the eyes of both of them, struggle relentlessly with a language that fought back, and working as third assistant in a television series, a job that Andrea had found for him through Leonardus.

After some months, around January, when the first snows began to fall on New York, he enrolled in a directing class at the University, and when, at the end of April, he finished his first short subject he sent her a copy. He waited impatiently for the mailman and the telephone but not even when Pedro Bali, a friend from the class, came back and told him that he had delivered the short personally to Andrea in her office, nor after giving her enough time to find a projector and a screening room – for which had included precise instructions – and no response was coming, not even then did he stop telling her, in his secret heart, everything he saw and experienced just as he had done since his arrival, with the innermost

conviction that, by means of a strange connection even more efficient than coded messages or the telephone that he never dared use, she had to hear him. He kept seeing her astonished or skeptical face, he heard her voice, and her presence remained so alive that at night he would be dying of impatience over having her so close and not being able to touch her. He knew her well enough to know that nothing prevented her from answering a letter, and this being the case he had no reason to suppose that she had changed her mind about not wanting to have anything to do with him. But even so he lived with the conviction that such a sharp break necessarily had to respond to a deeper purpose, or that her yearning to be with him was so strong that it could be counteracted only with that drastic decision; otherwise, what harm could be done by her writing him a letter, even a simple note? He then understood, with a knowledge different from the one that had made him keep his hope alive, that for half a year he had been talking to himself, and, without stopping to think if what was driving him was spite, pain, or a survival instinct, he decided to call a truce and rebuild the stage of his own life so that he could attack with all the more force when the occasion arose, as he was sure that it would unfailingly arise. Although, as he was to discover later, will alone is not enough as a weapon in the struggle, nor does it work to overcome the phantoms of the past, nor does it make us invulnerable to melancholy and suffering, nor, least of all, can it change the course of events that is written into their nature.

When his contract with the production company ran out he decided to stay in New York and took on any job that was offered him, from driving the production truck through streets he did not know to sweeping the sets when there was no one left. And he did those jobs with such devotion that many times, as he was aware, those around him regarded him not with admiration but with pity. But he went on, immersed in whatever they gave him, because he wanted to recover the time he had lost and was convinced that he had to follow the road he had traced for himself step by step.

He was pitiless with himself. He subjected himself to a discipline that forced him to rise at dawn, and before going to work he would sit down to work on a screenplay that he had begun the preceding winter, and would continue in the evening, on his return from night school, shutting out the world around him, not hearing his clarinet-playing neighbor or the street noises that had kept him from sleeping during the first few weeks. He was groping his way along a path that nonetheless appeared to him as well-beaten, because, without realizing it at the time, he was writing his own life story, and he was not wrong: he knew that every obsession is but a substitute for passion.

He used the same discipline against imagination and habit. When they made him see an explicit vision of Andrea smiling, or emptying her purse in order to find her glasses, or entering a theatre or movie house as if only her presence was necessary for the show to begin, or seated facing him at a café table, he realized that the pain was unremitting, but before reveling in the memory he would zealously file it away inside him and continued working with the avidity of one amassing treasures that he would some day offer her.

As though it were true that a hidden hand rewards boundless effort, as though indeed there existed an inflexible and rational justice that does not flinch until the scales return to his side, after three or four months he found himself recompensed. He finished the screenplay of his first film, which Leonardus was to produce years later; that first short subject that he had completed in film school with the help of classmates and on a rock-bottom budget won third prize in a competition at NYU and later was selected for the Philadelphia Festival; and when a kind of peace finally came upon him he convinced himself that he was driven only by the intense desire to do his best and it seemed to him that he had gotten back on the track he had abandoned in order to follow Andrea.

The days now grew longer. The scent of wisteria floated in the air, the trees began to be covered with leaves and around noon the heat was as oppressive as on a summer day. The streets smelled of spring and Martín thought of the fields of Sigüenza, of the meadows of Ures, of the linden tree in the plaza that he had not seen since long before coming to New York, since the spring of the preceding year when he managed to pull Andrea away for short trip inland, to his home, getting deep into the Monegros – a moonlike landscape that previously she had only vaguely contemplated from the plane, the way one looks from afar at something that has hardly anything to do with us – until reaching Guadalajara province at the zenith of the radiant spring, with scant sunlight on the ground that had for months been hardened by cold and ice. The air, still bearing reminiscences of winter, iridescent in its clarity and transparency, gently rocked the scarce, tiny leaves of the poplars. So tender was the newborn green of the fields, so short were the stalks in the wheatfields that the traces of the ditches and the paths could be seen among them. Martín knew that in a couple of months the sun would blur the boundaries that were now so clear, making the earth brown and uniform, and the air would remain static and dazed by the sun that would rule and would equalize colors and shadows.

June came again and the intense, humid heat of the street became hard to bear. There was no way of relieving the suffocating ambience of his apartment, because no air came in through the only window of the study, even when the one in the kitchen was open, and in the little bit of sky that he saw, clipped and framed by the neighboring buildings, the fuzzy blue of haze and humidity was barely seen. But he kept on, day and night, uncovering the nooks and crannies of his life story in terms that no one but he would have recognized. And in his enthusiasm it seemed to him that he was getting to know himself. Memory is feeble when it deals with pain, love and obsessions. How can one live, he would ask himself then, without a half-written script? What are the yearnings that make us go on made of?

It was around that time that he came to know Katas. For months they had met in the elevator. She would always get off on the fourteenth floor and even though she, like everyone else, kept her eyes fixed on the lights that marked the floors, he realized that she was seeing him, perhaps by the almost imperceptible uneasiness with which she moved her books from one arm to the other or by the way their glances fleetingly met when she was ready to leave the elevator. Her hair was long and straight, pulled back in a ponytail, and she always wore flowery skirts and monk's sandals. She was always laden with books and folders and on that day, in addition, a paper bag stuffed with groceries. When the elevator got to the fourteenth floor she was about to get off and, trying to avoid bumping into another neighbor's guitar, she stumbled and all her books fell to the floor. The young man with the guitar stoically held the door open while Martín helped her pick them up, and he did not notice that at the moment when he followed her to give them to her the door had shut and the elevator went on without him. With a slight foreign accent that he did not recognize she said, "Thanks, my name is Katas," and she stretched out a hand underneath the packages. He left her at the door of Apartment 147 and, though he did not accept her invitation to come in, that evening he was on the verge of retracing his steps in order to tell her that he had changed his mind.

The next day he found out more about her from the night porter, a Hispanic that he would sometimes run into when the heat would chase him from his apartment. She was Greek, he told him, she had come to New York a few years before to study medicine and at the end of the quarter, that is at Christmas, she would be going back to Greece. Osiris, the Hispanic, whom he had asked about her after overcoming his aversion to starting conversations, knew about it because the girl had already informed the building

manager. And, with his nasal twang, he added, “Every afternoon she is in the local library, here across the street. I am telling you in case you want to meet her.”

For several weeks he wanted to go the library but couldn’t. He worked until quite late and when he got home it was already closed.

One day, coming back from work, he left the elevator on the 15th floor and rounded the hallway without looking ahead, busy looking for his apartment key at the bottom of his bag. When he was about to put into the lock, driven by a presence he had not been aware of, he lifted his eyes and there was Andrea, leaning against a wall, barely a foot and a half away, smiling in amusement and emotion over the surprise she had prepared.

“You haven’t changed, you haven’t changed at all,” he was saying to her, so close to her face that, had his gaze not been fixed on that almost invisible little blemish that he had discovered next to her eyebrow, her face would have seemed blurred as though in a dream. “You haven’t changed at all,” he repeated and made his finger glide over her forehead, her eyelids and her cheeks, concentrating on the contact, almost not seeing her, the way a blind man’s fingertips slide over contours and surfaces, uncovering secrets that are denied to the seeing. He could hardly speak of anything else until dawn, his thoughts too obsessed by the avidity for a presence that he desired for months, and when he did so he paid no attention to the reasons she was giving him – “this trip is just an interlude, a surprise that means nothing” – because it seemed to him that she and her coming belied the truth of her words and her arguments, and, refusing to listen to her, he insisted on once again offering her, even more intensely, his life, his time, his body and soul, and he even spent time telling her how their life together in New York could be, so sure was he of infecting her with his enthusiasm and vehemence. Because, now that he had her so close to him, in the right, the perfect place, the place that had always been meant for him, he could not imagine how it could be otherwise.

Around ten in the morning, however, she began to gather her clothes because in a couple of hours she would be leaving for Mexico with Leonardus and two of his partners on a prospecting trip, she said; things are changing in Spain, she added, now that democracy has come, and one has to be prepared. She was in a hurry, but she had enough time to remind him that this New York stopover should not make him get any hopes up, hopes that, she insisted, had no foundation whatsoever.

“But you love me nonetheless.”

“You know that’s true,” she replied, “but there’s no way out for us. Life is like that, don’t ask it for more than it can give you,” and she smiled as she had done then, on that day, a year before – a whole year already – when she had shown up in the house on Plaza de Tetuán where he was living with a sister of his father’s, in order to resolve the long argument they had had the night before and let him know of a verdict whose urgency and brutality he could not understand.

“But why do I have to go away? What are you trying to tell me?” he asked her then.

“Federico has disappeared, you know that. The police are looking for him. Without him the production company is not working. In New York you have an opportunity with this contract that they’re offering you through Leonardus. Or would you rather stay in Barcelona without a job, waiting for the police to find you? You know they’re looking for you.”

It was true that for a week the door of the production company was sealed shut by court order, that no one had been paid for months and that Federico had not been heard from, but it had never occurred to him to relate these facts to politics.

"Why would they be looking for me?" he asked. "If they did they would have found me by now, it would have been a cinch."

"I know what I'm talking about," replied Andrea, who by all appearances was in a hurry, and from her purse she took out a billfold with the ticket, a list of addresses in New York, and a lease on the apartment that she had rented for him for a whole year on 14th Street at Second Avenue. "And there is no future for us," she added sweetly.

But he almost didn't hear her because she was not disposed to give him the only thing that interested him at that moment.

They went down together in the elevator and went out into the street.

"I'll always be waiting for you," he swore at the last moment, not fully aware that she was fast disappearing as her taxi was becoming lost in traffic, until, realizing that he had gone out only with the key, he returned home. The apartment smelled different now and was emptier than it had been during all those months, and his work, his life in New York and he himself suddenly seemed meaningless.

He called the set and made up the excuse of a fall, the way she had done so many times during that first year in Barcelona, and plopped onto the unmade bed. He had a free day and he didn't know exactly what to do. His mind went around and around every one of her gestures, the words that she repeated tirelessly until they were exhausted and wasted and meaningless, and by three in the afternoon neither the aroma that her body had left wafting in the air nor the diminishing trembling of her hands were anything more than another fleeting vision to add to the baggage that his memory was dragging along since he got on the plane on that June morning in Barcelona.

He went out again, to the Japanese restaurant on 16th Street. He ate as he had not eaten in two weeks and had two bloody marys. And when, upon leaving, he looked at his watch and saw that it was five-thirty he decided to go to the library.

He saw her immediately, her head bent over her books, playing distractedly with a tuft of her bangs. He took a magazine and sat down almost directly opposite her. She did not see him until much later, when she lifted her eyes, perhaps attracted by the insistence of his gaze; she smiled at him shyly but not surprised, and went back to her book. When she arose to leave he followed her and in the doorway he asked her out for a cup of coffee. She accepted. He did not have coffee but a beer and then another, and as the afternoon was dozing over the skyscrapers and the pink of twilight colored the hazy and thick sky of the city, he told her the same version of his life that a couple of years before he had wanted to tell Andrea, with no hurry because no one was waiting for them now and possibly because he was not so impatient as on the day that he met her on the beach, nor so anxious as at each of the instants that he spent with her that summer and the following winter until he left, and even later. And also because he was sure that, in that world of cement, noise and excesses, talking calmly about his childhood in that village hidden among wheatfields would at the very least turn out to be a much more exotic story. He began almost in the same way, as we all do when we avow the official version of our own lives, that version that we end up believing and on the basis of which we form a judgment of ourselves that we want the others to accept at all costs.

"My name is Martín Ures," he told her in his English, which, though improving, was still rudimentary, "and I am Spanish." She nodded as though she already knew that. "I am from Ures, province of Guadalajara, in the center of Spain, and I am very proud to carry the name of my village."

That night they dined in a restaurant in the Village and they walked until dawn. The next day, as they had agreed, Katas came to his apartment to pick up his bag in order to take it to the laundry together with hers. In the afternoon Martín picked her up at the library and asked her to come with him to the shooting on the other side of the Brooklyn Bridge and three days later he helped her paint her apartment, which, she said, needed a coat of paint. They spoke on the phone at least once a day and if he came home early he would prepare a salad and an omelet that he would share with her. They went to the movies, to Central Park and to the gym on Second Avenue, and they ended up telling time by the hours till they would meet again. But not even when, after three months, he borrowed from Dickinson – the first cameraman – the fifty dollars he needed to take her out to the New Orleans, a restaurant with checkered tablecloths and candles in glasses on the tables, where he had decided to order a bottle of wine and then present her with the long jet earrings that she had discovered in a shop window on Second Avenue very near their building, not even that night, convinced as he was that neither of them would push the button for the 14th floor, did he acknowledge that he had pushed Andrea aside. What is more, as he was getting ready to go out and putting on the white shirt that he had ironed himself, he stubbornly clung to the memory of her blue-eyed gaze, as we cling to the memory of the dead so that the part of our lives that left with them does not disappear and so that we remain who we are.

The vision remained, not like a delving into the past but deep inside him.

From behind, her moist hands on his arms, Andrea said: “What are you thinking about?”

He did not respond.

“Look,” she said, “they’re going to take us in.” And she rested her chin on his shoulder, as if by looking in the same direction she could discern what he was seeing.

On the starboard side there appeared a boat with a raised bow, the timber worn away by use, of the same pale blue, washed out by the light, as the rebuilt houses by the harbor. No one had seen it come near nor heard the rumble of the primitive two-stroke engine.

The boatman shouted an order that could barely be made out against the syncopated rhythm of the sharp crackling of the engine, and, standing, with one hand on the rudder bar, without waiting for a reply he grabbed a rope that was meticulously rolled up in the cabin and without letting go of the bar he cast it with his free hand onto the deck of the *Albatross*. He was so commanding that Tom tied up the rope without looking at Leonardus, as if from that moment on authority had been transferred, and then took over the helm to help it obey as well. After a few uncontrolled lurches the *Albatross* adjusted to the speed of the rudimentary engine whose screeching bespoke its great effort, and made it into the waters of the harbor, towed by the boat and its boatman like the dead body of a beetle dragged over the dust by an ant. They moved slowly, with the sails still spread out on the deck like useless tatters under a sky without a breath of air. The man turned around every so often, raised his head toward them and shouted in Greek to make them hear what he was showing with gestures to make himself understood. The still air smelled of sage and lavender but as they passed by the other shore, full of seaweed, a flock of seagulls took flight and the uproar brought them, in waves, the pestilential stench of a garbage dump, a compact mound of detritus where clouds of insects buzzed.

“What are you thinking about?” Andrea repeated, pressing Martín’s shoulder as he kept his gaze fixed on the little square by the mosque. The woman under the eaves, tall like a distant shadow, disappeared, like a chimera, behind a projection of the pier.

“What are you thinking about?” she insisted.

"Those are ruins," he said vaguely. He wiped his sweat with his hand and he turned toward her because he knew that only in this way he would clear the worry from her face.

"What were you looking at?"

"Nothing," he said and passed his hand over her forehead.

She was perspiring too, she who had never tired of proclaiming at all times, with an air of superiority in her voice and her gestures, that she didn't perspire even in a sauna, implying thereby that though she might have wished to perspire like everyone else, nature, her own nature, had not granted her that plebeian gift. At that moment the drops that formed on the surface of her skin and burst into minuscule shining dots over all of her body made her look exhausted and dehydrated.

The sun had reached its zenith and as they were nearing land, the shadow of the rock, like a monumental and magical filter, tinted a narrow strip of the harbor with color and gave form and definition to the first row of houses, their walls painted blue and ochre. And then the little square, which had made a place for itself among them with its two rows of squalid and dusty mulberry trees, barely covered with parched and sunburnt leaves, came into view, as did the two empty tables beside the café, which was still closed and deserted, like the whole village, which, despite having been partly immersed in the shadow, was still boiling from the sun. There was no one on the pier except two motionless men standing beside the water, seemingly waiting for the arrival of the boat and its trophy. All doors and windows were shut, no air was moving, no voices were heard, no cats or dogs or children were out, there was almost no noise, no seagulls flew in the suffocating midday air. Time had come to a standstill, and the world with it; only the silent caravan was moving in that lost place.

"*Rikhno agira, agira,*" the boatman shrieked.

Tom looked at Leonardus.

"What's he saying?"

"He wants you to drop anchor."

In a leap, Tom moved from stern to bow and cast the anchor when they were barely twenty meters from the pier. The sudden splash against the water and the metallic hammering the followed it drowned out for a moment the humming of the engine, and the seagulls on the dump flew up, crazily flapping their wings. The boatman threw the rope again onto the deck of the *Albatross*, which was already losing the scant velocity it had attained while being dragged, and once his boat was free he went around and around, his look fixed on the sailboat's inertia, as if the exactness of the tying-up depended only on him and his shouts. And when the stern was already falling onto the pier he started a loud dialogue with the two men, and with much moving around of ropes and boat hooks they managed between them to tie up the *Albatross* almost without paying attention to her, the way one would make a sick person's bed. The two men tied the ropes to the eyebolts on the pier and meticulously rolled up the remaining one, and at a command from the boatman they disappeared down a narrow alley that led from the square.

The boatman cut the engine and tied up his boat as well, and with the agility of a monkey, out of keeping with his wrinkle-beset face and his old man's skinny calves that showed beneath the rolled-up legs of his pants, climbed up on the projections of the seawall and jumped to land. Without waiting for Tom to put up the gangway he grabbed the *Albatross*'s stern rope and leaped across, standing up in the pool where the five had sat down without quite knowing what to do. Tom brought cold water, ice and lemons.

He was a tireless talker. Several times he took of his cap and put it back on, smoothing his thin, flimsy hair. He next lit a cigarette and left it resting on the wood until Tom saw it and gave it back to

him, and he then put it in his mouth without moving it again, and at last he launched into a long speech accompanied by gestures and grimaces.

His name was Pepone, he almost bellowed, and in order to calm Leonardus, who was loudly asking for a mechanic, told him that he himself had sent the two men to get him and that they would soon be back. Then, like a minstrel who might be impatiently waiting for his audience, he began to tell his story, perhaps told a thousand times already. He spoke in Italian, mixed with the Spanish that he had learned in Argentina, he said, where he had gone with his family when his father was a boatswain on the Messimeri and the disaster had not yet befallen them. "For, though it might be hard to believe, this island had been the richest in the whole Mediterranean. On the streets, which were paved with stones from Cappadocia, stood mansions built with Carrara marble, perfumed woods of the East and Venetian glass, and at the edges of the harbor storehouses and sheds stood one after another, and fishing-tackle plants and workshops that made the strongest and biggest sails in all the Levant. Ah, the time of the sailing ships! Ships with life and vibrancy, shy or submissive ships, happy ones, heavy, lazy, not like the mastodons of smoke and chimneys that came after them. I still remember this bay, so full of sailing ships that from here the hillsides would be hidden by a forest of masts." And he looked melancholically at the ruins where myrtle and thyme now grew, innocent and silent. "In the entrance to the bay and sometimes almost in the open sea the anchored sailing ships were lined up, waiting for a free berth so they could dock and unload their freight. They brought damasks and precious stones, or grains and spices that they traded for weapons, big studded crates that disappeared in the bilges of the boats and went off to the wars. Peddlers would be shouting by the customs houses and in front of the market," and he pointed to a building on the other side of the square, now empty and half-ruined, "and fortunetellers would be singing the sailors' fortunes, and beautiful stately women would come to the port to say goodbye to those who were leaving for distant places. And on the other side, where the beach is, down to the water there were fruit and vegetable gardens that were embroidered like flower gardens and were shaded by fig, cherry, apricot and medlar trees, and there were roads lined by almond trees and green vines leading to the sea; and fishermen would come back at dusk loaded with fish that they placed on baskets as in a picture; and from the hillsides there would come down flocks of sheep whose sour milk the women would wrap with aromatic herbs and strain in linen cloths until they turned it into big cheeses that they carried, wrapped in white cloth, on their heads to the market. Do you see that?" And he pointed at a cement pylon in the other corner of the square, next to a half-destroyed column. "In that place there was a fountain with seven jets, and big sculptures of wisdom, grace and power, with fish and sirens and acanthus leaves."

"That man is unstoppable," said Chiqui with a snort, and as she was going to get up Martín stopped her.

"There were always parties and celebrations," continued the boatman without letting on, "because there was money," and he moved his index finger and thumb under Chiqui's eyes, "lots of money. There were twenty thousand inhabitants on this island, more than twenty thousand, not counting foreigners who could be another two or three thousand. But then came the steamships and little by little they passed us by, and we remained abandoned at this end of the Mediterranean. That was the beginning. Then came a war, and then another. Now there are barely two hundred of us left. Everybody left, they took us all away when the bombings began. The Italians invaded us, the English bombed them out of here, they stayed on the island and turned it into an arsenal. We got sent to Palestine, to Iraq, to Australia. And when it all ended, there wasn't anything or anyone left here."

Suddenly he fell silent. A tall, somber figure was crossing the square, flanked by two powerful brown mastiffs with fallen ears, blunt noses and short hair, who were walking at his uncertain pace. The man wore a tall biretta of the same fly's-wing color as his well-worn cassock, and his long beard was almost down to his waist. Though he was walking straight and looking only in front, it was obvious that he was trying to keep his balance. But even so, the three formed a stately group.

"That's the priest with his dogs; he's going to ring the afternoon bell."

He found a place between Andrea and Chiqui and, crouching as if were about to tell a humorous secret, or perhaps fearful that the priest might hear him, he covered his mouth with his hand and added:

"He's always drunk. That's why he's here, because he's a drunkard. They say he was kicked out many years ago but now he's the one who's in charge here." And, recovering the ample gestures that he had used to sing of the island's glorious times, he pronounced: "Like a dethroned king who makes himself into a kinglet."

"Why does he have those dogs?" Chiqui asked Leonardus.

"Because he likes to," Pepone answered, "because he's crazy. Everybody on this island is crazy. Look at her," and he pointed at the pier, "Arkadia the visionary."

She was a tall, slim old woman, her bones narrow and elongated like shadows, her body wrapped in one continuous rag which she dragged like a cloak that was too long, of the same sunburnt color as her cheekless face. She was walking along the pier .... and after a few steps she vanished in a doorway or in an alleyway; it was hard to tell from there.

"She's looking for her house. She was coming back from the village when the bombing caught her by surprise and she couldn't find it. There was just a huge hole, and ever since she digs around in the ruins looking for her children." And he laughed. "She never eats or sleeps, she has no home, she doesn't talk to anyone, old Arkadia, all she does is hum to herself and walk from early in the morning to late at night, constantly searching, for over forty years."

"Well, this is some island we've come to," said Chiqui.

At that moment the two men came back with the mechanic that Pepone had sent for. The three of them jumped on board and homed in on the engine, talking to one another as if the problem did not concern anyone else. Then Pepone, taking on once again his role as intermediary, turned to Leonardus and, after demanding payment for the towing, informed with a certainty not devoid of a certain joy that they would not be able to set sail at least until the next day, because the spare part they needed was not to be found on the island. He added that they were in luck, though his tone seemed to indicate that they did not deserve it, because the steamer that made the weekly round trip to and from Rhodes came on Wednesdays, that is, tomorrow. Dimitropoulos, the mechanic, was going to call right then and there, provided the phone was working, and in the meantime they could visit the town, and he gestured broadly with his arm in order to make it clear that there were things worth seeing in those empty streets and on those desolate hillsides. He, of course, would be at their disposal to take them in his boat wherever they wanted to go. Would they, for example, like to visit the Blue Cave, the most beautiful of all the caves in the Dodecanese islands? Today was just the right day, because with the still water it would be easy to get inside. Or would they rather go tomorrow morning, when the sunlight – and he pointed to the faraway segment of horizon among the estuaries of the harbor – would be coming in through the slot and become polarized in iridescent blue hues? He lived over there, in the ochre house next to the café. They had but to call him and he would gladly attend to them.

The immobility, or perhaps the certainty of having to stay on the island for at least a day, intensified the heat that had condensed after midday, and though the shadow line of the rock was moving and gaining ground on the bay, even on deck there was not enough air. Leonardus had taken off his caftan and turned on the fan in his cabin, and, stretched out on his bunk, with the door wide open in order to create a nonexistent draft, perspired and snorted like a whale.

The two times that Martín had gone up on deck in the course of the afternoon he did not see a soul on the pier. Chiqui had put on Tom's headphones and followed the beat of the music with her sweating body while the two men talked softly as if they didn't want to wake the napping village. Pepone and his boat had disappeared.

"We'll end up dehydrated," Chiqui shouted at Martín when she saw him get some water out of the refrigerator.

Around six o'clock two women with washtubs on their heads crossed the square, like extras hired to dress up a stage that had until then been empty and to show the public that the show was about to go on. Shortly after the clatter of the iron blinds of the café broke the afternoon silence. A man with a white apron over his huge paunch brought out a few more pedestal tables and several chairs that he placed under the mulberry trees, and a little later three old men leaning on their canes moved toward the center of the square, sat down, took a pile of bone dominoes out of a bag and dropped them onto the table. The bar owner brought them some beers. They moved slowly but no one spoke as yet, perhaps waiting for the stifling heat to let up. The balcony of the house facing the *Albatross* opened and a man and a woman took up two seats facing each other, separated by a wooden table; silently, hardly looking at each other, they began to contemplate what would happen with that boat's unaccustomed arrival in port. He was wearing a pajama top and she, far more corpulent and wrapped in a flowered robe, wore a yellow kerchief on her head and fanned herself with a piece of cardboard.

Between the drowsy mists and his sweat, Martín looked at his watch again and again in order to make sure that the hands were moving, but time seemed to have no impulse to move on.

A knock on the door startled him.

"What's going on?"

"I'm going to take a walk in this damned town," said Chiqui in an edgy voice. "Does anyone want to come? If I stay on this boat another minute I'm going to burn up."

"It won't be much better outside."

"It doesn't matter, I'm going."

"Not me! I'm staying!" Leonardus shouted from his cabin.

The shadow of the rock had already merged with the horizon. Nonetheless the blinding daylight remained, sustained by a viscous humidity that refused to come off from skins and floors. The seagulls on the dump squawked and, like a spring tapped by mistake, the rhythmic beat of the power plant started up.

III

It was seven o'clock when, driven more by the hope that as evening fell the stifling heat would let up than by having noticed any trace of a breeze or a breath of fresh air, Andrea, Chiqui and Martín decided to go on land.

Martín leaped onto the pier and then stepped back in order to give his hand to Andrea in an almost mechanical gesture, sure that she was following him and that, holding on to the stern rail with one hand, she would stretch out the other in order to take his, trembling with dizziness but at the same time calmed by her own submission and by the help he was offering her.

Chiqui, on the other hand, walked self-assuredly and almost indifferently over the gangway, not in the least avoiding looking at the dark and smelly water into which, she was sure, she was not going to fall nor wanted to dive, just as Andrea had told about herself on the first day. The three then walked along the pier and the little square, slowly, so as not to stir up the inert heat of the evening.

As they passed by the old market hall, an atrium held up by chipped marble columns with the fish counters still maintaining their circular order and the side tables pushed against the walls, they stopped and went inside. The place smelled of dried fish and grime. Their voices resounded in the empty vault and their words, detached from their echoes, lingered on the marble surface of the old counters. A swallow broke the silence and hid in its nest on the topmost beam.

When they had gotten used to the darkness they found, in a corner, a man seated on the ground, his back leaning against a column and his head folded on his chest. He was motionless, wrapped in a rag, with his bare feet showing underneath. Next to him, spread out on the slabs, a dark-colored cloth displayed a collection of varied objects. Andrea and Chiqui moved in closer in order to browse: a small box filled with yellowing postcards of the island in the times of its old splendors, hand-cut pieces of cardboard with earrings, rings, colored beads, necklaces, matchboxes and a cardboard box full of elastic bands of all colors.

"What are these bands?" asked Chiqui and lifted her head, surprised by the nearness of the echo of her own words.

"What are these bands?" she asked again more softly.

The man stretched himself and, showing no intention of standing up, raised his somewhat tilted head and looked at them with one eye. The other, much larger, was fixed and immobile; it was white and he kept it open without any bashfulness. He then picked up one of the bands with his hand and by means of gestures showed them that it was meant to hold up eyeglasses.

"So short?" asked Chiqui, who had seen only the long laces that Leonardus and Andrea used.

"These are for sailing, they keep your glasses on even with a storm blowing on you. They're the ones sailors use," said Andrea, and turned toward Martín with a smile.

"I don't have this model," she added. "It must be the only one I don't have." She smiled again and, looking at him as though referring to a secret that they shared, she chose a blue one and, while he was trying to decipher the purchase price in dollars that the man was demanding, she took her dark glasses from her basket and began to insert the temples into the loops at the ends of the band.

He had never managed to figure out to what extent she actually needed her glasses, because she could be without them for hours and then suddenly be incapable of continuing what she was doing if she didn't find them. And though she would always ask if anyone had seen them, surely she never expected an answer. Perhaps this was why he thought he understood from the beginning that they were a mere pretext for ending a conversation that was beginning to bore her, or to change groups when she wanted to be somewhere else, at times precisely wherever he was. But as the years passed it became ever clearer that she really did need them, especially at night, though she would still fail to wear them and would lose them and look for them again, but, contrary to appearances, not in order to hide her myopia but because she had never fully convinced herself just how much she needed them.

Ever since she had left him alone on the terrace that first day, dissolving the languid figure to whom he would have wanted to tell his story, he could not remember the number of times that the scene had repeated itself. And when, that very summer – on the Friday of the following week, to be precise – he returned to the beach house with Federico, who had again been summoned by Sebastián, he brought her a blue band, with two washers to hold the temples of her glasses, that she could wear around her neck.

He had placed it in his pants pocket and had his hand ready to give it to her as soon as they were alone together on the terrace as they had the previous week. He had imagined that meeting from the moment in which she had come to the door in the late afternoon to bid them a hurried good-bye because Federico had to be in the city by evening; and although all that week, in his sudden loneliness, he had pricked up his ears in order to decipher the words that she had pronounced when she shook his hand and that he had missed, or to confirm the ones he was incapable of believing that he had heard, he was not sure that what she had whispered was "come back soon, please." Perhaps she really had said "come back soon" and what he had missed was "please," which made him suppose that, one way or another, she would be waiting for him, though even this conviction was not enough to calm him but just the opposite: his hand was trembling in his pocket and his voice failed each time he tried to speak. But he had thought so much about how it would happen, perhaps so that he wouldn't be betrayed by his shyness and nervousness, that he was sure that as soon as they arrived at the house Federico and Sebastián would get caught up in their papers, and then he would go out on the terrace and from the shadow of the awning, in a position – halfway between indolent and absent-minded – of which he had foreseen even the detail of how he would lean his hand on the railing, he would throw his hair back just as he had seen her do, and, as if stepping out of the depths of his self-absorption, he would raise his hand with a certain surprise but with complete naturalness as soon she would stop swimming and call him, shouting through her hands:

"Hey, Martín, hey!" he heard her.

But things almost never happen the way we have imagined them, because the situations on which we base our forecasts correspond to elaborate fictions built only on imagination, and we never take account of the longing and desire that change the meaning of things and hide or mask the essential and the obvious at their convenience. And we envision a chimerical progression starting from premises that are coincidental, partial and always inaccurate, and we then blame fate or providence for the failure or our predictions.

She did not make an appearance all day and he, constantly pressing the band in his pocket – when he thought that his impatience had reached its limit and that he couldn't take another minute without knowing where he stood, even though not the slightest splashing was to be heard and it was already night

– pointed at an invisible point in the sea and asked, in the most natural tone that his voice, ruined by the cigarettes that he had not stopped smoking all day, allowed: “Isn’t that Andrea coming over there?”

“No,” replied Sebastián, raising his head in surprise toward the terrace. “Andrea went to the mountains to pick up the kids, who spent a few days with Carlos’ parents. They’ll be back tomorrow,” he said, “and Carlos with them, I suppose. Carlos is her husband, you know him...” and he turned to Federico to tell him something about Carlos that Martín could no longer hear.

In the chimeras and dreams of the week, in his reminiscences and conjectures, in the building of utopian futures and biographies that had kept him busy for so long, in the schemes that he was going to carry out and the obstacles that he had to overcome, in the imagined, sweetened, perfected scenes, almost real from having lived them and relived them at all hours, the only thing he had not foreseen was a husband and kids.

He kept staring at the darkness of the sea and applied himself to going over, one by one, the bumper lights on the anchored boats so as to calm his confusion and get out of his bewilderment, in the same way that an irritable person, aware of the fit of rage that is about to materialize, counts to ten before speaking so as to give himself enough time to recover his composure and to see the situation in its true dimensions.

The blue band remained in his pocket, but, as though his knowledge of this new circumstance had disarmed him and calmed him all at once, he stopped pressing it and almost forgot about it. And the next morning, when, lying alone on the beach, he wondered, with a certain melancholy, what had been the point of the intensive swimming class that he had enrolled in and that he had attended, terrified, every day of the week so that he could learn to swim before she would realize that he hardly knew how, he also forgot that she could arrive just at that moment. And so it happened. Through the door that had seen her disappear the previous Saturday, two naked little boys rushed onto the beach, so blond and so alike that he became engrossed in looking at their mimicking gestures, the same straw color of their hair, the same way of walking while tripping on the stones, the same stare they gave him at the beginning, followed by the same gesture of indifference, the same movement of the shoulders before they both turned around in order to splash in the almost imperceptible breaking of the waves. And he had not even had enough time to reappraise the situation and assign them the part of Andrea’s children when she appeared, in the same bathing suit as on the first day, and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that he would be lying on the beach because it was the place that her occult schemes had assigned him, with a look of urgency but at the same time showing, in the corner of her mouth or in the tenderness of her half-closed eyes, an expression of mockery towards herself or maybe towards him, he thought, unable to adapt to the timing and designs of this surprising woman, she ruffled his hair with her hand in passing and, when she had already almost reached the water where the boys were, asked him:

“You haven’t by chance seen my glasses in the living room, have you, sweetheart?”

At that moment he remembered the band and went to the railing where he had left his clothes, and though nothing was as he had imagined, he was seized by a wild urgency to give it to her, perhaps so he could thereby eliminate the consternation produced by that unexpected word, whose precise nature he did not wish to elucidate at that moment, nor to know whether it was due to the flippancy with which she had dropped it or the presumption of taking for consummated more stages of this plot than he, in his impatience, had been ready to accept. He returned toward her, as she was crouching on the stones next to the boys, and without sweeping the hair that fell over his forehead with his hand, he stretched it out to her and said:

“It’s for you.”

He had not foreseen, either, her surprised look now as she now lifted her head, nor the quick kiss on the lips as she seized him by the ears, nor that she would leave him alone with those little kids who were entering the water, plunging under and getting farther away; nor that she would later lie down beside him as she was placing the band on the glasses that she had found and that she would let them fall on her chest, craning her neck in order to see the effect produced by this new and unexpected necklace. And yet everything happened so naturally that this time he forgot about the husband's existence.

He saw him later, almost at lunchtime, when Andrea had already come back into the house.

"Keep an eye on the kids, would you?" she had said as she was leaving.

"But..."

"Don't worry, they know how to swim, and they never go too far." And she left.

Then, rounding the cape that closed off the little beach on the north, *he* appeared, alone at the helm of the *Manuela*, which was moving so slowly that when he let the engine idle the slowing-down was barely noticeable. He moored the anchor astern and stepped forward with a couple of leaps when the boat was less than a fathom short of the pier, and then he leaped across, rope in hand, and turned around quickly in order to stop the boat before it bumped into the seawall. He pulled on the stem rope, tied it on a ring, leaped back on deck and ran to pull in the anchor chain so as to leave the *Manuela* tied up. He had never seen him before but recognized him immediately. By his parsimonious self-assurance or by the way he waved his hand and smiled at him as if the introductions had already been made, or, more likely, because his hair was of the same straw color as that of the twins, named Adrián and Eloy, as Andrea had told him. He spent more than half an hour undoing the awning, winding the ropes, washing down the deck, with no hurry or precipitation, absorbed in what he was doing. When he finished he pulled the two boys up by their hands over the gunwale, then sat down on a deck bench, lit a cigarette, put one leg over the other and fixed his gaze on some point of the coast to port without moving his eyes while he smoked calmly and with a certain enjoyment. He was not tall but he was well built; his body was solid and his skin was tanned.

"I'm just a kid," Martín thought.

And he truly was no more than a child, an adolescent with a still unfinished body, who had grown up too fast and who was still too lazy to get his hair cut, just as he had been back in Ures, when his mother dragged him every other week to the barbershop, from which he would emerge with his nape shaved clean and smelling of camphor cologne. His hair was light-colored and it now covered his forehead and shirt collar, but its color had not yet become defined, just as his skin had not yet become weather-beaten and only the barest wisp of a beard had appeared on his face. "You have the smooth skin of an Asian, you must have an Asian or an African ancestor," Andrea was to repeat to him that same summer so many times that he had become aware of his own singularity, and he clung to her so that he could prevail, unconcerned, over all those privileged people around him, who were older than he, whose ways were more self-assured and torsos more robust, and who, unlike him with his two dress shirts whose sleeves he rolled up to the elbow to give them the summer look that he couldn't achieve in any other way, always wore the right clothing: the white sweater thrown carelessly over the shoulders in the evening, shorts in the morning, and old pants, discolored by wear and saltpeter, when they went out fishing.

He saw him later at lunchtime and, somewhere, in the afternoon. He was a silent but not a harsh man, and in fact the only thing he didn't like about him was just that he was who he was. Or, perhaps, that underhanded attention he was paying Andrea, a certain detachment in dealing with her without missing any detail of what she did or needed, just as parents can follow a child's movements while

holding a complicated discussion and intervene only at the precise moment when the thing the child had grabbed is about to fall or when the bathtub faucet needs to be turned off or the child must be moved away from an outlet. And his sheltering way of putting his hand on her shoulder while placing his pipe in his mouth with the other, with the air of an English-literature professor who might be seeing off some friends at the door with his wife. He moved around the house and the beach so naturally, giving orders and serving drinks, that, when on his return from New York he found out that the house belonged to him and not to Sebastián, he began to see the truth of his relationship with his father-in-law, though even now, after living with Andrea for so many years, he still could not understand what the link that had joined him to his wife was made of.

But even so, and contrary to the unfavorable forebodings that the man's unexpected appearance had given him that afternoon at the beach, by the end of August he had learned to swim ably enough so that, under cover of night, he could get to the *Manuela* where Andrea would have arranged to meet him when they stayed back on the streets while the waiters in the bars had begun to put the chairs on the tables, the music was stopping and the town was becoming enveloped in silence. He would take it calmly and leave the guest house where he stayed the remaining weekends of the summer well ahead of time, he thought because of his impatience, but in reality he was carried away by caution and, aware of his inexperience, wanted to take his time in plunging into the water, getting to the *Manuela*, which was anchored a bare fifty meters from the pier, and leaping on deck without witnesses, because he was never sure that he wouldn't fall when, grabbing the figurehead, he would place his foot on the stem eyebolt as she had taught him to do and pull himself up so as to jump onto the moist and slippery deck. But almost every time she was already waiting for him.

That summer had been one of great heat waves. There was not a single day that the north wind came in, the wind whose unyielding tenacity had over the centuries left the slate terraces that disappeared into the sea free of vegetation, barren and bald. At noon, when the shopkeepers closed up in order to take time for the afternoon nap in the shady depths of their backrooms, nothing could be heard but the shouts of children on the beach, their echoes rumbling in the mist hanging over the sea, and the shutters were not rolled up again until the swifts, chirping excitedly, left the canopy of the great catalpa trees on the boardwalk and scraped the sky announcing the dusk. By night the water, heated by the day's unrelenting sun, was lukewarm and thick, and as he was swimming the breaststroke so as to make no noise and to keep his head up, he marveled at the phosphorescence that his own movements created on the sea.

The first time, however, he had not gone there swimming; Andrea picked him up on the beach. It happened on the third weekend. On Wednesday he had as yet no idea of how to get to the town, nor did he even know, contrary to what he had determined the first time, if he really could go, because Federico was away on a trip and on Saturday night there was a rush job on the Barceloneta beach. But Andrea, whom he believed to be sailing under the sun on her August vacation, had called him that morning from the city to invite him to dinner that same night with a couple of actors whom she later had to interview. He spent the rest of the day concocting plots and making plans, adapting them to the course of events, which always seemed to happen so as to belie his presuppositions. She showed up in the company of her mother's friend who had lunched with them the first day that he was at the beach house. He was wearing a white vest and a wide tie with big, loud flowers, even more spectacular against the immaculate linen suit, the dark skin and the mustache that filled his face.

"It's Leonardus, remember?"

From the table of the restaurant to which he had come too early he saw them enter laughing and talking loudly. Andrea's glasses were hanging on the band, and neither her extremely short skirt nor her very high heels kept her from moving as nimbly as when she danced barefoot on the stony beach. Then came the two actors, a married couple getting along in years who were celebrating their professional golden anniversary that very week, so talkative that throughout the dinner he was silent, dissemblingly scrutinizing the direction of her gaze.

"How old are you?" she asked him in an aside.

"Twenty-two."

She gave him a fleeting, somewhat indulgent smile, conscious of his unsureness and timidity. "What difference does it make!" she finally said, responding to a question that he, for his part, had not asked.

And that was all that they said to each other during that interminable dinner, which she and Leonardus, however, seemed to enjoy. Later, when they dropped him off at home and he was already going into the doorway, she had asked from the car window at what time he would come that Friday, with that same chatty naturalness with which she had wanted to know if he had seen her glasses in the living room, sweetheart, and he didn't know what to answer. It was she who, with the tone of someone who knows that her commands, by their consistency and the tone in which they had been uttered, admitted no appeal, arranged for him to ride with Leonardus, who had also intended to go to Cadaqués Friday evening.

"I'll go tomorrow," she added as though giving an unimportant detail but certain that he would hear her, "after I drop Carlos, who's going to Argentina, at the airport."

On Friday Leonardus was already at the door at the agreed-upon time when he went downstairs. He came in a big black car with a chauffeur and a quiet, buxom girl whose thigh he kept slapping throughout the trip in order to accentuate what he was saying. Halfway they stopped to eat dinner and he bombarded him with questions about his work and his free time, how he had gotten started and why he was working with Federico, and at each question he shut his eyes, wrinkling his eyelids, as if wishing to concentrate his look more. The girl hardly spoke the entire evening.

"How old is Andrea?" Martín suddenly asked with the brusqueness and bad timing of the shy.

Leonardus laughed and slapped the girl's thigh again, while she remained motionless.

"How old would you say?" he asked him in return.

"Maybe twenty-five, twenty-seven," an age that he calculated by how old he supposed the twins to be, because in fact he had not thought about the matter until the evening of the dinner.

"If that's how old you think she is then that's how old she is. I know how old I am, I'm fifty-two. I'm an old man next to you."

On saying goodnight, when he dropped him off at the beach bar, he said to him absent-mindedly:

"I'll call you one of these days, and maybe we'll do something together."

Martín ordered a coffee and set himself to wait with the conviction that in some way Andrea knew that he had arrived. But at two in the morning she had not yet shown up. He then walked up the slope towards the church, where the waiter at the bar had told him that his father had a guest house, and was about to enter it when a group of ten or twelve people came out of a nearby bar. Martín did not see her then but she saw him, left the others and without his realizing it hung on to his arm.

"I was waiting for you," she said to him.

"Where?" he asked. "I don't see you being as impatient as you told me on the sea."

Andrea, perhaps under the influence of drink or because the sudden meeting had not given her time to adjust to the situation, began laughing so loudly that in the balcony of the house across the street appeared the head of a woman screeching and ordering them to shut up.

"Come," she then said in a whisper, and cuddled up to him as if the silence suddenly had made her feel cold. "Come," she repeated.

"Wait," he said, carefully moving her aside. He entered the guesthouse, asked for a room, left his bag and came out again.

Andrea was leaning on the wall and seemed to have lost all initiative. She was wearing a very short jacket with long, wide sleeves and sandals with a barely visible strap, her glasses hung from the blue band over her cleavage, and the humidity had curled her hair so much that when Martín took her head to bring it closer to his, for a moment the contact with that spongy mass wiped out every other sensation. She then kissed one of his eyelids, then the other, and said to him very softly in his ear: "Let's go."

The calm sea, reflecting the shoreline lights, showed its seaweed-covered bottom. The lighted buoys and the white hulls of the first row of anchored boats shone like spots in the darkness, and behind them it was perhaps the intensity of the darker zones that made one imagine others and yet others, like fuzzy superimposed backdrops. Andrea took off her jacket and sandals and left it all on the ground with her glasses, hardly caring about them – just as her mother had put a cigarette in her mouth with the certainty that someone would light it for her – and whispered to him "wait a moment, I'm coming right back with the *Manuela*," and she plunged into the water, still lukewarm from the sun. The wake of her receding body widened until it covered all of the little bay and its vertex disappeared in the darkness, leaving in the air only a trace of rhythmic splashing that after a little while was no longer heard.

He sat down on the ground. The sky was black, the dark water seemed to have the petroleum-like thickness that it sometimes acquires during nights of sultry weather. He would have liked to know which one was the *Manuela*, but for landlubbers, he thought, all boats look alike, just as the features of one race look alike to those of another. During the weekends that followed, when he was already part of the heterogeneous group that met every afternoon on the beach terrace, and when, not knowing very well what to say to them because he was reserved, quiet and shy and did not feel like making any effort to hide the fact, he passively attended their endless conversations and arguments, he would try to discover the precise details that according to Andrea characterized each and every one of the boats that crossed the bay. "You see that one with its raked bow and escutcheon stern? That's how the boats from Tarragona are." But Martín never found out what a boat's escutcheon or a backward stern was, nor did he manage to learn about that difference in height or raking of the bows that seemed to constitute an unequivocal way of knowing boats by their origin. And by the end of the summer he was still incapable of distinguishing them by anything but the color they were painted, the way the rope ladders were attached, or, at most, by the height of the hatchway. Never could he, as she could, recognize them by the way they sailed and the way the bow met the swelling sea with the facing sun that darkened the contour of the faraway silhouettes, or when at dusk the sea blended with the sky and they were barely a spot that was moving half-hidden by the swell.

Behind the horizon could be seen the pale gleam of the moon which was soon to appear. After a while the gentle faraway humming of an engine broke the silence and a few minutes later the *Manuela* appeared in front of him, approaching slowly until her keel scraped the sand. From the ground the bow rose against the sky and hid Andrea, who soon showed her head and said to him quietly:

"Come on up."

Martín took of his shoes and gave them to her with the jacket, the sandals and the glasses, grabbed the outrigger with one hand and jumped on deck.

The *Manuela* backed away from the beach. Andrea handled the tiller and made the boat snake among other boats and buoys until she had enough room to maneuver, changed the direction of the tiller, the propeller under water made a little whirling noise, and the *Manuela*, making an almost full turn, set off straight for the darkness.

From his seat, his back leaning against the hatchway, Martín had the town lights in his face and could barely see Andrea's naked silhouette, her body hazy like a dream and her chin uplifted in order to decipher the darkness that spread from the bow to the horizon. When, upon rounding the cape that enclosed the bay, they reached the open sea, the moon appeared, and the phantasmagoric vision of the woman gradually took shape until it became once again a tangible being that he had within the reach of his hands.

Dawn surprised them in a cove near the Cape of Creus, where they had anchored a little more than a couple of hours before. They would have given their lives for a glass of water, and in the brutal first light, which had not yet given them back the sense of orientation and of time, their faces looked contorted, their eyes surrounded by shadows, and their skin trembling. "You have the smooth skin of Asians and Africans," she said to him as she traced his chin with her fingers, and he: "how long are you going to love me?" referring to words she had spoken that night, "how long?" in order to wring a promise from her, a commitment, in order to extend the incipient present of this magical night into the future. "How long are you going to love me?" She made an evasive gesture with her hand and cast him a glance that turned the question back at him, as if to say, *that depends on you*, or *it's up to you*, or, as he came to think at times, *for as long as you can take it*.

Martín returned to the city in the noon jitney after they'd had coffee on the terrace of the beach bar, blinded by the sunlight which on that morning had been even more overwhelming, more mortifying, more intense, and Andrea, contrary to what had been planned, followed him by car on the evening of the following day and called him as soon as she arrived in a voice that was still surprised, pressured and pleading, as he had not heard her use except in the darkness of the *Manuela*'s hatchway, which was their post-midnight meeting point the rest of the summer. The aroma of saltpeter was to remain forever in his memory joined to the first step of that unexpected, messy relationship on which they embarked with no goal, almost with no route, free but aimless like errant voices adrift, and which was to be interrupted a year later when she initiated a breakup for which she, perhaps to palliate that unjustified separation, perhaps to assure its definitive conclusion, had planned all the details.

But, by one of those unforeseeable tricks of time, those beginning months – like a golden age that could be recovered or at least repeated – took up much more space in his memory that the years that followed them, marked by the intermingling and confusion of the idle hours, the half-abandoned projects and the quarrels and the reconciliations and their complicated course, replaced day after day by others that wiped out the previous ones, leaving hardly any trace other than the steady march toward routine and resentment, not even understanding how they were getting there, just as parents can't recall a child's face as it's replaced at each moment by the new one, so that if a photograph had not immobilized the image of a certain expression in the memory or if they could not rely on the fossilized recollection of the tale retold ad nauseam, they could not remember either the face or the manner of the child they had observed for so long.

That first year, on the other hand, had remained so petrified in his memory that nobody or nothing could have supplanted it or effaced it or disfigured it. He could recall with the minutest details every one of the times they had seen each other during the summer, the brightness of one morning was not to be confused with that of any other of the many when he sat waiting for her at the beach bar – the town still empty, the boats motionless on the silvery sea that was awakening under the pale sun barely broken off from the horizon, a woman sweeping in front of the door and then watering, sprinkling the ground by hand, the lost shine of an opening window crossing the bay like lightning. He would recognize her from afar by the way she walked as she rounded a bend of the pier, her hips thrown slightly forward, always wearing the same kind of white shirt, and with that overdone hair, curled like long metal shavings, while he inhaled the aroma of the first coffees of the morning and the espresso machine's jet of air imitated a toy locomotive. And that unquenchable desire to see her again soon after she had left, so intense and so well known to him and so expected that sometimes it would show up even before she was gone – her back as expressive as her face, if not more so – driven by some obligations to which she nonetheless seemed to attach no importance, perhaps to calm him, who was living frightened by the existence and the possible unexpected arrival of a husband whom he had not seen again, and would emerge so forcefully that he ended up confusing presence with yearning, both fused in an artifice that could barely be banished by contact or voice or the certain knowledge that she was right there.

There is no greater complicity than that of a mother with her child in the first months or that of lovers during that period in which one can't tell where the one's skin – or heat – begins and the other's ends, and where the characters merge and take on by turns each other's parts, and sometimes both the same part, intermingled while missing the one they left behind, neglected and unconsumed. *Everything else is transactions*, thought Martín.

And perhaps because he was living immersed in that inexplicable connection, it did not occur to him until much later that the ease with which she had seduced him and with which she was managing this new situation necessarily had to imply a tumultuous past which made him a mere link in a chain that he would rather not think about. Because, how could he be sure that she, protected by an armor of wealth and security, was aiming for the same things as he?

At dinner, that first Sunday when they were alone in the city, there was no room for questions. Wrapped up as they were in the same aureole of tenderness and fatigue, they could not take their eyes off each other nor abandon the contact of hands on the table and knees under the tablecloth, as if there still were some point of the body that had not come into contact with that of the other body. Where is the separation? Martín asked himself, overwhelmed, not noticing the bowl of shrimp that after an hour the waiter, heeding a gesture from Andrea, took away intact. It was not until much later, during the long hours of waiting that would define the rainy winter that followed, that he would have to try to uncover the mystery behind that woman, so joyous and carefree but also cautious and reserved, capable of creating such deep intimacy but at the same time so little given to trust, making her behavior incomprehensible. Nonetheless on a few occasions he ventured to ask, not only because he feared that she would straight-out impose on him the barrier that she had tacitly lifted from the first day, but because something told him that these were other uses and customs, different from the ones he knew, in which there was no delimitation whatsoever among partying, pleasure, work, fidelity and social life. He had fallen into a place where there seemed to be no differences between one thing and another and where illicit love was not necessarily shameful and did not have to be infidelity. It was hard for him to understand it because he had been brought up and had lived otherwise, and nothing was further from the closed, almost scowling

household that he had known, nor did the tangle of relationships in which she moved have anything to do with the rare visitors who approached the house in the mill, and even less so the one in Sigüenza, where they hardly knew anyone. And in the few months that he had lived in the city he had been witness to behaviors so free and careless that, had they not been accompanied by smiles and indifference, he would have thought that they presaged real catastrophes.

But during the first weeks of that long summer there was no room for doubt because nothing was more evident or truer than the excitement, the consternation and the tenderness of the stolen hours, the fun and the laughter and also the glimmer of some tears on her eyelids that the momentary glow of the sea and its reflections would occasionally reveal in the shadow of the hatchway, tears that he would excitedly suck up just as he had learned that same morning to suck at the sea urchins taken from the rocks, but whose meaning he neither understood nor dared to find out.

When he would set about thinking of that first year, which had passed without clouding over or wavering, he still refused to admit that even intense passions, just like fearful and indecisive ones, are destined to become spent, though they may at times leave terrible aftereffects, the worst of which is undoubtedly the denial of that general and immutable law, because then the memory of what it had meant – mixed with the conviction that because it was so powerful it had to last forever – drives, conditions and encourages the biographies and all the acts that define it in a vain attempt to make the passion, already spent and disintegrated, prevail over nothingness and thus show, against all evidence, its nonexistent vitality.

But long before this had happened, Andrea had already received the second of the endless collection of eyeglass bands that she would have accumulated over the years if she had not lost them all just as she lost that first one barely a couple of weeks later and as, Martín was convinced, she would also lose the blue elastic one that the one-eyed man in the market had just sold them.

She had already put her glasses back on with the band when in the shaded space there resounded, piercing like a lament, uncertain like a curse, a roar of laughter from the man who, soon exhausted by his own convulsions, lay down again on the slabs, covered himself with the same dark cloth and suddenly fell silent. They went out into the light and, frightened, began to walk along the slope leading to the seaweed-strewn beach. The air was still and the heat had become petrified on the asphalt. None of them spoke as they wandered through the little streets that were vaguely marked by the ruins and occasionally by a rebuilt house, even with flowers in the windows but silent and closed like any ruin. They had taken a path and were climbing up some stone steps skirting the edge of the cliff, but when they got to the top they realized that it was a dead end.

“Let’s go back, we can’t go on this way,” said Martín.

“Yes we can, there’s the sea again,” said Chiqui, who was in the lead and pointed at the mosque square, now deserted.

Halfway down the hill Martín had stopped.

“Come on, Martín,” said Andrea then. “What are you looking at?”

From the corner of an alley a house could be seen with a grapevine over the door. Two men and a woman, seated at a marble table, were drinking wine and at that moment the woman rose, took the empty bottle with her and entered the house. They could barely see anything more then her long ponytail when the door shut behind her. Martín turned his head forward. Andrea was looking at him.

“What were you looking at?” she insisted.

Not answering, Martín grabbed Andrea's hand and went up the trail again, made a decisive right turn, then left, and began to wander along the labyrinthine, silent and ruined streets.

"Where are we going?" Chiqui interrupted. "Why aren't we going back?"

"Let's go on this way," said Martín, pulling Andrea's hand.

"I don't want to go on," she said, and went to join Chiqui, who had stopped and was sitting on a stone bench. "It's too hot."

"Go on if you want to," and he let go of her hand.

She looked at him suspiciously.

"What are you saying?" and she sat down in turn.

"That you two go back to the boat. I'll go later."

"But where are you going to go?"

"For a walk."

"I'll go with you," she then said. There was determination in her voice and she was about to get up, but she let the resentment that comes from feeling excluded go by and she didn't move.

"So come," he said without looking at her.

But he said it just for the sake of saying it, because the only thing he wanted at that moment was that they leave him alone so that he could retrace his steps and go looking for the girl in the hat that he had seen from the *Albatross*. Though at that time she had vanished in the sun-blinded distance and he had not been able to adapt her to the hidden image in his memory, she might well have been the same one as in the patio with the grapevines. It wasn't the ponytail but something more enduring, the air, the gestures, her way of leaning only with her shoulders, with the rest of her body separate from the wall, that had immersed him once more in that story that he had left unfinished. Perhaps there are no unfinished stories, he told himself, one way or another they would have to conclude without our realizing it. But now, across the time of silence and oblivion, a time that exists only in reminiscence, she was rising, precise and certain as then, leaving the other time – real time, which had accompanied him up to now – faded and remote, as if he were no longer allowed to hold on to it, nor to listen to the songs that were calling to him from there, as if he no longer recognized Andrea's voice and what she was saying meant nothing.

Then the old woman appeared. She must have been following them for a stretch and when they stopped she passed them and began to climb the hill. The heat didn't seem to matter to her. She walked haltingly on the stones but her haggard body maintained a precarious stability to the rhythm of her disjointed leaps, which she nonetheless executed deftly and fearlessly, and she accompanied herself with a monotonous singsong, as though she were reciting a list of errands that she didn't want to forget, coupled to its own, mangled beat.

"I don't want to go on, I'm going," said Chiqui as she rose and started down the hill.

"Let's follow the woman," said Martín, "let's see where she's going."

"Who cares where she's going, I'm going back, I'm exhausted," said Chiqui.

Andrea rose too and caught up with her, and Martín, who in spite of everything had decided to follow them, when he heard the underhandedly threatening tone of her voice that he knew so well and in which he had already noticed the tinge of scorn – "leave him, he'll come" – said in a louder voice so that he would hear it, turned around and started on the path that went up the promontory, and, matching his pace to the woman's, followed her at a distance so as not to be discovered.

IV

The path climbed abruptly and the pavement was coming apart into bare stones and puddles made dry and hard, like the blacktop of the pier, by the scarcity of rain and the absence of walkers. A dense and sweetish aroma of honeysuckle hung in the air. Not a whiff of a breeze was blowing.

The woman hummed as she walked on, giving no sign of the heat that weighed down like lead. Martín stopped for a moment to catch his breath and keep his distance from the old woman, because he had become disoriented again. At his feet, the bay was enveloped in the penumbra and in the harbor there was hardly any shine other than the short arc of wobbling lanterns in that mist of heat over the asphalt and the sea. The faint light at the top of the mast showed off, against the fuzzy profile of the village, the slight swaying of the slow and still faraway waves from the two fishing boats that were approaching shakily. On the other side of the bay the primitive power plant was uttering its lazy metallic refrain and in some nearby location a dog barked over the singsong of the woman, who was moving farther uphill. *Any movement becomes a sign or a signal when change is nearing*, he thought, and he stopped looking at the bay and followed her, and it seemed to him that they were getting into the village by way of its highest part, though she descended again over half-ruined streets and paths and then climbed again, the way one walks through a maze that one knows, sometimes making detours or going in a direction that contradicts the preceding one with the same assurance as though she were guided by an objective that only she could recognize, not interrupting her singsong or changing her rhythm or stopping or slowing down or running out of breath. They had reached a path between walls, perhaps the remains of houses, neither ruined nor rebuilt from the ravages of time, survivors of all the catastrophes, which leaned on both sides as though, before collapsing, they had decided to meet somewhere at infinity. It had become dark and the edge of the sky now had a marine hue. The lane became narrower still and the woman rounded a corner and he behind her, not knowing or wondering why he followed her and not able or willing to stop, when behind his steps – he was so close to her that if she had paid attention to anything but her own humming and the impulse that guided her she would have noticed him, if only by his footsteps and by the occasional stone coming loose beneath his feet and rolling down the path with uncontrolled but firm movements, as her own steps echoed in the narrowness of the street, amplified by the incandescence of the walls or perhaps by the silence that was so dense that it was no longer pierced by the snore of the boats or the refrain of the power plant – he was startled by a barking almost at the level of his shoulders. A dog was looking at him ferociously, at him and not at the old woman who passed by him without seeing him before entering a tiny garden through a wire-mesh gate that creaked above the barks. There was no way out on that side and when the dog jumped and blocked his way on the backside, Martín picked up a stone from the ground and threw it at the dog's nose with such force that the animal tottered and became motionless, but only for the moment that he needed to regain his strength and attack. He shrank back on his hind legs, gathered momentum, and as though catapulted by a crossbow described an arc that was to end in him. He could still see the blood-shot eyes and the open maw, and he just barely managed to cover his face with his arm when, paralyzed by fear and stunned by the animal's impact, he stumbled and fell on the ground. The dog, giving him no quarter and not stopping his barking, charged again and, though Martín was kicking

and defending himself, in a flash closed his jaws on the calf of the man's leg and shook it with such obstinacy that he could not pull it apart. Then, blinded by pain and panic, he picked another stone from the ground and, with a fury far more intense than the pain, the fear and the position in which he found himself would allow, struck the dog's head with such ferocious insistence that the dazed animal loosened his jaws, remained motionless for a minute with his flanks trembling and his eyes aflame, ready to go at him again. But before he could begin his charge Martín grabbed a rough, dagger-sharp stone, sat up in order to get closer and with the strength of his terror drove it without looking where at the very moment when the dog was setting at him. Struck in his nose for the second time, the animal staggered and fell to the ground whining. The retreat was free, but instead of running away as he had wished a minute before, he stood up, climbed on a wall between two ruins or uninhabited houses – what did it matter now? – where the dog, even if not wounded, would never have reached him, and, driven by the inertia of the first terror, like someone who has eaten in such a hurry that there was no time for the hunger to dissipate, pulled out the stones that stuck out without noticing that he was hurting his own hands and, unrepentantly and viciously, propelled by a violence that being unknown to him he could not control, threw them at the animal one after another until the dog, lying on the ground, blinded by the blood covering his eyes with no energy left for barking, took the volley of projectiles without defending himself or moving away or even knowing where they came from, and, having perhaps forgotten how it all had begun, laid his head on the ground and stopped whimpering. It was neither his silence nor the certainty that he could no longer attack him, but the trembling of Martín's arms and entire body, set off by his own heartbeat of exhaustion and excitement, that made him stop. He jumped down from the wall and began to walk, more in order to escape the viscous and humid darkness – as if he could deposit in it that part of him that had just shown itself – than to find a place with a little more light so that he could check the wound on his leg. And when, forced by pain, he stopped at the top of the slope, he turned around yet again to contemplate the dog who was still emitting an occasional faint howl, almost a bleat, in the cloud of dust floating in the penumbra, and making efforts to lift his head in a vain attempt to recover his breath, or perhaps only with the intention of demonstrating ever more blindly that, even as moribund as he was, he had managed to expel the intruder from his territory.

His shirt was soaked through and his hair was stuck to his eyes. He pulled it away with his hand, still full of dirt, and he then saw the old woman as she was leaving the garden, dragging her rags on the ground with he same damaged and indifferent majesty and singing her stubborn tune with the same rhythm. And, as though she had done nothing but enter the garden through one door and leave it through another after a pointless stroll through the garden, she stepped over the bloodied stones and passed by the prostrate dog without looking at him, perhaps without seeing him, or even noticing the presence of the sweaty and contorted man who was looking at her. Nor did she seem to have noticed the dusk, which had left the street in a tenuous, shallow, opaque light in which nothing shone except those agonizing eyes in a final and useless effort at staying open. She climbed up the path, hugging the ruined wall, and, blending more and more with the penumbra, she turned into a shortcut and vanished like another shadow.

When she had disappeared he pressed his temples and closed his eyes. Then he began to walk, looking for light. His wound was hurting and he was limping, but he did not stop until he got to the end of the slope, under a bare, pale street lamp hanging from the eaves of a large house in ruins. All that could be heard was the chirping of crickets in the heat of the night. No one was to be seen, the street was deserted and the pier was still far away. The wound was still bleeding, though it seemed to have partly dried up; he cleaned it with a handkerchief that he took out from his pocket and folded diagonally in order

to bandage his leg and stanch the wound. He then unrolled the cuff of his pants leg and, once the bandage was hidden, he cleaned the bloodstains from his hands with some dried grass. With the light of his lighter he set out conscientiously to find other traces; he found only a couple of drops on his pants, which he rubbed with dirt in order to change their color and, as he wiped the soles of his shoes on the stones he raised a cloud of dry dust that made him cough. His anxiety had given way, as had the excitement, and he prepared to hit the road again, pressed by a relentless urge to get away from that place, when at the top of the hill a figure – silhouetted against the sky, vaguely outlined by the darkness surrounding it – burst into a volley of roars of laughter, whose diaphanous echo nonetheless superimposed them on one another, stringing them together and multiplying them until they broke against the walls and vanished, trembling, in the stone-strewn streets. A frightened lizard leaped out, a stone came loose from the noise, and a bird, hidden in an invisible thicket, screeched; and the man, shaken by the violence of his spasmodic laughter, threw his head back. Only then did he recognize him by the blind gleam of his glass eye.

It was not only the echo of those broken and virulent bursts of laughter, but perhaps the fear or the shame that he felt, that made him flee from that accusing image; he ran stumbling down a path that he was sure he had not seen before, guided by the smell of saltpeter, even denser now because of the stifling air that had filled the bay at nightfall. When he came out to the pier the woman's singsong, the dog's barking and the man's laughter were still following one another behind him. He turned around, but he heard only the cadenceless pealing of a lost bell.

Though that part of the pier was dark, in the harbor café, near where the *Albatross* had been tied up, some lights had been turned on and for an instant he forgot the nightmarish experiences he had just left behind. He kept walking without too much pain, still out of breath though he was noticing that his heart was slowly recovering its normal beat, because in some corner of his conscience the one-eyed man's laughter kept on echoing. And amid the torment and the tangle of voices and noises whose origin he could not decipher he repeated to himself time and again in order to convince himself: *I've only killed a dog! All I've done is kill a dog! What's happening to me? The world hasn't progressed morally since the age of cavemen, who can deny that? Don't the powerful live calmly, and yet they throw tens of thousands of people to their deaths with impunity, only to sell more units of some useless product? Or those who torture, kill and destroy in the name of freedom or morality? But they don't feel any anguish; don't we see them every day, vain and self-satisfied, receiving honors and distributing favors, without the least bit of remorse or compassion? Then why should I have to have them? Why me?* He started to run, staggering like the old woman – *who knows where she might be now?* – still pursued by that laughter that was becoming part of the dislocated ringing of the bell which, amplified and fed by itself, deafened the heavenly vault, by now decidedly black and already spangled with stars and constellations whose impassivity and permanence were not enough to camouflage the hidden scene of his foul act. He stopped upon reaching the old market and stooped down to look for the stream of water from the pipe. He washed his hand and face and he drank with gusto until he choked, so much that his air-filled stomach began to churn and rumble. After ten minutes he smoothed his hair with his hand and carefully examined his pants, his shirt and his face in a curtainless glass door. He could hardly see himself but that shadow of himself calmed him. He then sat down on a stone marker and tried to recover his breath and his calm. From where he sat, in the darkness, he could see whatever was happening within a few meters, in the little square, with the certainty that no one would discover him. At one of the tables Leonardus, Andrea and Chiqui were eating boiled potatoes and roasted peppers and drinking beer. They were joined by Giorgios, the owner, with his apron still on, and Pepone, the boatman, who was rolling his cigarette while talking

nonstop. Leonardus appeared to have recovered from the heat; he was wearing a clean caftan and must have taken a shower, because his hair was still wet. He smoked ceaselessly and his bursts of laughter rang out in the night. Some lights had been turned on and at the neighboring table four or five fishermen were shouting, perhaps already drunk. On a tinny-sounding jukebox someone had put on a song whose melody sounded cracked and barely recognizable. Leonardus made an impatient gesture to Giorgios and almost simultaneously with it the music – guitar, mandolin, who could tell? – stopped. And in the silence there arose once again the sharp sounds of the bone dominoes and the well-defined voices and chair noises. Chiqui was wearing pants so red and so tight that she was flushed by the heat, or perhaps by the vehemence with which she repeated her assertion: "All men cheat on their wives, all of them."

"And how would you know?" Leonardus asked, laughing.

"Because they cheat on them with me," she answered and directed her gesture and her glance to her left.

"All of them?" Andrea asked mockingly.

"Enough of them," and her voice was more than cheeky, it was defiant.

Martín stopped listening. He didn't want to see Andrea's face – he knew her too well – when Chiqui was addressing her speeches to her. "Don't be philosophical," Leonardus was saying to her, "you're not made for thinking," and he was slapping her thighs in the way that annoyed her so much. Andrea remained silent and somewhat uneasy, and Chiqui looked at her sideways with so much security that it was difficult not to see in her demeanor the indifferent satisfaction of winning. It always happened like this, especially since the scene with the dolphins that had occurred four or five days before: it was around six in the evening when, after an extended stretch of bathing between two islands, they ware sailing at dusk with the engine idling. Tom, who was holding on to the helm, suddenly shouted: "Dolphins! Dolphins!" He and Leonardus came out of the cabin where they had escaped the western sun while waiting for the whisky hour; Chiqui stuck her half-washed face through the bathroom door and once she understood what was happening ran up to the deck, where Andrea was already looking at how the dolphins squirmed and frolicked against the bow only to hide and swim under water at the same speed as the boat, and how they would dive again with leaps, following its rhythm. Occasionally one of them would move away and seem to flee but would come back again to the same place. After a while they all left, perhaps tired of playing, and could still be seen swimming in the distance, attentive to the *Albatross*. Then Chiqui took up the highest point of the bow, and pressing her tongue against her palate with two fingers of each hand, let out a whistle, first soft and then louder, which she repeated several times. As though he had understood the call, one of the dolphins returned and came alongside the starboard side of the bow. She continued whistling insistently, and then stopped and waited, convinced that the dolphins had understood her and would come back. And in fact they arrived, one after another, rolled around in the waves that the bow made, and left again, responding to the game. Chiqui had bathed for hours in the morning and after lunch, and had done nothing but sun herself once the voyage had begun, and since she had come out of the bathroom hurriedly, she had gathered her hair in a towel in the shape of a giant turban. She was wearing only her bikini bottom, still dripping water from the shower, her eyes were shining; and, standing almost on tiptoe – very tall and with her fingers in her mouth so as to produce that powerful whistle – she looked like a living figurehead, a mythical tamer whom the creatures of the sea obeyed. And she ruled not only over the dolphins but also over the four who, fascinated, watched the spectacle of the innocent and sovereign game that she herself had invented, under the boundless vault of the sky, at that hour of dusk following weeks and weeks of calm weather. Andrea must have seen her as

so alive and powerful, so playful in her passion and enthusiasm and so skillful at her game that she couldn't stand it; she held on to the stays so as not to fall and hurried astern, bumping into turnbuckles, sheets and guylines, went down the steps, entered her cabin and threw herself onto the bed without even shutting the door so as to hide her sobs. Sobs of jealousy, of envy perhaps, or of resentment toward the girl who was – who had been – nonchalantly showing off her triumph and the conviction that the world adored her and the gods had granted her all the gifts on earth.

In the stifling air the various voices had lost their meanings. His head was boiling and his leg was in pain. He tried to wipe his sweat with his still-wet hand. The night was humid and sticky.

It must be at least forty centigrade, he thought.

He leaned his head on the wall and closed his eyes. In that dark and sheltered spot in which he had taken refuge he decided to wait for his perspiration to dry and for the traces of fighting and fatigue to go away so that he could join them, who now appeared to him as unknown, distant and vague characters in a story that, once again, hardly had anything to do with his, but whose call nonetheless had left him no peace since he had arrived on that island. In the sky, still high and invisible, the vultures began their uniform, monotonous screech. I'm going crazy, he thought, vultures don't fly at night, though on this cursed island everything is possible. Right then the idea of staying there yet another day, of returning to the stronghold of his people, became so unbearable to him that to his anguish was added the distress over the fact that there was no place to go other than the one occupied by them. It was the same feeling of distress, the same overwhelming awareness that the course had already been traced, that he noticed that day when, newly arrived from New York, he stepped for the first time into that splendid house in the city where they were to live, where they had in fact been living ever since, for seven years already, and where according to all indications they would in fact go on living. He saw it so definitive, so different from the series of boarding houses, rooms and furnished flats that he had known since leaving his home in Sigüenza soon after turning seventeen, that the image of his own coffin coming out of the immense, still empty entrance hall appeared before his eyes, still shining from excitement and astonishment at the sight of such magnificence. I'll leave this house only as a corpse, he said to himself then, amazed by the certainty of a sudden and incontestable premonition. Because he looked ahead and knew exactly what was going to happen. There was nothing to change that course along which he, one way or another, had seen himself being pulled; nothing would derail him from the track that he himself had not been able to avoid. His everyday life, equal to itself, not only in that tiny parcel of his existence but in relation to the great, wide world that he was never to know and to those universes that one reaches by taking different courses. A fleeting but tormenting vision, which vanished with Leonardus' footsteps and the sound of Andrea's heels on the parquet floor and their echo in the empty sun-filled rooms, filled with the sunlight of the spring afternoon in the city; and with the loudness of their words, which furnished and rearranged and grew from wall to window until they were lost on the terrace, cluttered with large pots containing dry plants and trees that would green again and grow and provide a shade for years to come to a life that, by a curious combination of facts, would make them contemplate from a distance a city that she had left barely two years before, and to which he had never intended to return. In fact he never found out in return for what Andrea had obtained that apartment, but he did realize that its acceptance meant the conclusion of a family relationship so filled with secrets and tensions that her explanations and her decisions and the consequences that followed had escaped him, perhaps because they harmonized so little with the first version that she had given him the day she arrived in New York to stay with him. She had told him then

that not only had she been sincere with the blond and civilized husband who loved her so much, but with the whole family, who had accepted with pain but with understanding a decision dictated by that passion, so peremptory that it did not mind giving up either the children or her privileged standing as an adored and spoiled princess, showered with all kinds of gifts and sinecures. And the prestige she enjoyed in her profession seemed to justify that standing, as veiled as Federico's sarcasm may have been when he insisted that the freedom that Andrea enjoyed came from the majority stock that her husband held in the weekly where she worked. And that may have been true, because during the first winter she had come and left whenever it pleased her, at mid-morning or in the afternoon, though she always called him with an urgency that she attributed to her limited time. He would then go out to the door of his production company or of his house on Plaza de Tetuán, and a few minutes later she would appear at the wheel of her car.

They came to know all the *meublés* of the city, day and night hotels, with no lights or signs, whose façades of closed or blind balconies, often dilapidated, hid a honeycomb of rooms and silent hallways and teardrop-shaped lamps that jingled as they passed. They went through them holding hands, Andrea making faces or imitating the walk of the room clerk who went ahead of them looking downward, voices muted, muffled ringing of bells in some corner of the closed house that told the desk that another couple wished to leave. They were ample and comfortable rooms, with a look of faded luxury, of an old ladies' dwelling, of exquisite and impoverished relics that gave the setting the magic of a secret and forgotten retreat. An institution that left Martín breathless the first time they saw each other in the city after the summer and the long weekends of September, when, after kissing like adolescents behind a door in her office, Andrea took him by the hand, grabbed her bag and dragged him down the stairs to the garage and, with no more explanation than a smile full of connivance, made him get into the car, in which they drove across the city paying no attention to the traffic lights or the loud blasts of the policemen's whistles directed at the red Morris Mini slipping through the traffic. And when, arriving at the top of a hill, she drove into the dark opening of a building and the car slid down a deep ramp, slowly moved through an almost dark lane and stopped at a door hidden by curtains. Shortly there appeared a desk clerk looking into infinity who couldn't help showing his surprise upon realizing that he was opening the car door for a man. Andrea left the keys in the ignition without cutting the engine and got out of the car, and, laughing as though doing a prank, attached herself to his arm and entered with him behind the clerk.

That day she did not go back to the magazine office and around eight o'clock jumped out of bed and used the wall telephone to call home and announce that she would be late and not to be waited for with dinner.

When she lay down again by his side Martín took hold of one of her black curls and amused himself twisting it around his finger, and with his gaze focused on what he was doing he asked her:

"And your husband? What are you going to tell your husband?"

Neither one of them had mentioned him overtly the whole summer and she did not seem to attach any infidelity to the prolonged secret nights they had spent aboard the *Manuela*, trysts that they did not discontinue even when Carlos returned from Argentina in mid-September, though, as if his return had imposed a curfew on the fantasy, from then on she made a point of getting home before dawn. And though by mid-September the nights were growing longer, they no longer had time to go out on deck to contemplate the shine of the moon on the sea, nor to trace the mysterious paths of the stars, nor to see the dawn, nor did they go back to sleep with the first heat of the sun as when they were the owners of time

that was theirs at least until nine in the morning. Martín marveled at how little importance Andrea gave to what his mother in Sigüenza would have called human decency and at how little effort she made to cover her steps, to the point that, with summer almost gone, at a moment of doubt and loneliness he came to foresee the possibility that when they returned to land and he would go to his guest house, she would go home and tell her husband about what had happened between them, just as half an hour before she had told him about her plans, her head resting on his knees, with the *Manuela* adrift and the engine cut – "Don't ever do this if you ever have a boat," she said, "if the fishermen saw me I would lose what little reputation I have with them." On some nights when the sea was choppy Martín, seated in the pool, felt the uncontrolled swaying due to the absence of steering and felt a weight in the pit of his stomach that he would not have admitted for anything in the world and that he tried to alleviate by looking at a fixed point in the distance as he had been taught as a child when he would get car-sick in the jitney going to the mill of Ures. Then, when she would get up in order to start the engine he also hid his undefinable and intense dread that it might not start, as had happened on other occasions, though never at night, without understanding whether what he feared was that their secret would be uncovered or that they might go adrift in that hull at the mercy of the sea and the coming of the north wind or, even worse – they said – of the east wind, that he had heard about so much and not yet experienced. But she, who could read his face, would sit in his lap and tell him in his ear, as if it were an important revelation: "Don't worry, the sea is calm and the wind won't come in. And if the engine doesn't start the current will carry us ashore, or some fisherman will pick us up at dawn. But it's starting," and she would get up and push the button, "you see?" And the bursts of the engine would fill the silence and calm his mind and his dizzy stomach. Andrea, triumphant, would take the helm and they would calmly cut through the still-sleeping bay.

Even when – perhaps in order to show that she had nothing to hide from her husband – she invited Martín to spend the last weekend of the summer in that house into which he had not stepped since going there in mid-July with Federico, the same night, upon leaving a party, she broke away from the rest of the people, took him by the hand like the first time and they swam out to the *Manuela*. Martín interpreted such an audacity as a display of her love of risk and of her need to take things to the limit, the way a tightrope walker feels sure of himself only above the precipice. Perhaps Carlos, who knew her well, had to know that the essential fidelity was the one she committed to him. Perhaps neither one of them went beyond the limits that they had tacitly allowed each other. But where those limits were was something Martín could never know. Because the next day at dinnertime he did not show the least hint of violence or tension, when it was evident that of the three, at least one and to some extent two were the deceived ones. Therefore the following evening, not wanting to prolong a situation in which he didn't know what part he played, he left early and from his room on the upper floor he saw them together, reading the papers on the terrace overlooking the sea in a scene of perfect harmony that seemed to be written to show – as though in a script – the indissolubility of the union of two accomplice-lovers, and, sure that they in turn had seen him timidly leaning out the window, he bitterly wondered to which of the two she was committing.

Because from the beginning Andrea – just as men do when they conquer a woman, in order to assuage their guilt feelings about their infidelity, as Chiqui had said a few days before on the boat, or in order to make her understand that she could not expect anything more, as Leonardus had added – had given him to understand that she loved her husband after her fashion, perhaps in order to set the tone of their relationship and to make it clear just how far she was willing to go. And she never changed her position. Never, not even at the moments of greatest intimacy, did she let out a confidence that might

mention him, a hint that might lead him to understand the nature of that seemingly indestructible union that in any case she did not seem willing to put to the test. But wasn't being with him putting it to the test? How many times, when the midday sun was coming in through the half-open blinds of the *meublé*, in place of getting dressed because time was up she would seem to have a sudden inspiration, pick up the telephone and call the paper to tell them that the lunch was running later than expected and that she wouldn't get to the office until six. And she would come back to bed, happy like a schoolgirl playing hooky, because she had scratched away a couple of hours of work. She was so inventive and imaginative in deceit that at times he would wonder, in his moments of greatest loneliness, if she was not deceiving him as well, in a web of intertwined subterfuges and falsehoods where it wasn't clear if she herself knew where the truth lay. But when it came to her husband she did not procrastinate. She knew exactly at what time she had to leave and she did not delay by another instant, whatever pretexts he might make up, as if that area of her life were a secret garden that she wanted to preserve and to which only she had access.

At those times Martín felt more alone than ever, with no company and almost no hope. So went all the Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays and all the vacation times. And when one day in February, after a weekend that had turned into an unannounced trip of several days' duration, he finally saw her show up at seven in the evening in the bar of the Hotel Colón, and, convinced that he couldn't stand another test like the one he had just undergone, he proposed to her, in a fit of sheer thoughtlessness, that they spend together not a weekend but their entire lives, it was the only time that she referred to her husband, getting to the bottom of the issue with a seriousness that ended the conversation: "I can't. I can't do that. I don't love him more than you but I can't do that."

"What are you going to tell your husband?" he repeated, seeing that she was not responding, aware that he was getting into forbidden territory but willing to do it, especially now that with the end of the summer they seemed to be entering a new, more permanent and more definitive stage which, because of Andrea's insistence on speaking only of the present, he nonetheless could not yet figure out where it would take them.

She turned around, came as close as she could until she was joined to him and with her free hand she put her index finger on his mouth and whispered, "Shhhh, shhhh." She then got up with a leap and began to pick up her clothes, went to the bathroom and while waiting for the hot water put her head out the door and laughing, constantly laughing, said, "Let's go out for dinner!" And, seeing him sit up, or perhaps guessing the question he was going to ask from his surprised look, she jumped onto the bed, crouched in front of him, once again put her finger on his lips and repeated the same sound ordering him to be silent: "Shhhh, shhhh."

That night after dinner, when, with both of them overcome by sleepiness and fatigue, Andrea dropped him at the doorway of his house, he went around the car and squatted in front of the driver's window where her motionless hands were on the steering wheel: "I don't want to leave you," he whispered, kissing her nose and eyes, "I don't just want to make love with you, I want to have breakfast and lunch, take walks, without being afraid, I want to decide what we will do, what will become of us, I want to know what it is that you want..." But she looked at him and smiled, and he didn't understand if she was asking him for patience or if her mind was on prospects that were forbidden to her too. "Let me at least go to your house with you, I can walk back."

"No," replied Andrea, closing her eyes and letting herself be kissed. "It doesn't make sense. When you have learned to drive, when you have a car, when you are rich and famous..."

"Me famous?" Martín stood up. "What makes you think I want to be rich and famous?"

"We all do," she replied, and, after a moment she said "Good night" and turned on the motor. And before moving away, recovering – as tired as she was – the self-confidence with which she spoke in public, she added, "I'll see you tomorrow in the Paseo de Gracia gallery, sweetheart, I'll be running a little late but don't leave before I get there."

Martín remained standing on the newly watered roadway, which the almost summer-like October heat had covered with mist in the flickering light of the street lamps. In his hands he still had the smell of her skin and her hair and, mixed with the uncertain flavor of that absurd word, there entered into his mind the surmise of a disillusion, though in his soul there remained the sadness over the sudden separation, as if all of that had not happened, as if he had simply made up the most beautiful story. And with a shudder of harshness and loneliness he opened the iron-grate-and-glass door, which closed behind him noisily, leaving the night shaky.

The next day Andrea showed up in the gallery with her husband and three friends. She was not overly tall nor particularly beautiful but, they said, she filled a place with her presence. And it was true: when he saw her so self-assured, so radiant, he understood that that grace originated perhaps in her ability to recreate herself and to be attentive in a special matter to the relationship she had with each person, always different from the one she had with everyone else, that way of creating a world so dense and compact that she multiplied pleasure and complicity by herself: her charm and grace came from this certainty.

He spent that winter waiting. He had managed to stay on in Barcelona for another year as second cameraman on a documentary series on the city for Italian television, which Federico wanted to start on as soon as possible, but the permits were being delayed and the crew was wasting time waiting. Martín also waited: he waited for the producer's word to begin work but most of all he waited for Andrea's calls. At night, around eleven, he would sit down at a table at the Boccaccio when the place was still empty and waited for her to arrive. Some times he had been forewarned, other times he trusted in chance. She would show up long after midnight, always surrounded by a group of friends, and once she had sat down at her table he could do nothing but keep waiting for her to turn her head in his direction because, unlike what had happened over the summer, now they always saw each other secretly, while in public they feigned a distant and fortuitous relationship.

Other times he would see her enter the place, looking in her handbag for her glasses with the large black rims. He would then know that she had not yet noticed him. Sometimes her husband was with her, other times not. She would then approach him under the guise of greeting him or made him a sign and they would meet on the street, far from the friends.

Martín knew that he would never be part of that crowd because his rhythm was slower than that nighttime vortex of comings and goings, and if he had wanted to follow them he would always lag behind. Gradually he came to know them all, but he was so taciturn and solitary that he did not manage to make a place for himself in a lifestyle that was too foreign to him, though at that time anyone with a couple of new ideas and a modicum of attractiveness could do so. He never knew whether to accept an invitation until he was sure that Andrea would be there. And because he insisted on improvising, by the time he had decided the dinner would be over and the guests would have scattered to so many other parties, as unexpected as the previous one, and he never managed to adapt his pace to the nighttime rhythm of the city.

"It's very simple," Andrea would say, "just let yourself go. Go if you feel like it and don't go if you don't."

"And what if I go and you aren't there?" he would ask.

"What difference does it make? You'll see me the next day, or else the time will come when you'll know whether or not I go without my telling you."

But he didn't enjoy social life now, nor did he ever enjoy it, even in those days when it always had an air that was less easygoing, less calculating, less based on formal invitations, as in middle Europe; nor would he enjoy it in New York, nor in Barcelona after his return. And if, years later, he had given in and would attend many of the dinners to which he was invited, he would do it as a concession to success, but never with the least bit of pleasure. He was dour and quiet, and in those first months he believed himself to have a critical spirit that was too sharp to endure so many hours of useless conversation. And alcohol, rather than encouraging him to talk, would immerse him in a speechlessness where his desires and his phantoms would take on more life as the dose increased, and by his fifth drink he would be shut up in himself, having built around him an impenetrable fortress of silence amid the din of voices and music in which the waiting became even more unbearable. All he wanted was to see Andrea. Because in those summer months he hardly thought of anything else, which is why he accepted the waiting role that she, who directed everything and on whom everything depended, had assigned to him: waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for a chance meeting, waiting for her to approach, to return from her weekends, to find a pretext that would let them spend a few days together, and waiting for her to decide what would become of their lives. And, as though the time that he did not spend with her or thinking about her had been wiped out from his memory and his life, he could barely remember what he was working on, because it's well known how little that which isn't talked about counts, and even less so what isn't thought about, and over the years his memory, which didn't record reasons that made him talk or think, gave him a scant and sifted version that had no place, for example, for the lies that he made up in order to grow in her eyes and to forget for himself just how far he was from being the self-assured man that he wanted to be for her, with a destiny marked out for him and a future that he could offer her.

He lied because in no way did he want her to know his precarious work situation, and he sometimes pretended to have other jobs besides his contract with Federico's production company, and he talked about them with indifference, as if letting her know that they weren't exactly to his liking but he had accepted them because of the insistence with which they had been offered him or simply as a favor to a friend, and he unwittingly used the same tone and the same duplicity for which he had inwardly reproached the people around when they referred to a dinner or an event to which they claimed to have been summoned with that same insistence, not so much to convince themselves that it was so as to forget the effort and the time they had spent in order not to remain on the margins, knowing, as he did, that those words could only create in their own eyes – and in those of some clueless innocent – the prestige that they didn't have and that they could never attain otherwise. "Call me tomorrow at ten o'clock sharp," he would say to her as they were parting, "after that I have some work that will keep me until late. Don't forget." And in order to avoid waiting, the endless waiting by the telephone, picking up the receiver a hundred times in order to make sure that the line was working and that it was properly hung up – because he could not understand that having agreed to call him at this time she would not do so – he would start writing so as to prove that he had something to do and that in no way would his inactivity increase her certainty that she had him at her beck and call. But he could not manage to concentrate on a script that he did not in fact finish until a year later, in New York, because he was too aware that he was only making

an effort to fool the waiting, and though he might have wanted to get involved to the point of forgetting the telephone – so that when it finally rang it would catch him off guard – he never managed it. The waiting annulled every other project and there, he knew it well, lay a part of his torment. Nonetheless he never told her how much he had suffered nor, of course, how much he was willing to suffer. And it was not out of fear that she wouldn't call – he was sure that she would unfailingly do so – but because long before the appointed hour the uncertainty filled the scope of his consciousness with a ferment of anxiety that he could feel with hands, monsters and phantoms that followed one another, superimposed themselves on each other, and grew with each minute, taking on precise forms and wounding him with strikes and bites: he felt himself forgotten, abandoned and insulted, and in the end he attributed to her such duplicity or such a studied strategy of balance – or of reprisal for some unknown reason – that he himself would have been willing to put into practice if he had not been prevented by the doubt and the mistrust that clung to his consciousness and remained there, even after the tension had been relieved by the call, prolonging the pain and the bitterness. Andrea, who seemed to know and not to care about the pretext, would call at nine o'clock at night, making vague excuses and sometimes not even that.

Other times, unable to bear the waiting any longer, it was he who would call, and after having tried to make her come down from his fantasies, his wheedling and his dreams he would manage to squeeze a few minutes out of her at the end of the day, which most of the time didn't go beyond having a drink in the bar of the Hotel Colón, where for some reason or other she always had to pass before dinner in order to interview some celebrity, or the vague promise that perhaps they might meet at the Boccaccio after midnight.

It wasn't much, but it calmed him. It was like setting a limit to infinite time, like creating a precise object at the end of the day, like framing a landscape or glimpsing the end point of the interminable hours he had before him. He would then call the production company with the certainty that nothing was to happen because Federico was having more and more difficulty getting the permits, and he would go out into the street and walk and along the Gran Vía until he found himself in the Santa Catalina neighborhood, skirting cobbled alleys, avoiding the noise of the Vía Layetana that was always plunged in the penumbra, and through the shaded Santa María del Mar area he would go to the Plaza de Palacio and the Paseo de Colón. The afternoon was getting darker and a lukewarm, filtered sun tried to find an opening among the clouds. The restless winter sky was darkening, sometimes taking on the tone of the dark dampness of the pavement. The sea breeze made the palm trees stretch their limbs, and the patches of light that the wind left on the city confused him. *When I'm rich*, he thought from the pedestal of his idleness, *I will live on the top floor of one of those solid patriarchal houses with big gates and broad staircases, and everyday from behind the blinds of my room I will discover the sea in the distance, beyond the sheds and the masts of the sailboats, and when the sun sets I will contemplate from my house the clean line of the red horizon at dusk.* He would look at his watch again to convince himself that there were only two hours left until that end-of-evening drink, because suddenly the light along his route would acquire the hue of a holiday morning that lasted a few moments before the rain came down. Gradually the patches of light became scarcer, the palm trees quieted down, the already dark façades along his route became even darker, and soon the streetlights went on, the headlights of the cars coincided with a cacophony of horns because a gentle rain had begun to fall, without drops or drips, so fine that it almost merged with the dense humidity that had preceded it.

Other times he would go up to Consejo de Ciento, and around the end of March he became enraptured by the light that filtered through the tiny leaves on the plane trees, or he would go down to the

Rambla and sit on a wooden chair and amuse himself by weaving and reweaving dreams that redeemed him from the passivity to which he was subjected by an enchantment and a sweetness so deep that they had carried away his desires and immobilized his ambition. Then he would go to the Colón.

He would have liked if some time or other she had waited for him, but he always got there when there were still fifteen minutes left, and though before entering he would count to a hundred and sometimes to a thousand, would go around the block ten times, or would go up and down the Cathedral steps in order to let time go by, the hand of his watch hardly moved. Only one day did he arrive late, he was even forced to take a taxi, a luxury that he could barely afford because his money was running out, but the anxiety that she, in a hurry, might have left was joined to the excitement of seeing her, for once, seated with her gin-and-tonic. Nonetheless, that day she did not show up. He knew it as he stepped on the flowery carpet in the hallway that led to the bar. He knew it without knowing that he knew it, aware that by some mysterious signal he had received the message, and long before getting to the door he saw the sofa where in his dreams she had waited for him so many times, empty, without Andrea or her gin-and-tonic or the porous intensity of her blue gaze.

Now, after all that time, it was hard for him to know if he had gone to the Colón every day or only some evenings. Time had created its own version of that year that he spent in Barcelona, depending on the filming permit that was to arrive any moment and on the telephone, or of that hour stolen from her work that Andrea would grant him one way or another between interviews, meetings and dinners.

When he thought about those walks he was incapable of remembering if they were many or few, and his memory was also amiss, because the clear wintry morning in the city did not match the incipient leaves on Calle de Consejo de Ciento or the drops of dampness that vibrated in the bundle of light of the streetlights at five in the afternoon, and he saw only superimposed images without getting anything more than one full sequence with only one epilogue: the return home once the day was done and the hope was lost for that today which slipped away into dawn and into the loneliness of his colonial bed.

Sometimes a single image in our memory spans a complete period and ends up defining it differently from the way it really was. Sometimes it's enough to evoke a summer storm with the sky dark, restless and threatening, with traces of lightning that barely broke into thunder and left a distant and muted sound in the air, to erase from that summer the sunny days, the quiet twilights, the night of crickets and cicadas, and ourselves searching in the calm of the August sky for the stars that fell in the darkness.

We say, "It was the time when I sat every day at the Café Doria on the Rambla de Cataluña," when in fact we accidentally sat there one afternoon, or because we had a date with someone who didn't show up and we were left looking at the leaves of the plane trees and the paving stones of the street and the cars crashing into one another and the boys and girls from the school on the corner walking in a bunch, with the background of buildings and stores that we have seen not only remaining in place but also varying and transforming with the layers and the fog of our memory, being hardly aware of the changes that happen silently, a balcony becoming a window, a notions store disappearing, or a wooden bench replaced by an unattractive designer bench of metal. And we remain in ecstasy over the pulse of the city at seven in the evening that we almost never have time to contemplate, it begins to get dark and the light takes on a marine tinge and seeps into the air, over the canopies of the trees and in the snapping of the car wheels against the dampness of the paving stones, the disjointed lament of the siren of a boat: a song for those born beside sea that slips among clouds and puffs of smoke and trees and houses and goes up the streets to the hillsides, and returns us to the evenings of our childhood in which another lament like this one opened the way to imagination and adventure, the vague anxiety to discover an unknown path that would

stir up the sleepiness of the motionless evening and of the book that one could not go back to and that turned the teacher's monotonous voice into an empty and meaningless squawk. Then there comes a shudder of nostalgia for that which we are never to experience, and between the puffs of smoke we breathe the saltpeter-dense air of our port, which we have forgotten because we haven't seen it in years. But that moment – perhaps a friend greets us in passing or the conversation at the next table begins to stand out – manages to combine postponed memories and shows us the essence of our city while our finger runs over the condensed moisture on the glass of the beer mug, delaying in ecstasy the moment of drinking from it. And so intense is the sensation that it is enough by itself to invade the adjacent stages, the spaces and the time that extend before and after it, and this month or this year or this time period, ruled by the moment of urban twilight, will remain, like it, forever marked by the aroma of an undecipherable heartbeat.

"This is the city, this is my city", she would say on the rare occasions that she walked with him, showing him ancient houses, each one with its history that she would add to those heard and inherited from several generations intertwined with the city's history.

"This is where my great-grandfather lived with one of his sons, who was mayor during the dictatorship. And when Alfonso XIII came, my great-grandfather, who was a republican, closed the balconies when the king, who was accompanied by his own son, went by. My grandfather, who was the mayor's brother, told us that they had lunch and dinner at the same table for over a year without exchanging a word."

Martín knew that Andrea was repeating an anecdote that had been heard a thousand times, but she told it with the unconscious tone of telling her own story, mockingly perhaps, even jokingly, but with the intimate conviction that one way or another she was exhibiting her trophies.

He had to go back, it must have been very late already. He couldn't know exactly what time, because there was not enough light to see his watch and he was so close that if he lit a match he would be discovered. If he didn't show up shortly they would go out to look for him.

Martín saw her looking towards the mosque, and though he couldn't hear what she was saying, nor could he see the movement of her lips, he knew that she was looking for him. She was dressed in white, she was always dressed in white, with those languid full skirts that moved with the least gesture and the slightest whiff of air, white skirts like a plagiarism of the ones of those days, just as she was now a copy of herself, of the woman she was in the days when her mere presence was a show of freedom and independence.

He got out of the shadows and slowly advanced, feigning a tranquility that he did not have. When Andrea saw him she got up, went to meet him and took his hand.

"Where have you been?" she asked anxiously, though her voice held a reproach for the overlong absence, and that touch of insecurity in the reprimand that would sometimes make itself felt by the slightly weaker intonation, or by a pause in the statement or in the question, looking back at him as if seeking his acquiescence or perhaps trying to uncover hidden intentions. A kind of attention that he would have given so much for in the beginning, while now it bothered him and sank him in a constant confusion.

"Come on, sit down and have some dinner, sweetheart."

And this way of ending her sentences – adding "sweetheart" – that she used in public with a carefree and natural tone, and that after ten years still gave him a vague shudder of discomfort like the creaking of

a fork on a dish or the scraping of chalk on a blackboard. No one noticed the slight gesture of impatience, visible only by an attempted grimace in the corner of his upper lip, or by the change from one hand to the other of the object that he might be holding, perhaps because over the years these had become an automatic reaction, a simple means of response already stripped of the displeasure that it provoked. Perhaps only she caught it, perhaps it was that brief and almost exhausted movement of rebellion that made her insist with a tenacity that would yield only when the involuntary tremor of his upper lip would not be visible even to her.

"Sit down to dinner, sweetheart," she repeated sweetly. "We've been waiting for you."

But before he occupied the chair her tone changed:

"Good god! What's happened to you!" And, even more inquisitorially, "What have you been doing?"

There was still dust on his arms, and the fountain water had done nothing but change it into drips of mud that the heat had dried up, sketching arabesques on his skin.

"Nothing, it's nothing, I stumbled and fell, that's all." And in order that no one could see his leg he sat down to devour the bell peppers and eggplants that Giorgios had just served him. But first he drank a big glass of retsina to quench his thirst and because he wanted to calm down.

With his wounded leg under the table, the blood stain well hidden, he had just managed to recover his calm when the old woman appeared from an alley in the back of the square. She walked at the same pace as during the climb and descent and for a moment he thought that she was aiming for them. But she passed by without even looking at them. Behind her a group of people was walking cautiously, as though they were afraid of catching up with her, and further back there followed the priest, who now, among the shouts and his own fussing and yelling, had lost the drunken majesty of some hours before, when his walk across the square seemed more like a challenge to the whole universe than a trudge to his task as bell ringer. He was accompanied by the chief of the detachment and a soldier, both with their faces gleaming with sweat, their khaki uniform shirts open and their epaulettes torn through wear and time.

It was Pepone, who had risen from the table in order to approach them, who upon returning told them what was happening: one of the priest's dogs had disappeared, he said, and now they were all after the old woman because they said she was to blame. Martín drank another glass of wine but did not speak and barely looked at what was going on; as though occupied in removing a hangnail, he kept his gaze fixed on his finger and seemed to listen distractedly to Pepone's explanations.

"Those dogs, except when they walk with the priest or accompany him to the bell tower, run freely around the village. They know everybody and they bark only at the old woman, who knows what it is about her that bothers them." He stopped for a moment to savor the attention he was getting. The square was silent again, though far away the shouting behind the woman could still be heard. "Though they seem to be vicious dogs, they are not," he added, "and I'm sure that the priest keeps them by his side not for protection but to make himself respected and feared, the same way that he puts on vestments for the services, and that's how he gets the majesty that nature has denied him. The priest is in charge on this island," he continued, "the priest and his friend, the chief of the detachment, one of the ones who were with him. That's all the police there is here."

"And why do they assume that the old woman killed the dog? What could she have done with it?" Andrea asked.

"They say the old woman is a witch," Pepone explained, snuffing out his cigarette and picking up his cap, ready to leave, "and maybe, being tired of the dog barking at her, she gave him the evil eye or a spell,

who knows. What's known is that the dog has disappeared and she has blood on the hem of her skirt." He got up and gave them a greeting with his hand. "I'll be back tomorrow. Good-bye." And he disappeared through the same alley as the others, lost like them in the silence and in the stifling air of the night.

V

"Are we going to sleep?" Leonardus asked. "There doesn't seem to be too much to do in this town." He slapped the palm of his hand on Chiqui's thigh and burst into laughter.

"Cut it out already," she said crossly.

Martín reached his hand to find his wallet in order to pay the bill but all he felt in his pants pocket was a few wrinkled bills and some coins. He remembered very well having taken it from the shelf of their cabin when Chiqui had gone to look for them that afternoon. Besides, he had paid the man in the market for the eyeglass band; where could he have put it?

Suddenly he felt an intense chill in his temple because his memory hoisted what his consciousness had not picked up at the time and he distinctly heard the crack of an object falling to the ground at the very moment when he took his handkerchief out of his pocket in order to clean his wound, paying attention to nothing but the pain in his leg. That's where the wallet must have remained. He gestured to Leonardus to let him know that he had left his money aboard the *Albatross* and in the meantime he tried to remember what was in the wallet that might betray him. There were no documents, but would the credit cards be there, or had he left them aboard together with his passport? Nonetheless, two or three days before they had gone on land in the launch, they had dined in a beach restaurant and he had paid with his card. He didn't remember the name of the town, Kinik or Kalkan, something like that. It was the evening when Leonardus, tired of the argument between Andrea and Chiqui, had gone to have coffee on the terrace.

"Those feminist debates, those excuses to hide women's weakness, couldn't interest me less," he had said as he got up.

"They're neither excuses nor feminist debates," Andrea retorted, somewhat tense, "they're the truth. I say it and I repeat it, a woman alone has to work twice as much as a man in order to survive, in every sense."

"Well, all she has to do is find someone," he said with a smile, almost in the doorway, "and that's easy." And, turning around, he added, "I'll wait for you outside, enjoying some fresh air."

It was then, when he went to pay at the counter, that Martín had taken the card out of his wallet, he remembered it well, almost grateful for having a pretext for getting away from the table.

"And besides," Andrea went on, angered by Leonardus' leaving, as though she were continuing a debate begun many years before, "a woman alone does not exist socially."

Chiqui looked at her mockingly.

"That may be among people of your age and your world. I'm alone and I exist," she said.

And Andrea responded with invective hanging in her voice:

"You don't seem to be all that alone."

"I'm not alone when I'm on vacation, but I'm still without a husband or a lover or even a boyfriend, if that's what we're talking about, and I still exist," and she left too.

Then Andrea, alone at the table, in order to have the last word, raised her voice more like a threat than like a premonition and said, almost to herself:

"Just wait and see," and she began to make boats and birds out of the paper napkin.

From the counter, Martín had feared that Andrea would burst out crying as had happened on the afternoon of the dolphins. But soon she got up and went outside to join the others, calmed already.

He had then paid at the counter and had put the card and the receipt in his wallet. Andrea was still too caught up in her paper birds and her own irritation in order to pick it up, as she would sometimes do when she insisted that he would lose it or leave it on the table, as had happened so many times.

"Andrea, do you have my credit card?" he asked her anyway.

"No," she said, having moved ahead of Chiqui and hung on to Leonardus' arm. "You used it to pay for dinner a couple of days ago, remember?"

On the table, among the pieces of bread and the half-empty glasses, a matchbox had remained. Martín put it in his pocket and followed the others.

The heat had not let up. They walked slowly towards the *Albatross* and Andrea stopped and took his hand, but he got free and put his hands on her shoulders from behind and made her walk at his pace, following the other two as if it were a game, so that no one could see his stained pants leg.

When they got to the gangway Leonardus leaped, turned around and extended his hand.

Andrea looked at Martín.

"Go ahead," she said.

"No," he said, "you go ahead."

"Come on, give me your hand. You're dizzy, remember?" Leonardus said impatiently.

She put out one foot, took the waiting hand and leaped laughing, as though making fun of herself.

"It's always scary," she said, dissembling.

But he did not hear her. He let Chiqui go by and from the pier, leaning on an oil drum that hid his leg, he said:

"I'm going to take a walk."

"Again?" asked Andrea. "It's late already. Come."

"No," he said, "I'm going to walk."

"We've already seen what there was to see. Come on, come," she repeated.

"I don't feel like going to bed now."

"We'll be having a drink on deck," Leonardus shouted and went belowdecks to get some ice.

"I've had enough drinks, now I just want to walk." He moved away a few steps to be out of range of the street lamp, but he stopped, and only started walking again when she, with uncertainty in her voice, shouted,

"Wait, I'm going with you, give me your hand."

Paying her no attention, he then turned around and started walking towards the alley that opened almost directly under the wooden balcony, the blinds already drawn and the windows shut. And from the shadows he saw her standing on the gangway with the arc of her white skirt, that the beginning of a step had left suspended for an instant, her left hand grasping the rigging and her right hand extended in a meaningless gesture, and behind the gleam of the lamp in her glasses the dread in her gaze over the emptiness that separated her from the water.

He still heard her voice as she turned to Chiqui, who was watching the scene.

"I know that he's going to her," she said in a whisper.

"What her?" Chiqui asked without interest.

"The one in the house with the grapevine."

"Don't talk nonsense. He doesn't even know her."

"It doesn't matter. I know it."

"That's like being jealous of the dead," said Chiqui and entered the cabin.

Andrea closed her eyes and without letting go of her hand she slid until she was seated on the ground with her arm still raised, and, like the end point of an arabesque, she dropped her head to her chest and remained still, perhaps trying to convince herself that nothing could happen, that there was no one on this cursed island that he could go to, because they had gotten there by accident. But even so she was to feel a pang of jealousy, true jealousy, the kind that has neither front nor back, jealousy of the intangible, perhaps even of the dead, as Chiqui had just said, of the forgotten, of the unrecoverable, of the shadows, because otherwise, thought Martín, she would have gone into the cabin certain that he would be right back.

Then, knowing that nobody would be following him, he got into the street and accelerated his pace. Gradually his eyes adapted to the darkness. Every so often a lamp attached to the wall gave off a yellow light, so weak that its shine hardly reached the ground. He saw an open window and another bulb hanging from the ceiling and he barely made out the hue of the wall inside. He continued walking in an alley that was so narrow that stretching out his arms he could touch the houses on both sides. In order to bypass the pier he would go around the village through its upper part, rounding the bay, and would look for the path until he found the place and recover his wallet, which had to be on the ground next to the dog. But he had to go carefully so as not to run into the men who were looking for it. Maybe someone was following him. He stopped for a moment and listened. Silence. He advanced anew but came to an open space, had to turn around and found himself among uninhabited houses with fallen ceilings and empty windows, where the leaves of a tree that he didn't get to see were moving, perhaps swayed by the running of rats or the weight of the owlets hiding in the foliage. He kept on walking and he knew that he was passing behind the old market by the odor of fish that the centuries had impregnated in the wooden arcade and that was still suspended in the nighttime mist, and when it seemed to him that, when looking at the bay, the pier and the *Albatross* were already at his left, he went down towards the shore, and, staying close to the houses, followed the direction of the lighthouse. He went up and down countless alleys that he had not noticed before, but he could not find the house with the grapevine. But it was not that house that he was now looking for, nor the girl in the hat, an unreality replaced by the irrational fear of being found out. But even so he was not getting to the place. He went back to the mosque square and tried to reconstruct the route he had taken that afternoon with the old woman. He took the slope and began to climb the steps. Behind him, some steps repeated his like an echo. He stopped but the world stopped with him, there was no sound other than the faraway sea lapping against the shore, and he kept on searching. When he came to a hill it seemed to him that he recognized the place where the one-eyed man had found him, and he shuddered again on remembering the laughter. He then went down, sure of finding the lamp that had given him light, and once there he went down the stony path almost gropingly. He got used to the darkness of the walls and he found the grating behind which the old woman had disappeared. He recognized the very place where he had fought with the dog and lit a match, but there was nothing on the ground. He went up and down the slope, using up the remaining matches until his fingertips burned, but did not find the wallet. Someone had gone by before him and taken everything away, and furthermore had smoothed the ground, because there was no print and it seemed as virginal as the desert sand after a storm. And, as though he had found hidden witnesses of his own terror, he felt himself watched and menaced, and suddenly, after having looked over the empty ground for the last time, he started running up the hill and didn't stop until he got to the top of the promontory. He was still panting when, not ceasing

to scrutinize the night noises, he sat on a stone and leaned his head on a ruined wall. The air in that place was slightly more perceptible but he could not dissipate the anxiety that had bothered him since dusk, whose origin he had attributed to the suffocating heat and the fight with the dog, now increased by the fear of being found out. The sea, now calm, had to be quite far down. He couldn't see it, but in the distance he heard the rhythmic and gentle crashing of water against rock.

A falling star scraped the sky until it was extinguished where the horizon had to be. It's true that stars fall in summer, he thought indifferently, but he followed its trace and then of another and yet another. The whole atmosphere brightened slightly, and the lines of the horizon on the sea and the even darker outline of the coast appeared to his left, until he was surrounded by the diffuse light of the magical brightness of the night. Behind the hill there appeared a slice of moon without any glow or spread. Somewhere the rusty bells rang again, and every so often inklings of voices fading in the distance sprang out in the air. Little by little, in the glow of that lonely night under a sky that seemed to be sheltering only him, time took on a rhythm that was different from the one shown by clocks, even different from the slowness it acquires in a sea voyage. And he remembered once more the girl beside the mosque but not her face, which he could not pinpoint, hidden as it was behind the web of oblivion – which nonetheless sheltered and clamped the confusion in which he had been plunged by the dog and its disappearance and the conclusive proof of his crime – but rather, so as to escape from the terror in which he found himself, the unquenchable desire of restarting the story from the moment when he had lost her, as if the time that had passed since then had been an overlong interlude that wanted to end and remain hidden and immovable in a buried corner of his life. It was his story that had remained unfinished, not the girl's.

Perhaps that was the moment when he succumbed; for when did he succumb and to whom? Or to what? How does one know the exact moment? Where is the threshold, the infinitesimal threshold that changes things inevitably? The point at which a caress, by dint of repetition, doesn't produce pleasure but pain. The moment when a nail holding up a picture that's too heavy for it falls out, and its load with it. Does it yield gradually and silently, or does it hold it up until the end with the same tenacity and collapse suddenly when it understands that it can't hold up the weight any longer? Perhaps one's conscience – which is lazy and tardy – understands, when the signal appears and the calamity happens, that what is inexorable had happened long before it became apparent, in the same way as when love dies we know, if we want to know, that it had died a long time before.

Andrea had returned to New York four or five months after her unexpected June visit, when the trees were beginning to lose their leaves, carpeting the sidewalks. She had come to stay, she said from the first moment, standing in the doorway, almost not daring to come in. He had remained true to his promise of continuing to wait for her and for her memory, perhaps because in some vague fashion, which he would not have dared define or recognize, he finally understood that all he could wait for were unforeseen appearances, and he had found comfortable refuge in melancholy. Or perhaps it was just that things always come at the wrong time.

This was why, as he was preparing to go out to dinner at the New Orleans on that October evening, leaving on a hallway light to provide a warmer welcome after dinner, the white shirt he had just ironed still lukewarm on his chest (in the afternoon he had arranged the apartment, changed the sheets and towels, and left a bar of perfumed soap in the bathroom – still in its wrapper, as he had seen done in hotels and in Andrea's house – and a bottle of white wine in the refrigerator, and red roses in a vase on the table), when he heard the doorbell he went to open the door, convinced that it was Osiris who, with the

excuse of bringing his mail, wanted to chat for a while, and what he found in the doorway was a static, almost motionless Andrea, her face darkened by outsize bags under her eyes, and in a somewhat bent-over position; he thought that he was hallucinating, and in his anxiety was about to close the door.

"I've come to stay," she said in a hoarse voice, barely able to stifle a sob.

This was not how he had imagined it, but he took her in his arms as if she had become a little girl and he, curiously, her protector; he let her in, cleared the entry bench and sat down beside her. She seemed so defeated that he did not dare ask her what had happened and what those tears were due to, perhaps because he too had cried. So many times he had wished that this moment would come, and on so many occasions he had told himself that it didn't make sense to be apart, that he couldn't understand why her presence overwhelmed his so much and gave him such uneasiness. Or perhaps his intelligence, fearful that the dreamt-of fulfillment didn't exist, upon finding it within reach pretended it wasn't there and withdrew, or else from a sheer instinct of survival it refused to follow him because it knew that the fulfillment of a hope so firm and remote always brings about disillusion and disappointment, which in turn invalidate the enthusiasm necessary in order to stay the course and reach the hoped-for goal, and rather than lose that source of energy indispensable for going on living, it prepared his spirit for failure.

Katas would be waiting. He would have to go down and cancel the dinner under some pretext, or perhaps tell her the truth. He had spoken to her of Andrea many times, making her even more mythical, perhaps with the hidden intention that she remain in the limbo of the past, the way one talks of the dead, dehumanized by absence and turned by time into brittle and meek characters with no bite or passion, whom we disguise with their own virtues and cover with our melancholy and indulgence.

He looked at the clock; there was still time. But what would he tell her? In any case he had to go, he knew it, so that the sooner he went the better. But he was bewildered: a decision taken a long time ago had set in motion a process that he himself, its author, couldn't stop now even for the time necessary to check if he was willing to ratify it. He held Andrea's head in his arms and remained still; he would have been unable to free himself of it and he could do nothing but rock her and caress her hair and nape, so as to wait, to wait for the solution to come by itself because he was unable to concentrate, nor capable of finding the decision or the will, or, simply, because there is no sin more original than sloth.

Katas' two knocks, which he knew so well, sounded on the door. But even then he didn't move. They sounded again once, perhaps twice more. And he would have been able to perceive the uncertainty in the footsteps as they were becoming lost in the hallway and to hear the creaking of the old elevator as it went down, if he had not submerged his head in the curly hair that he held between his arms, blocking Andrea's attempt to get up, and if he had not found a last refuge in the vehemence of his kisses on her head, neck and ears. But, wrapped up as he was, he let himself be surrounded by the smell and the contact that stopped being mere reminiscences and finally took on their proper measure: only then did he recognize himself in a time that once more had lost its rhythm and its cadence. And when the bells of the Russian Orthodox church rang nine – or was it ten? – and he got up to open the bottle of white wine, he vaguely remembered the date and his decision to go down to the 14th floor for a moment and the double knock on the door, but he was already almost unaware of what was happening, concentrating more on his own bewilderment than on Andrea's prolonged stillness and silence, or the unjustified snub he had inflicted on the woman for whom he had chilled that wine.

He didn't go to see Katas until three days later. He had not called her or seen her and, not knowing yet what to tell her or how, the few times that he had gone out for bread and newspapers and cigarettes he had feared meeting her in the elevator. He was grateful to her for not calling him but at the same time he

felt hurt. Perhaps she had done it in his absence and Andrea had hidden it from him. He couldn't find out because he didn't dare ask, either.

He went down to the 14th floor at a time when she was usually at home, he stopped at every stair in order to search for the words he would say and remained standing in front of the door, undecided. Finally he knocked.

The door opened shortly and a tall, corpulent man in a T-shirt appeared, sweating and holding a hammer in his hand. Behind him the apartment was empty. In his confusion he thought he might be on the wrong floor, but when he saw the number 14 over the elevator door he asked about her.

"She's gone. I live here now," said the man and closed the door.

Borne by a sudden and violent panic attack he went down to the ground floor and asked Osiris, who was sitting behind the desk reading the paper.

"Where is Katas?"

"She went away. She finished her studies."

"She wasn't supposed to leave until Christmas. She still had more than two months left."

"Well, she left yesterday. I thought you knew."

"Did she leave an address?"

"No, she didn't say anything. She was carrying a lot of packages."

He went back to the library at different hours, asked at the University and at the hospital, went to the gym and walked around the streets of the neighborhood looking for her, until he convinced himself that she had disappeared forever, though, incapable of acknowledging it, he stuck to the conviction that he could rely on chance to see her again, and to calm himself he kept in his soul the indecisive premonition that he would meet her some day, somewhere. Sometimes, in the subway or on the street, he would turn his startled look at the back of the pony-tailed girl who had left the train or turned the corner. But he stopped suffering over it, perhaps because he was so involved with Andrea; everything that was happening to him was so new, and he worked so hard and so long that he hardly had any time left.

He felt driven like a madman to build for them life together in which, after the first surprise, there seemed to be no other clouds than his recurrent doubts. At times, when Andrea had already fallen asleep at his side, he remained with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, thinking about her. The fact that she renounced her profession, her husband, her children and her city for him filled him with pride, but at the same time it overwhelmed him, and it was so unexpected, and the displacement of interests was so disproportionate, that he couldn't help thinking that Carlos, though he might indeed have been the model of the civilized man that Andrea had always described him as, had discovered her trip to New York in June and grown tired of so much infidelity. And, in the loneliness inflicted by suspicion, he imagined what might have happened. He knew the setting: the living room of the house with the sea in the background. It was evening and the last light of sunset accentuated the interior half-shadows. Andrea came in with the suitcase in her hand and carefully closed the door so that it would not knock. Carlos was snoozing in an armchair with the newspaper in his lap. She was sliding furtively toward the stairway leading up to the bedrooms. Carlos was vaguely awakening due to the noise of the door and getting up in a rage. No, not in a rage; he had never seen him angry. He was not that type of man. He was getting up, his mouth twisted in a bitter and somewhat cynical rictus... No, it would not be like that, either. Perhaps what wasn't working was the setting, because it was June when Andrea had come to see him in New York, and they didn't go to Cadaqués until July at the earliest. It must have been in their Barcelona home. She was coming in from the airport. It was eight in the morning. Getting in on tiptoe would work equally well.

Was the husband having breakfast? No, it was too early. He would still be in bed, or better yet in the bathroom, so that she would be able to leave her suitcase in the hallway, change, or shut herself up in her room under the pretext of a terrible headache. But what was making him suppose that Andrea had come into the house surreptitiously? In all likelihood Carlos would have gone to pick her up at the airport. What would have happened then? What would have caused the breakup?

The night of her arrival Andrea, her head still hidden in his lap, had told him in very few words that it had been she who, in the wake of the June visit and unable to face her own duplicity any longer, had found herself forced to choose. But she gave no details beyond the legal dispositions that her husband as a lawyer had arranged in his way – she did hint at that – and the agreement they had reached about the boys, who would live with him.

During the entire time – almost two years – that they were together in New York, and ever after, even now, during the long hours of sailing without knowing what to do, he had kept on changing the settings and the dialogues, and he had elaborated them far more than any of the scripts he had been writing before her arrival, but not even after all these years had he achieved a firm and convincing version that might be as "official" as Andrea's. And when his doubt grew he didn't need to shut his eyes in order to witness a stormy scene where the husband was waiting for her at home, pacing about the room like a caged lion, distressed by a bout of infidelity so prolonged that, rather than one of so many flings, it implied a betrayal; because, as she was repeating throughout the interminable night, it was she who had broken the pact that they established between them, and he was therefore resolved to take reprisals. Then Andrea, defeated, her job in his company lost, not wanting to be alone – as she had said so many times – and incapable of facing a society that had known her as a winner, could find no solution other than going to New York to join him. Because in truth, he would say to himself as he was hammering on his own pain, what could a shiftless boy with no future and no money, ten years her junior and with nothing but his devotion to offer her, mean to her? How could she have willingly chosen him?

Sometimes he was so convinced by the version that his own imagination had concocted, and he was so carried away by mistrust, that he would sink into a prolonged and deep silence, grow distant from her, and let her suffer as though destiny had assigned him the task of dispensing justice.

That is why, a few weeks after Andrea had arrived in New York, he disappeared, leaving a simple message on the kitchen table to keep her from calling the police. He was gone for three days, which he spent holed up in a highway motel in New Jersey near the Hudson with an actress that he had met at a film shooting a few months before, making love to her brutally and insistently as if in that way he could ease his spitefulness.

When he got back he found the bedroom locked. The apartment was tiny, and he could hear her breathing behind the door over the background sounds of brakes, horns and sirens. He shook the doorknob, not trying to break in but to let her know that he was back.

"Andrea," he said softly through cupped hands into the crack of the doorway, "Andrea, open."

But there was no response other than the creaking of a mattress spring. *She must have turned around,* he thought. He looked through the keyhole; the neon sign running down the corner of the building gave out intermittent bursts of color over a segment of the wall, the legs of the bed and the floor. Her head was in the shadow but he managed to see how she put her arm under the pillow and covered her shoulder with the sheet, as she always did, even when she couldn't stand the heat from the radiator, because she said that she needed the weight in order to sleep.

"Andrea," he repeated, "open, please, open." He knocked on the door. "Open, I beg you, I'll tell you everything. Let me tell you."

The spring creaked once again.

"Andrea," he repeated yet again, almost in a whisper, but when he was convinced that it was useless to keep on knocking and saw himself flattened against the door reciting an entreaty that had become a refrain, he let himself fall on the rickety sofa that the two of them had picked up on the street a few days after her arrival, when only the tears of her near-sighted eyes perturbed the present that now seemed to him irrecoverable, and he remained attentive to the undecipherable sound of the air, concentrated in the room, in the sheets that he knew so well, and in the woman who lay between them and whom he had never loved so much.

Nothing broke the density of that silence that made the metallic street noise seem far away, and, overcome by fatigue and by pain and by the emptiness that transcended the measure of his desire, his eyelids closed and he succumbed to the restless sleep of one who doesn't want to sleep but is defeated by a nodding-off sleepiness, until, almost at dawn, a brief sigh – or perhaps a held-back sob – passed through the door. Only then did he surrender to a full sleep, lulled by the comforting rocking of someone else's pain.

Though the next day she threatened to go away, the reconciliation that followed was so splendid that it became a benchmark, a model of behavior to which he would resort, eager not so much to banish remorse and achieve forgiveness for the infidelities he threw himself into whenever the phantom of doubt – which was never to leave him in peace – appeared yet again, as to regain his security and receive once again the confirmation of his love, which on those occasions exceeded the abundance of their first times and even went beyond the spectacular visions of paradise that he had made up in the chimeras of his longing. To the extent that many times he wondered if he did it truly from the pressure of his uncertainty or rather to spur, with the suffering provoked by betrayal, the subsequent reconquest and closeness, which only increased his vehemence when she would convince him once more that she had given up everything in order to share his miserable life.

Then, excited by being together again, they would go out into the street and blow the budget that they had so conscientiously planned so that their money would last until the end of the month. Andrea's coming had not improved the situation, and the more he worked at any job he could find – and for weeks on end he would come home only to sleep, to fall exhausted at her side only to get up again at dawn – her savings soon came to an end, keeping only the untouchable sum of money that she would need to be able to spend the children's vacations with them.

He would have liked to ask her why her husband hadn't given her any money, nor her parents, but he didn't dare, and he seemed to understand what had happened when she, with no additional comment, reminded him one day that she came from a country where a woman's adultery was still punished with three years in prison, and a man's with three months.

"Where did you get that?" Martín asked.

"That's how it was when I left. The laws of the dictatorship are still in force, and even though they say that all that will change with the new divorce law, it won't affect me. After all, the children aren't mine."

And by the indifference of her voice when she spoke about them, which she never modified or toned down, and in which she never let show a hint of complaint, nostalgia or confidence, he seemed to understand that things had not in fact gone the way she claimed. But there was no point in inquiring

directly or indirectly; he never found out any more about what she confided to him, between sobs, on the night of her arrival.

The same thing happened with her job, which she hardly ever mentioned, taking it for granted that it would have been impossible for her to stay with a company that largely belonged to Carlos. She had come with a series of letters of recommendation to high-level persons in the newspaper business, whom she sought out looking for work, though without success. A journalist, she said, can't do much in a country with a different language, and after several weeks of fruitless visits she gave up the effort. At first she used her time to paint the walls and the cabinets, then she went walking in the city, even going to a lecture series organized by a feminist group in the neighborhood, but she ended up wasting away at home. She quickly attained that state of mind of apathy and boredom, in which one does not have enough mettle to discover the great temptations and succumb to them, nor the will to resist the little ones. So she would doze, on the bed or on the sofa, claiming ills for the purpose of self-justification, and she would alternate between periods when she would do nothing but eat peanuts and others when she would go on a harsh diet in order to lose the kilos she had gained. And for days on end she would not even get up except to go down to the mailbox when the mail was being delivered, and as she would not find the letter she was waiting for she would go back to bed, with disappointment written on her face, and in a foul mood that she had no one to vent on besides Martín.

"Your life is wasting away in sleep, Andrea," he would say to her when sometimes he would come home in mid-morning – to change his clothes or to look for something he had forgotten – and he would find her still between the sheets, though in the course of the five minutes that he snuggled beside her he couldn't help thinking that, in a way, she had not much else to do besides wait for him, as had happened to him that winter in Barcelona. And, not wanting to pester her or to add even more pain to her captivity or her exile, he trusted that one day it would all pass, as had happened to him, and when the crisis was at its most acute, unsatisfied with this Andrea that he sometimes could barely recognize, he consoled himself by dreaming about her, not as she was now, arriving defeated and bare, but about the one who was his, who would one day recover her courage and humor, whom he had left behind in Barcelona; and, carried away by the inertia of his fantasy, he would sometimes end up so confused that he would have been unable to say which one of the two fed the other. Seeing her faraway and sad, and knowing that as much as he would ask she would remain silent, he left the desire to insist until later, until the night, convinced that once she got sleepy she would listen to him and respond.

"What good is it for me to be in New York if we don't have enough money to go anywhere?" she would say in self-justification whenever he reminded her how beautiful the city was in spite of everything. "I can't even go out for a walk," she complained, "it's snowing all day."

It was true. It was a long winter, so cold in New York that when she went outside her tears froze behind her glasses. But she went on the same way when spring came. In the summer she went away for a month to spend the boys' vacation with them. She came back tanned and happy, but her joy barely lasted a few weeks, and for all his efforts to make her talk to him he did not manage to get even one confidence out of her, and, fearful that by his insistence he would add to her suffering, he kept his mouth shut.

They had already been together for over a year when one day, on coming home, he found her crying. Her hair was wet and stuck to her forehead, and without having fully dressed she reeled from the wall to the armchair. Stumbling, she fell over him, and as she hung to his neck he got an acrid whiff of drink.

"I have vertigo," she said, trying to straighten up and unable to stifle her sobs and hiccups.

"You don't have vertigo; you're drunk."

In was the first in an infinite series of times, and though in time her vertigo became chronic and occurred even when she was sober, he could no longer doubt that one was a result of the other, and when she would grab a railing and make that gesture of shutting her eyes so as not to see the abyss at her feet, he took it as an affront, his sight and his mind clouded over, and once more his resentment surged, because he could not understand how she could have left all she had in order to come to New York and then turn into an alcoholic. And once again the mechanism – that he was unwilling and unwilling to stop – would go into action: he would leave the house, slamming the door, and call her from a public phone to tell her that he would not be home for dinner, that he needed some air. And when he would return at dawn, having done nothing to expunge the foreign odor coming from his hands and his body, she would look at him and see in his hesitancy only the warmth of the bed he had just left. And that vision blinded her. Emboldened, first with circumlocutions and then directly, she would summon him to tell the truth, like a prosecutor who is sure of the guilt of the accused, so ferociously – more because of his concealment and stubborn denial than the infidelity itself, she would repeat time and again as she gradually became inflamed – that she only managed to turn his silence into a tombstone.

"Say it, say it already: you don't like me any more. You only like those nitwits, those scrawny little girls."

How could he say it to her if it wasn't true? And even it had been, how could he say anything, he who had never spoken too much, who even in order to say *I love you* during the sunny afternoons of the first summer beside the sea, when he was sure that the world began and ended in her, he could do nothing other than look at her and listen to her and squeeze the hand that she had dropped and that played with the pebbles on the ground?

"You never say anything," she chided him then with a sweetness that did not hide any reproach. And she would curl up next to him and he would let himself be surrounded by a mist of tenderness and complicity that fulfilled all the dreams and hopes that he had accumulated since he had the use of reason.

Those sweet eyes had become inquisitors hunting for some guilt that would make her right. And her songlike laughter had became a cascade of reproaches and rancor. Where had all of that remained? When had she taken the turn and why? What had been favorable had become contrary, what had been gifts had become threats. Would marriage or a life together be a devil's laboratory, a hellish alchemy? Or a two-sided game that required mastery and patience for each one to take his turn? Because, when she would calm down and he would see her drowning in disappointment and pain, when in her eyes there would no longer be anger but only bewilderment, the fortress of silence behind which he had steeled himself would crumble, and he would then confess and seduce her again – the more excited the more offended she was, the more persistent the farther she was from surrendering again.

At the two-year mark the telegram arrived, and then the contract; they decided to return to Spain. From that moment on she changed again, and for the rest of the time that they stayed in New York she showed the same vitality as when he first met her. She did nothing but go from one project to another and concoct stories and plans for the life they would start in Barcelona, *as persons*, she would say laughing, *as who we are.* She was no longer in New York; she had gone away and was no longer walking about this city but another, the one she had her mind set on, the point where she had placed her future and the exact geographic place where she had set her hopes.

He, on the other hand, tried to impart to each one of his steps and his glances the intensity that would best conserve its remembrance, and order it and name it so that he could store it in his memory and use it whenever he wanted. But he did not achieve his goal. He walked the streets and the avenues enveloped in the nostalgia that he was to feel when he left them, but he managed only to tinge them with so much melancholy that, petrified underneath it, they faded away the way a memory fades as it is supplanted by the next one, with the taste and smell of those years lost forever, perhaps in order to remind him that the half-trodden path that he was forsaking by his departure would be forever forbidden to him.

"This isn't what I want to do," he had told her when she triumphantly lifted a letter from Leonardus with the complete project and the contract that, if accepted, would oblige them to return.

"And what *do* you want to do?" she asked, halfway between stupefied and offended.

"Six TV serials in five years! I hardly know the medium, I haven't read the scripts, I've never directed a superproduction. I want to do other things!"

"What things?" she asked, incredulous. "Since I've been here you haven't done anything," she chided him with the pitying cruelty to which parents – for whom the only thing that matters about their children is the future – resort when they want to convince them that the path they have chosen leads nowhere. And for the first time he realized that the ten years' difference between them placed her in another generation, in another worldview in which there was no room for utopias.

"First read the contract, you don't even know yet what he's proposing to you," she insisted, as his mother might have done.

He read the contract and the letter, and though he understood that Leonardus – or one of his companies – would never have offered him those exceptional conditions if it hadn't been for Andrea, he agreed. True, he did it for her sake, because he knew how painful it was for her to be away from her city and how hard these two years in New York had become for her, and perhaps he was also led by an irrational feeling of indebtedness that would sometimes become unbearable. And if that weren't enough, it was true that since her arrival he had done nothing that would now give him an argument against the return. His jobs before her coming, everything he had left hanging, belonged largely to a chimerical future that had evaporated the way a youthful dream fades. But above all he gave in because he knew in advance that it was useless to resist: the combined elements, events and characters mark patterns of behavior in lovers and assign to each one a well-defined role in the relationship, and though those circumstances vary in time and may even become diametrically opposite, in reality the function carried out and the place occupied by each one are fixed. Martín went on asking almost no questions and she, though with no power to decide, was the one who in the final instance took the decisions.

And nonetheless those six serials that he directed in the first years of his stay in Barcelona had put him at the top of the profession, at least of a certain profession, and had made him rich and famous. The serials were made into movies, and the movies into miniseries, and all were translated into dozens of languages and were sold in all the video clubs in the most dubious countries. His presence was demanded at televised colloquia, at festivals and at lectures. And at the premiere of each serial the production company would organize a publicity display attended by all the media, as well as lecture series that in many cases were sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, of such scope and with so much resonance that, without having put an iota of his creativity or imagination into the works he directed, he found himself at the summit of fame in the city and in the country as a whole, surrounded at all times by people whom he did not know but who, as he knew well, huddled in his shadow while it was there. He was aware that the

prestige he had gained was not due to the work he had done but by the success he had achieved, and that this success had nothing to do with quality. He knew it well: success plus money provokes adulation and applause, and prestige as well, though the prestige that comes only from quality brings only silence.

He never said so to Andrea, but he had the impression that no one was really needed for those productions that were planned to the last millimeter, because he, the director, had so little freedom of movement that he might just as well have let the first assistant do it, following the script – in whose writing he also had no hand – to the letter, while he would go out for coffee or to the movies. And though at first he was tortured by not doing what he would have wanted to do, after a short time he could no longer remember – or didn't want to – just what it was that he had wanted to do, and he let himself be carried away by the aureole of his triumph; and, lulled by the song of those around him and by the general fervor and applause, he managed to stop thinking about it. Perhaps what happens with one's work is the same as with the wrinkles that deepen and proliferate at the same rhythm as the increase in diopters. Nonetheless, in his innermost self he had not abandoned his dreams, that sometime way of falling asleep while imagining that he had managed to work tirelessly, as in the days of his first short, on a film of his own – whose screenplay was completely finished in his mind and one of these days he would write it out – with no guidelines or demands, nor cardboard characters that he didn't understand or absurd dialogues that jerked the public's tears, a dream that he had been transforming over the years, not in order to couple it to reality as we always do but, on the contrary, by setting the bar ever higher, almost inaccessible, as if to let himself know that it was best to dream because what he had wanted had been lost in the nooks and mists of impotence.

"In order to do what you want you must first have enough money," Andrea had told him. "It's the only way of not having to bow to the demands of others and of being able to choose what you want."

Only now did he understand the fallacy of this assertion, which had made him, pressured by her, accept a new four-year contract when the first one ran out, and now be about to sign the third. Or perhaps it would be better to acknowledge that he had not been able to resist the million-dollar contract and the success that followed. Or – who knows? – perhaps he had given up because at last he had convinced himself that he lacked the gift and the talent, and that in reality the passion he had carried forward from childhood had been only a desperate try, the dark desire of escaping his destiny – the destiny of an ant.

But even so, now, seated on a rock at the top of the promontory over the estuary of the harbor of that bewitched island – as he was to repeat many times before everything that happened on it was forced into oblivion – and, perhaps by the connected effect of a series of absurd facts and remembrances that had begun with the appearance of the girl in the hat on that very, now so distant, morning, he wondered about the meaning of that endless trail of conformism, ease and boredom in which he was immersed, and of the six-year contract that he was about to sign and that would bring him to the age of thirty-eight, almost to his forties, at the threshold of the divide after which the way is marked and has no return.

There is a moment in creation when the original objective can go astray; it is only an instant of confusion but it sometimes suffices in order to change the meaning and to change the path that had been begun many years before. If the creator wants to maintain that objective or if its force is greater than that of the easy way that is offered, he will go on and continue the endless search. Otherwise, if he is confused and sticks to the pretext that justifies his giving in to that temptation, then it is possible that he will triumph, but in this triumph he will have found his ceiling and whatever he does after that moment

will be but a mere repetition of the work that put him at the crossroads or that he had in his hands when he succumbed.

And this was what had happened to him. He could precisely locate the moment after which he had done nothing but spin like a screw with its thread stripped. Perhaps that was why those years in Barcelona – seven? how many? – that remained vaguely in his memory, like dreams, with no connection among the various images that make them up, had hardly left a trace in his mind. And yet during that time enough things had happened to define a complete biography – from his marriage to his father's death – but now they were mere sparks of memory with hardly any content, swarming like feathers and almost imperceptibly moving away from his consciousness, finally disappearing, blended into the amalgam of all that had once been, like a drop in the immense sea of nonexistence.

From the time they moved into the spacious apartment, which Andrea's father had given them on their return, in the upper part of the city, they lived, traveled and worked with Leonardus. Everything else was dinners that she gave for her old friends or for the new acquaintances whom she made a point of inviting, perhaps in order to recover the place that she had so brilliantly and nonchalantly occupied before. She seemed to want to show that she was in fact still the same, and perhaps for that reason the new house in the city was almost a replica of the one that Martín had known, perhaps a little more ostentatious, or more cautious, more simple, more condensed, the way a playwright's directions appear on stage: the clock on the mantelpiece, the arrangement of the armchairs and sofas, the furniture beside the window in an accidental-looking disorder, the sober combination of colors meant to give the same impression of carefree elegance, the placement of the fashionable sculptor's work on a table among several other objects so as to strip it of its sheen of novelty and show her familiarity with an avant-garde art that had stopped shocking a long time before.

She would have two drinks before people came, while getting herself ready, perhaps so as not to notice the large bags under her eyes – which her makeup could not conceal – or the way her skin was beginning to crack, because she had lost so much weight that she would end up looking like her mother; and she kept drinking so as to recapture the distant familiarity with which she had treated everybody when she was a part of that society, which, though it had become scattered and moved by other habits, eventually accepted her back. From her return she had thrown herself into that unstoppable social life and paid almost no attention to the half-time job that she had begun at a local paper. She seemed to have lost interest in her profession, because she never talked about it, and after a few months, under the pretext of having to manage Martín's business – he being so careless about these matters – and wanting to accompany him on his travels, and because she also needed time to visit her sons (who were now living in Madrid, where Carlos held a high position in the new democratic government), she left the paper and dedicated all her energy to him. Her life revolved only around his filmings and his movements, in daily contact with Leonardus (and with the obsession to organize that unstoppable whirlwind of appointments and dinners that she wouldn't give up, despite the protests of Martín, who was more than satisfied with the production company's publicity activities; the gradual deterioration of her health and her state of mind; and her visits with the psychiatrist in order to find the hidden reason for the vertigo which really, at its worst moments, hardly allowed her to go down the stairs.

Martín felt curious to know what verdict had been bestowed by those people on Andrea's flight and her reincorporation into civic life with that boy from Sigüenza, who had come to replace the brilliant husband of yesteryear, and he would have liked to know if they really wondered – as he did – if his

striking success and his reputation as a young genius were enough for him to play a part for which he did not have the attributes or the character or the knowledge or the age or the background. But how was he to know that? It is a fact that we die without ever knowing what others think of us, nor managing ever to decipher correctly how they have interpreted the actions of our existence, nor suspecting which is our official image – a plot and a web that they all weave until the fixed personality – with which we walk and live and carry on without even knowing what it consists of – is formed. In truth they were all – and for years there was no one else – as foreign to him as he was to them and, being unable to do anything else, incapable of communicating with anyone or of establishing a social relationship – superficial and frivolous though it might be – for which he had not been born and was not willing to make any more effort than contributing his passive attendance, he moved through the drawing rooms behind the footsteps of Andrea, who was then bestowing the best of herself, happy to show that – against all predictions – the replacement had been worthwhile and to exhibit radiantly the prestigious place to which Martín had raised her a few months after their arrival.

It was around that time that she began speaking in the first person plural. She would state an opinion as if she were expressing, in the name of both of them, that of her young and famous companion, so shy and withdrawn that he would never have dared to do it by himself, as yet another proof of the understanding that the myth of their love story was to foster.

Martín, meanwhile, looked for her among the people as he had looked for her during that first year of secret loving in that same city – which was then but a promise – convinced as he was that the complicity that he would find would be enough to counter her recurrent suspicions and the violent scenes that would precede their reconciliations and her tears and her vertigo of obscure origin, and upon discovering, among an amalgam of laughter and voices and hairdos with a knifelike shine, the gaze of her blue eyes filtering tenderness or intention through the lenses of her large eyeglasses, he would feel imprisoned by the same indestructible bond, stronger than all the ones exhibited in that drawing room and in that city, as tyrannical as the most imperious passion which it nonetheless fed, and all he wanted was that the clock's hands would hurry up and turn so that everybody would go home and leave the drawing room deserted, and the two of them would return to the stronghold of their intimacy, where desire was still as awake and pressing as in the hatchway of the *Manuela*.

No one loves as we would like to be loved; therein, perhaps, lies the fruitless search.

But now those fantasies and the successes he had attained meant nothing. Nothing, against this house where the nascent moon, as thin as a line drawing and so pale that it did not illuminate the dial of his watch, gravitated as it rose above the horizon; or the unseen earth, extinguished and mute; or the dull noise of the sea, turning about itself for lack of air, by the weight of a temperature that had become solidified over the metallic swaying of its barely insinuated waves. No, not only the moon, the earth, the sea, which he had ignored for years, replacing them by words that referred to them. Not only they; he himself, his work, the woman he had left behind – held back by her cowardice – on the boat, the money he had to make, those strange beings who would be sleeping in the cabin, his own mother forgotten in his faraway hometown.

A noise startled him. There were voices somewhere well below where he was. He got up, worried, and carefully followed the slope. *If I fall here,* he thought, *no one will ever find me here*, and he looked at the precipice by his feet where, two hundred meters beneath him, the sound of the surf became angrier as it crashed into the rocks. He continued downward. Every so often he stopped in order to listen and at the

crossings he waited and paid heed not to come across those who might be looking for the dog in some corner. He turned left and, once again moved by the urgent need to find his wallet, walked in a direction opposite the one he had taken an hour before, passed by the dark and silent grapevine and, stumbling down the pebbly path, he arrived at the mosque square. The water of the bay was still motionless and the heat was even more stifling; he almost suffocated. He walked past the ruin-lined shoreline until he got to the first little houses and entered an alley, trying once again to reconstruct the old woman's steps. But, there being so few streets behind the seafront, he could not get oriented and walked around them pressed by his worry, not knowing what to do. The air weighed down like a slab; a cat mewled almost beside his head; he shuddered and kept walking. He stopped after a while because it seemed to him that someone was following him, but all he heard was a smothered snore coming from the black hole of an open window almost at ground level and sliding over the stony walls of the house. After another while, led by the same obsession, he stopped again, and this time the footsteps on the paving stones continued resounding. He then became still, leaning against a wall, not daring to wipe his moist forehead lest he was found out, nor knowing how to quiet the beats of his heart. A bird, frightened perhaps by them or by the footsteps – now growing distant – flew out from a corbel, and in the silence of the night the flutter of its wings multiplied as though a flock of ducks had taken flight. All he wanted was to get back to the boat. He took a few steps, almost on tiptoe, and leaned against the corner of a ruined house whose edges had been eaten away and cracked by time, and he waited timidly, not daring to run towards the pier, which he neither saw nor knew how to get to. The footsteps on the pavement were no longer to be heard; the stifling night was crossed every so often by sporadic noises – the barking of a dog or the sound of breathing from behind a window, or other, indefinable ones of unknown origin, impossible to locate or decipher, crackling in the stuff that makes up the night: creaks in the framing, timber in the lofts, doors in the bedrooms.

He set out walking again. He thought he recognized a street from which it would be easy to find a way out, but he found himself again in the alley where the snoring kept up its pace towards dawn, and as much as he tried to get away he always ended up in it. The fourth or fifth time, when his forehead was already dripping with sweat and anxiety, he thought he saw a light at the end of an alley that he had not discovered yet. A window frame creaked and a flash of light, the representative of some other unknown light, swept over the space. He stopped nonetheless, as if the anticipation of a sound that would soon follow vibrated around him, and all at once a roar of laughter burst out behind him. He turned around and there was the man, barely a few meters away, coming out of the darkness like an apparition, with a flashlight in his hand. In a flash the thought crossed his mind that this was who had picked up the wallet and was coming to offer it to him for money, and without another thought he pulled a ten-dollar bill from his pocket and showed it to him, showing him with signs that he was offering him an exchange. The man stopped laughing and seemed to have understood. He stretched out his hand to pick up the bill and put it in the bag hanging from his shoulder. Martín saw him rummaging inside it while holding on firmly to the flashlight, but he only closed the bag and started laughing again, this time with even more gusto, raising his congested face to the sky. Someone hissed from a darkened window, warning him to be quiet, and Martín waited for him to stop laughing and return his wallet. But the man raised his flashlight, blinding him for a few seconds, then turned it off, leaving him doubly in the dark, and began running. Martín set off up the hill in pursuit. He could not see him now in the darkness but he heard the trot a few steps ahead of him, and when he got to a steeper path the sound of the stones let him know that he was still behind him. They had come out to an open space and the star-studded sky shone in its fullness, but all he

saw was the shadow that preceded him, which suddenly stopped, hardly giving him any time. Martín was about to jump on him, but at that moment the flashlight went on under a tortured face, and there appeared, inflamed by the bias of the light, the features of the one-eyed man who launched a roar – *aaaahhhh!* – into the night, raised his hand to make visible the knife he blandished over his head, and gestured that it was his turn to begin the chase. Martín turned around and haltingly ran down the hill to the area of silent streets, obsessed only by the need to get back to the pier and jump aboard. Behind him the steps and the roaring with which the man accompanied his pursuit seemed to him to be getting ever closer. But until he found the way out he kept running over the alleys and coming back to the same place in order to fool his pursuer and leave him in a corner, when, more from exhaustion than from knowing if he was still being followed, he stopped in an entranceway and wrapped himself around it, stifling his breathing. Nothing was to be heard. The street had become somewhat wider and formed a little square, enclosed by a half-ruined wall of a church that housed, at mid-height, the image of a white Madonna. Rubble and ruins that no one had cleared had merged in time so as to form a monument of hollows, protuberances and shadows that trembled in the gentle flicker of the flame in the niche.

From some place a stone came loose and tumbled down, coming to rest at his feet. Martín got even closer to the doorway and remained still, searching in the silence for a sign that would tell him where the danger came from. His soaked-through shirt burned on his skin and the rarefied air of this enclosed space, loaded with dense odors of undefinable substances, that might as just well have come from the acrid smell of milk as from a pile of fruit and vegetable peels that had begun to rot, hardly let him breathe. He leaned his head on the door and closed his eyes, not stopping his panting. He suddenly heard the sound of hurried steps approaching, but before he had decided which way to run away the hinges of the door squeaked and he barely had the time to realize that a hand was taking him by the arm and pulling him into the house. The hinges squeaked again and the dull thud was followed by darkness and the coolness of a thick-walled interior. Not knowing why, he felt safe. He let himself be led by the hand that was holding on to him until the other hand opened a door and they entered a room. The switch clicked and on the ceiling a wan lightbulb went on. The woman was almost as tall as he and had a disproportionate forehead and big dark eyes. By all indications she had just risen from bed because she had thrown over her shoulders a flowered scarf that barely covered her black petticoat. She was unkempt and looked at him without smiling. He didn't even feel any curiosity when she began to speak, and since he didn't understand what she was saying he remained silent. Nor did he react when he felt the contact of the sweaty hand that slid over the skin of his neck, and when, mumbling incomprehensible words she pulled him toward the window, he let her do it. He did look out, however, no longer in fear but in order to know if the one-eyed man was still running around, but the air was marked only by the snoring and the restless movements of the same invisible sleepers behind the open windows. She took him by the hand and led him to the still-warm bed.

Before he lay his head in the persistent hollow of the large white pillow, he took a bill from his pocket, placed on the nightstand, and with gestures indicated to her that he wanted to sleep. But she either did not understand or did not seem to pay him any mind; she twisted her lips with indifference, took the bill, put it in a drawer and lay down beside him without turning off the ceiling light.

Of that night and of the time he stayed in that house, he was to remember little more than the pitiless metallic groaning of the mattress springs and the woman's large eyes, which remained fixed on his until, exhausted, he shut them. He must have nodded off to sleep because when he opened them again he could hardly recognize the setting. He moved the woman lying beside him away and got up. She sat up on the

bed and began to gesticulate, and he, seeing her open and shut her mouth, though he knew that she was talking, even yelling, did not hear her voice, as if he were present in that place with only a part of his senses while another part had left the house in order to find the way out. She had tufts of black hair stuck to her forehead, and the slip that fit tightly around her armpits showed a body that seemed to combine the halves of two different persons. With some tenderness he thought, *I've never seen such a strange creature.* He left a few more dollars on the table and the woman's expression softened: she kept talking but no longer had those long, deep lines that had previously run across her face. With both hands she pulled her slip, which hardly moved, downward and the hair on her forehead backward, she picked up the scarf from the floor and covered herself with it, thus fixing up her image, which nonetheless did not take on any meaning. He went to the door but she stopped him and showed him the way to the front door through the dark hallway. He heard the hinges squeak again and went out into the street, which did not lighten the weight and the heat that was stuck to his skin.

This time he had no trouble finding the pier, following the narrow alley to his left that the woman had pointed out to him. The heat had not abated and he thought that when he got to the sea he would feel an air current but the water was still thick, viscous and black like oil and so still that the *Albatross* seemed to be split in two and reproduced in a shadow equal to itself. The lights of Giorgios' café must have been turned off hours before, and there was only a lightbulb hanging from a wire in front of the tobacco stand on the other side of the square.

Under the scant light of the mainmast he noticed Andrea huddled and wrapped up in herself, shielding her knees with a look of someone who feels cold – unthinkable in that sticky, stifling heat – embracing them as though she had wanted to span her whole body. Curled up like that she still looked like a scared and confused little girl who dare not move knowing the punishment that awaits her. And for the first time in his life he overcame the impulse to run towards her, as he had so many other times, armed with the outrage of his pointless betrayal which would restart – or perhaps only continue – that endless cycle that fed on itself.

Confused when he finally realized the narrow scope to which his longing for home had been reduced, as evident – for the first time – as that that first glimpse of light rising timidly over the horizon would soon merge with the dawn, he sat down on the ground of the pier at a certain distance from the *Albatross*, his legs dangling over the water. Tears struggled vainly to flow from some hidden and dark place inside him and only a moist veil settled on his pupils, not falling or sliding but blinding them. He had wanted to cry for himself and for her, for their transformation, for their complicity turned concatenation, for the hell of longing for what he had stopped being, or for the past happiness that one way or another always manages to fade away and disappear.

He still did not fully understand what had happened, what strange path he had traced that night nor where it would lead him, but, distressed by the clairvoyance with which that conviction was showing itself to him, urging him with an inescapable insistence that he didn't know where it came from, he began to see in an instant the course of pitfalls and obstacles that he would have to face. And suddenly he was invaded by an infinite languor that left his soul empty and hungry for some rest and some peace that, he understood, he was not to find for a long time.

The cock crowed out of tune in the stifling air, the first light showed up on the horizon, the crackling of an engine moved away a yet invisible boat, the suffocation trembled in the air like the waves on a lake when a stone is cast upon it, and the paper moon hid behind the rock.

He got up and wearily made his way to the *Albatross*, unafraid of footsteps or shouts or creaks or laughter. Tom had pulled in the gangway, so that he pulled in the stern rope and as he let it go he made a long leap onto the deck. The boat rocked and Andrea raised her head. As he passed beside her he briefly tousled her curly hair, neither looking at her nor wanting to see that this gesture, so inoffensive, had tinged her eyes with the shine of humiliation and spite. Without stopping he headed to the stairway, went belowdecks, opened the refrigerator, drank some water and silently entered the cabin, closing the door noiselessly.

He took off his shirt and shoes and plopped on the bed in the dark. He did not notice the stifling heat in the cabin and closed his weary eyes, aching from the tears that could not flow. And in the violet darkness of his eyelids there appeared the great stain of her white dress wrapped around the defeated figure, the head crowned by long curls, fine and stubborn, whose volume had been multiplied by the sticky humidity of a night spent in the open, and the deep reproach of her gaze.

Blue, like the blue of the sea at nightfall, like the blue hour of dusk or the superimposed shadows of the backdrops of Cappadocia facing the sun; blue like the breeze that falls upon the land when the sea wind comes in over the horizon; blue like rest, like fountains, like fresh sheets, blue like the light of dawn, like sails in the wind, like the blue eyes of the girl in full bloom. And yet.

VI

"The way out is through the door. Why does no one use that way?"

Confucius

The door opened suddenly and Andrea turned on the light. She had let her glasses fall over her neck and the lines in her face had become accentuated by fatigue and lack of sleep. Standing at the edge of the open door, she was obviously not coming in peace: "Aren't you going to tell me where you've been?"

The cock crowed again with four high-pitched tones that ended in a squeak, and in the distance the crackle of an engine broke the silence of dawn.

"I've been waiting for you all night," she added.

"You shouldn't have done that." Martín stretched and turned the lampshade toward the ceiling. The cabin became half-lit. "Come to bed," he said gently. "It's late," he added and without sitting up stretched out his arm toward her.

"I know how late it is; I've been waiting for you."

There was a silence.

"Haven't you heard me? What were you doing?"

Martín made a weary gesture. "What does it matter what I did?"

"I have a right to know, don't I?"

"What for?" he asked without much interest.

"I'm your wife, or have you forgotten?" She closed the door and sat on the bed. She was on edge and had no intention of sleeping.

"No, I haven't forgotten," he retorted, though he barely remembered the trip to the courthouse, almost immediately after arriving from New York, with Leonardus as the only witness, a few months after the passage of the divorce law. He did, however, remember her sudden insistence and the dispatch with which she organized the simple ceremony, though until then she had never been concerned about it; and only later did he understand that all that haste might well have been aimed at beating Carlos – who, after completing the divorce proceedings, had surprisingly announced his own marriage for the end of the year – to the punch.

Andrea still waited for him to speak. But he said nothing but "I'm sleepy" and stretched his arm to turn off the light.

"No!" she shouted and jumped on the bed to stop him. Her face was flushed with anger and sweat. The air in the cabin was stifling.

"Then I'll turn on the fan," Martín said patiently. He sought out the switch under the glass of the hatchway and turned it on. A rhythmic humming filled the cabin.

"Turn that thing off," she shrieked.

He stretched his arm again, struck at the switch and crossed his hands at his waist. He shut his eyes and thought, *When I die they'll put me in this position.*

"You're not listening to me," said Andrea. "You never do, you withdraw into yourself, you don't talk, you don't leave a crack where I can come in. You stay up in your tower, outside of everything, and you act without knowing either the harm you're doing or what the tears that it causes are due to."

How could he know? How could he understand, if she did not explain it to him, that uncontrolled weeping with which she had come to New York in order to stay with him? How could he fail to attach importance to tears that by and of themselves contradicted the purpose of her being there? For weeks on end she cried without managing to calm down more than once in a while, when he, or perhaps both of them, taking what they had been before as a model, would get close to each other, trembling, in order to convince themselves that the same symptoms concealed the same passions. And she would go on crying, sometimes in hiding, other times suddenly for no reason, for days, years, even until now, as if all that weeping – which had been waning in frequency and intensity, gradually replaced by strange illnesses or mysterious aches that would appear with an overwhelming strength and disappear, replaced by new symptoms, vertigo, migraines, backaches, fatigue spells so persistent that they forced her to stay in bed and in the dark for whole days – were nothing but a fountain of inexhaustible pain whose origin and persistence he could not understand correctly.

He shut his eyes.

"Don't go to sleep," she raised her voice, shaking him.

He got back into his position and said to her:

"Don't yell, you'll wake the others," and he pointed his head towards the cabin next door.

"What do I care if they wake up? Or do you think they don't know that you've been out all night?"

A truncated blow of air, or a wave coming from the open sea, produced perhaps by a boat going out fishing, crashed into the hull of the boat and gave them the expectation of a breeze that was not to come.

"Come to bed. We'll talk tomorrow. I'm tired."

"And tomorrow, with some excuse or other, you won't talk either."

"Tomorrow I will," he said, "tomorrow I'll tell you everything."

"Tomorrow," she repeated mockingly, "tomorrow. You haven't talked all afternoon or evening, nor at dinner, but tomorrow you will."

"I never talk a lot, you know that."

Silence reigned again.

Andrea threw her hair back and reached out her arm so as to take the whisky bottle from the shelf; she uncorked it and took it to her mouth in a deliberately coarse gesture.

"What's happening to you?" she asked while pursuing with the back of her hand the drops that dripped onto her chin. "Are you sick of the boat?" And, without waiting for an answer: "There isn't much more time left; when they bring the spare part tomorrow we set sail. You have another contract, even better than the ones before, that's the truth. Look at the good side. I see it from your side, don't I?"

"What's my side?"

"Everything."

"What does 'everything' mean?"

"As long as I've known you I've done nothing but what you've wanted."

Martín did not reply, nor even look at her.

"Don't I take care of your business? Don't I look at the rushes over and over? Haven't I traveled to your part of the country?"

"That was a long time ago. I thought you liked it."

"Well, I don't like it, I didn't like it."

She said it to hurt him, he knew it. She was in one of those moments of contained fury in which she did not let herself get carried away with anger and measured her words in order to go beyond mere insult: the desertion of a common remembrance, the unilateral withdrawal from memory. No, it couldn't have all been a lie, he knew it, nor even a concession. And yet she would now deny even the trembling of the leaves on the tallest poplars that she noticed one afternoon, lying on the ground with her head on his knees. It was a calm summer day. Under the diaphanous and motionless blue sky of Castile, while the breeze was wafting over the golden hills spotted with bales, she had discovered – *love is fed by such discoveries*, she said at the time – a way of looking, of understanding, of puzzling out the landscape, almost swallowing it as though taking communion, so different from the indifference or the passivity with which she had been in nature up to that moment. "I'm a city girl," she would repeat passionately when he first met her, "I'm from the city." And she would add: "The love of nature is for reactionaries and those against change," a sentence she had perhaps heard repeated by her husband with a polemic intent that escaped her, but she would say it in so personal a manner that no one ever asked her for an explanation, nor was she ever accused of repeating what she heard because, they said, it was logical that she would share his ideas and beliefs; what was wrong if, with her passionate nature, she would proclaim them with even more enthusiasm and aplomb, even if they were not hers? What woman married to an important man doesn't do it?

As though she, too, had wanted to recover her calm, she repeated wearily:

"There's only a little time left, there's only a little time left," and she added in a whisper: "Everything will be the same again."

"No," said Martín, "nothing will be the same again."

"What's supposed to change? And why? What has happened? Don't you think I know that your need for air, that kept you away all these hours, concerns me even more than you? I want to know what's going on. I need to know, do you hear me?"

Martín did not respond.

"I'm talking to you."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry nothing. Listen to me or talk. Don't torture me like this. I don't deserve it, you know it well." Her tone of voice had softened perhaps when she added, "I left everything for you, everything." And she covered her face with her hands, as though she could not stand the sight of such a great mistake.

"You shouldn't have done it," he said bitterly, and when the echo of the statement, which she seemed not to have heard, was lost he added, in order to imprint what he had said with purpose: "I didn't ask you to do it."

"That isn't true," she replied, hardly giving him time to finish, forgetting her pain, "you begged me a million times, even crying."

"You're right," he admitted, "you're right, but now it doesn't mean anything any more. Forget what I said and what I didn't say." He looked at her for a moment almost indifferently, as one looks at a gaffe committed by a stranger next to us, and he thought, *now I have to right the wrong, not this one, not last night's, but that of a lifetime.* But he was being overcome by sleepiness and fatigue, and, in order to end it all and to be allowed to sleep, with the decisiveness and brazenness of the timid person who, once he speaks, believes he can say anything, he whispered, "I just don't love you."

But he did not achieve the desired effect. Andrea smiled ironically, as if facing someone who contradicts himself all the time.

"Oh, you don't?" There was boldness in her voice. "Now you find out?" And she raised her head to see how he would deny what he had just said.

"I want to leave," he said, cornered. "I want to leave and I will."

"You've left many times and you've always come back."

"This time it won't be like that. I won't come back to you." And, more for himself than for her, he added: "No, I don't love you; maybe I've never loved you. I should've known it a long time ago."

"When am I supposed to believe you, before or now? Which is the truth, last night's or now?" She had found shelter in indifference and irony.

"You have to believe me now. Now I know it. Before, I only desired you."

"So you've made a mistake?"

"Yes, I've made a mistake in everything. Not only in you. You're just a small part of it. The smallest." And what was meant to take the sting out of the brutality of his declaration was taken by her as the only and unjustified insult. Again she covered her face with her hands, but almost immediately she raised her head with a shake, and with the hand gesture that Martín knew so well she tried to throw back that curly hair that always refused to obey her, though this time even more furiously, like a bull trying to gore the whole world, and she burst out:

"And you're trying to make me believe that the heat on this God-forsaken island has opened your eyes, that this is your road to Damascus, and that the revelation is so stark that you have to throw overboard all of our life together and deny everything we've done to be together? Because of this God-forsaken island?"

It was true. Martín thought of yesterday and the day before yesterday and of all the nights of this cruise that had in the end taken such an unexpected turn: everything that he had not wanted to think about during those ten years had now come bubbling to the surface with great momentum, in a messy way but laying bare the only and unexpected truth, as water rushes out from a reservoir when the sluice gates are opened and instantly shows the power of its flow.

He didn't reply and moved his eyes away from her so as not to have to withstand the cry for help which he in any case could not provide.

"What has happened? Tell me, I'll be able to understand," now with hope in her blue pupils. "Please, I beg you. Tell me what's happening. What have I done?" She had taken one of his hands that he was holding on his waist and slowly kissed it, starting with the nail of the little finger and going to the other fingers one by one.

He did not reply this time either and he let her go on, buttressed in the conviction that everything would end by itself if he resisted. But after a moment he realized that his only wish was to sleep, simply to sleep, and, overcome by the urgent need to end it once and for all, or perhaps emboldened by her sudden submission, he said, "I'm going to ask for a divorce."

"And me? Have you thought about me?" She had not let go of his hand, which, as though it were a rag, she now used to wipe her tears. "You're sentencing me to loneliness so that you can follow God knows what hidden impulse that you don't want to reveal." She stopped for a moment. "Do you know what loneliness is? Have you ever been alone? No, I see, you don't know it, it hasn't come to you yet. Loneliness is the conviction, the absolute certainty that you don't exist for anybody." And she could barely finish. She covered her mouth with his hand and slowly began to sob.

"Don't cry," and with his free hand he handed her a handkerchief.

It may have been at that moment when she saw the stain from his wound and his dirty pants.

She stopped crying and, frowning, asked:

"What have you done to yourself? What have you been up to? You have blood."

"It's nothing, forget about it, I fell on a cliff."

There was a truce. Andrea caressed the wound through the handkerchief but insisted:

"Tell me the truth, for once," she entreated. And she added again: "I hate lying, falsehood, you know that. Tell me what's happened, please."

"I've told you: I want to leave," and he added nothing more because he realized that his strength lay in silence or at least in being laconic.

"Sure, now you don't need me any more," Andrea said, emboldened.

Oh God! What else was she going to try? Why wouldn't she accept the only explanation?

"Don't talk nonsense." He took his hand out of hers, put it, pillow-style, under his head alongside the other, and shut his eyes as if to show infinite patience.

"You don't like me any more," she then said and went silent, waiting for him to deny it. But he neither spoke nor moved.

And only after a moment, overly fearful that if she did not make the effort then he would not, she stretched out her hand and put it on his cheek tenderly. "You don't like me any more," she repeated and added, "Isn't that so?"

He moved her hand away as if, in order to say what he had to say, he could not admit any contact.

"It's not that I don't like you. I don't like myself when I'm with you."

"But why? What's happening?"

"You know perfectly well what's happening," he said with some indifference. "You know it, and you know even better than I do," but he would not have been able to explain it. He repeated again: "I want to leave, I have to leave," almost regretfully, as though someone were forcing him and he were resisting.

"Is it because of Chiqui?" she asked as if she had suddenly found the solution.

"It is not because of Chiqui," he answered in the weary tone of voice that one uses to respond to unjustified jealousy. He knew why she was saying it. With that tiresome precision in the memory of the jealous, which keeps awake in their consciousness the discovered clue upon which they concoct and buttress plots until they find one that seems to align with the truth, she still remembered that look that she caught not by chance but because she always lay in wait. It had happened on the first, or perhaps the second, day of the voyage. Chiqui, who had been lying down in the bow, had sat up with the jar of lotion in her hand. For a good while she kept busy spreading it on her legs at the same rhythm as the swaying of her body. Suddenly she raised her head, and above the sunglasses that had slid down to the tip of her nose her eyes met those of Martín, who had come up on deck with a book a moment before and had sat in the pool next to Tom, and who looked back at her without flinching and with assurance. Martín was not wearing sunglasses and even so he held out, breathless, and when in an almost automatic gesture he moved his glance away and to the right, where Andrea had settled in order to untangle the fishing line, he felt naked before her. He could not see her eyes because at that very moment, perhaps as she slightly lifted her head from the line that had kept her obsessed for the last ten minutes so as turn it toward him, the sun had become reflected in the mirrored lenses of her glasses, blinding her. But he knew that she had caught the long exchange of looks by the barely insinuated contraction of her lips and by her way of

opening her mouth expectantly as if at any moment she would begin a deeper breath, a gasp. Disturbed probably by the discovery or by the inert scrutiny to which Chiqui (whose eyes, though unseen, he felt fixed in him) was still subjecting him – and not so much by the attraction that he felt for her nor, as at other times, by the desire to produce in Andrea an anxiety that she would eventually give back to him, as by the turbulent pleasure of being the object of an unknown intention – he did not, until much later, notice Leonardus, who a moment before had replaced Tom at the helm and was using the magical power of his little eyes so as not to miss, nor to betray, that game of superimposed looks and intentions.

"It isn't because of Chiqui," he repeated, thinking of that initial contact which, perhaps consumed in itself, had not happened again, "it isn't because of anyone. Only because of me and also because of you." The cock crowed tunelessly again in the dawn that had begun to make its way through the darkness and invade the world. The daylight, which was now gushing in through the hatchways, unchecked by the thin canvas curtains, mocked the dim shine of the lampshade that Martín had redirected toward the ceiling. "It's because of us, both of us," he insisted. But Andrea was no longer hearing him; she was slowly undressing without ceasing to look at him and when she finished she calmly lay down beside him. But he was not moved either by her prolonged look nor by her intention, nor even by the memory of all the times when she had acted the same way when she revealed, even recreated by herself, the nature of their intimacy, so deep that it wiped clean the setbacks of their strange relationship, so complete that it left no room for other voices or other spaces, so inexorable that it augured the perpetuity of its existence.

She had been crying and in the light of day her eyelids were red and swollen. But for the first time he did not see in them the shine that would incite him to get her back once again, to convince her, to submit her, to make her confess to what point she was in his hands and belonged to him, come what may, as great and heinous the outrage to which he had subjected her might have been. For the first time he did not recognize in that face that of the one who had left everything behind to follow him, even more beautiful in the lines of fatigue and pain, delirium and alcoholism, that he himself had imprinted in its features; but only the pathetic face of a woman who was aging and leaving her soul in the overwhelming effort of competing with herself.

"Everything ends when desire runs out, not when hope clouds over," he remembered, and drew her toward him only to see how she would shiver, but nonetheless sure that in a last attempt at overcoming him she would feign a vehemence that by now would never surface spontaneously, clenched as she was by fear and by pride of seeing herself relegated, and because she too knew that those hands were no longer the ones she had seen tremble so many times. And in the play of simulations and distortions of one mirror facing another they repeated their duplicity to infinity, until they both fell exhausted, battered, wounded, still avid and humiliated by having laid bare to each other the futility of their useless pantomime.

The powerful whistle of a one-note siren that had come to a halt and was piercing the air had something strange about it, like the obstinacy of a corner of fog in full sunlight. Martín opened his eyes, and his still-sleeping memory sent him obscure and unfathomable messages that nonetheless inflicted on him a sharp, deep pain. Someone had opened the curtains and the brutal light blinded him. *It must be past noon,* he thought. Andrea wasn't there, and the disarray of the cabin, like an image of his own discouragement, wounded him in an unaccustomed way. Confused noises came from the harbor and the pier, and as they took on meaning he remembered that today the steamer from Rhodes would be coming, and among the mists of his sleepy anxieties he managed to deduce: *if it does then it'll bring the part we're waiting for,*

and with a little bit of luck we'll be able to set sail this very afternoon and we'll leave the island once and for all.

He went to the bathroom and did not shower but washed his face with cold water, because a piece of paper on the mirror reminded him that water had to be conserved until the boat could go to refill from the hose at the other end of the harbor.

There was no one belowdecks. They had gone to buy provisions or to accompany Leonardus in going to make a phone call, *as always*, he thought, *there's nothing they like better*. He went up a couple of steps of the stairway leading to the top deck and put out his head. A rickety packet boat showed, over its red-painted hull, an obsolete smokestack, overly flattened, with the black-and-white anagram of the shipping company that was keeping it alive. It had begun the maneuver for docking at the pier, almost directly across from Giorgios' restaurant, and two sailors out of an operetta, in white sailor caps and blue-striped jerseys, had the gangplank ready from the gunwale. On land, beside the two men who were waiting to pick up the ropes, thirty or forty people remained motionless while observing the slow maneuver. Giorgios had left the confines of his café, taking a wheeled cart to the boat for picking up the merchandise. Behind them other people approached in small groups. They all moved slowly, as if the heat – suspended in some rays of the sun that by dint of showing their intensity had lost their shine – barely allowed them to advance. The midday air was hazy and sticky.

Martín returned belowdecks, poured himself a cup of coffee that he found, still lukewarm, in a can on the stove, and went back up to sit down in the pool, under the awning.

"This heat will kill us," he said aloud, but he knew that it wasn't the heat.

From behind him, Andrea's voice startled him. "Come," she said, "it's true, it's hot."

He had not seen her when he looked out on the deck, nor later; she must have been lying on a sofa in the cabin.

"Come," she repeated, and put a hand on his knees, "it's cooler in the cabin."

Martín, motionless, put his guard up.

"No, I'm fine here," and waited for her angry reaction.

But Andrea did not insist. She passed in front of him and went to sit down over the main hatchway, barely shielded from the sun by the corner of the awning that Tom had fastened to the cleat on the side of the mainmast, and as though she had suddenly lost interest in him, she set out to contemplate the disembarking of people and packages, though her manner was scornful and ill-tempered.

On the balcony, the couple had regained their place, because the sun, though still high in the metallic sky, had begun a slight descent and a strip of shade was projected upon it by the eaves. The woman was wearing the flowery robe and the man a pajama top. Sitting opposite each other they were still in the same attitude and position as the previous day, with that look of irritation that becomes set over the years in the expression and in the insolence with which both kept their necks raised and their faces in opposite directions, avoiding each other; he, with his hands crossed on the table, focused his attention on the Rhodes steamer, while she, facing him and unwilling to see him but hanging on what he was doing, sighed every so often and looked at him sideways.

Just like us, though Martin. *People are too much alike.*

"Is there any coffee that's made?" asked Andrea without raising her eyes.

"Yes, there's a little left."

"Can you bring me a cup?"

Martín went to the kitchen, poured her a cup, put a paper napkin on the tray and went to take it to her. He didn't want to sit with her, but he didn't know how to leave without provoking a reaction that he did not desire, nor did he want in any way to restart the preceding night's talk. He remained standing, leaning on the mainmast, and thought that once she had finished her coffee he could leave with the pretext of taking back the cup. She looked at him and began to drink in little sips, as though the coffee were boiling hot.

Dislike, at times, shows up unexpectedly in trifling details that may carry as much of a charge as the obscure reasons that motivate it. Andrea finished her coffee, wiped her lips with the paper napkin, crumpled it and put it in the cup before handing it to him, and, without knowing why, Martín hated her for it.

He went down again, left the cup in the sink and, like a child escaping the teacher's attention, went up the stairs trying to make no noise, slipped past the pool and was about to leap on the gangway when he heard the shouts:

"Haven't you got anything to tell me? Didn't you say that today you would tell me all about it?"

But he did not turn around; he continued down the gangway, and, at full speed and not stopping to hear if she was calling him, followed the pier in a direction away from the square opposite which the Rhodes steamer was tied up. He walked hurriedly along the boardwalk, which by this point was getting narrower as the buildings became scarcer until it faded into a path covered with rubble and sharp stones, partly invaded by the sea. There were no boats or people and a little further the power plant, silent and deserted at this hour, blocked the way to a promontory that enclosed the inlet of still and muddy waters where the garbage from the dump floated and rotted, protecting it from the wind. A hulk that was tied up to land and which must have served for storage held above it a motionless cloud of big blackish flies. The bridge had partially collapsed and the worm-eaten and storm-battered timbers invaded the orlop deck among sacks and crates. There was no way except back, and since he didn't want to return to the boat and be alone with Andrea, or pass in front of it and expose himself to her calling him, he sat down on the ground in such a way that he could not be seen from there and killed time by looking at it. It was a very old boat, which must have been a fishing barge, had long ago lost its last coat of paint and oozed dampness.

Suddenly something moved among the sacks, and it was then that, paying closer attention, he noticed a shape that was breaking away from that strange amalgam, a man curled about himself, like the one had seen yesterday in the market, his back leaning against a box and his head folded over his chest, wrapped in a too-small rag under which his bare feet showed: the one-eyed man. Fear paralyzed him, fear that he thought he had banished after the chase, perhaps calmed by other anxieties and terrors that had replaced the one-eyed man, the dead dog, his lost wallet, as though they belonged to the realm of fiction or nightmare; but there it was again, that confused fear of being found out or of having that part of him, which neither he nor anyone else had noticed before, made public. He rose almost on tiptoe so as not be seen, lightly stepped away for the first few meters, and once he was at some distance away from that putrid cove he began to run and did not stop until he got to the *Albatross*, the only place that offered him protection. He leaped onto the gangway, not caring who was aboard, got into his cabin, drew the hatchway curtains, plopped onto the unmade bunk and covered his face with the pillow. All he wanted was for time to pass and for the *Albatross* to set sail once and for all.

After a while he heard some steps on deck and some voices, and the motor of a launch that was approaching by the bow. Pepone's voice, giving Andrea instructions to help her jump. Leonardus calling him, *Martín, get out of the cabin already*. And Chiqui's, *Martín, come on, we're going to the Blue Cave, we've got food and wine, hurry up.*

He would have preferred not to answer, to stay shut in until sailing time; but in any case they would have found him and forced him to go, and, with no pretext for refusing an insistent demand that he could do nothing against, he went out on deck and let himself down over the gunwale until his feet were in the launch.

Tom and the two mechanics were arriving on board at that moment laden with toolboxes, and long before Pepone had moved away they had already begun to dismantle the deck in order to get into the entrails of the engine.

He looked at his watch, and it was only two in the afternoon.

"How long will it take them to fix the problem?" he asked as a greeting.

"Two or three hours," said Leonardus. "Between one thing and another I don't think we'll sail before seven or eight. But we'll be able to get to Antalya and take the taxi that will be waiting for us in time to get to Marmaris, though we may not get any sleep, get on the first plane to Istanbul and not miss the connection either to Barcelona or to London.

"Don't be in such a hurry," said Andrea, who had sat down beside him. "You haven't left the island yet, and a lot of things can still happen."

He heard her perfectly, though he made her a sign to let her know that the sound of the engine had drowned out her words. Andrea responded to him with an incredulous grimace, pulled her hat down to her eyebrows, and turned toward Pepone, who, as he was moving away from the *Albatross* and making headway out of the harbor, recounted in a shouting voice the adventures that the town had gone through that night.

"It was the old woman," he bellowed, "they found the dead dog in one of the streets on the hill, opposite the garden where she goes every afternoon to pick herbs for her remedies and ointments. And she hasn't denied it. In fact, she hasn't even responded to the priest's accusations, and she hasn't even said how she got blood stains on her skirt."

So the one-eyed man hasn't talked, Martín thought. *We'll leave and it'll be over. What could they do to the old woman? And whatever they do, what would it matter to her? She hardly knows anything.*

"If they don't lock her up for that it will be for something else. They've been looking for her for a long time," Pepone continued. "As a matter of fact she doesn't do anyone any harm, but the priest has it in for her. Whatever happens in the town, it's her fault." With a kick he put the engine cover, which the jiggling had displaced, back in place, and went on: "They were going to kill her yesterday. First they followed her on her errands but then they let her go, but when after midnight the soldiers found the dog killed with stones, this time a larger group got together and they started to look for her as if they were out hunting. They found her almost at daybreak, huddled under a fallen dome among the ruins of the old monastery. She was crying without stopping her singsong, and she was wiping her tears with her skirt. Two women grabbed her and pushed her out of there, and she, maybe because she was numb from the time that she had spent in that posture, could not stand up and fell in the middle of the ring of people that had formed around her. People started to shout at her and somebody hit her with a stick. They got excited over that, or maybe because in this town nothing ever happens to get us out of the lethargy and the boredom, one of the women threw herself on her: *witch,* she called her, *witchier than a witch.* The others

yelled too, and one man, the one from the tobacco shop, threw a stone at her. At that moment the corporal, the chief of the detachment, came and had it out pretty roughly with the people, who scattered in a moment. Otherwise they kill her."

"You were there?" Leonardus asked.

"Of course I was there, that's how I know. But I didn't throw any stones at the old woman. I have nothing against her; I've seen her for years, mumbling and walking around the streets and digging in garbage piles. She doesn't do anyone any harm."

He put his cap on firmly and went on: "They took her to the police station, and at least one night in her life she slept under a roof. Though she doesn't sleep. They say she stood the whole night and hasn't stopped singing and crying.

"What will happen to her now?" asked Chiqui, though she did not wait for the answer and went to the scant portion of the deck that remained free in the bow to lie down, smear oil on herself and sunbathe.

"They say that the priest will judge her and that they'll use the occasion to put her in jail, so that she doesn't walk any more. She's very old already, no one knows how old, and she's been searching for her sons for more than forty years. That's why she was crying, they say, because they wouldn't let her keep on searching."

Until dinnertime there was no further talk about the old woman. It was Giorgios himself who did it, though there was not much for him to add to Pepone's version. There were more people in the restaurant that evening; two green bulbs were lit in the virgin grapevine arbor, and it seemed livelier because of the sailors' voices from the deck of the Rhodes steamer. It was only eight o'clock but the night was already black.

They had returned from the Blue Cave late, detained by Pepone's ghostly stories and by that bath that Chiqui wanted to take, in spite of everything, in the cold water inside the cave, but the sudden and precocious end-of-summer sunset surprised them only when they were already going to dine at Giorgios'. They had time to disembark by daylight, leap onto the *Albatross*, cross the deck while avoiding the grease spots left by the mechanics, and sit down in the pool to have a drink before nightfall.

Andrea had remained on board and Martín, who would have wanted to do the same, could barely keep up with what was being talked about. And when Tom showed up half an hour later and told them that everything was in order and ready for sailing, he left his yogurt dessert half-eaten and, not waiting for Chiqui to finish her dinner, got up and paid no attention to the shouts of Leonardus, who had suddenly lost his hurry and wanted to open another bottle of wine. He went to the *Albatross* with Tom in order to wait. The ten minutes that Chiqui and Leonardus took to get back felt endless, though he made no show of impatience over it or over the slow pace at which the final errands and payments and farewells were made. He made an effort not to get consumed nor to hear that voice of bad luck whispering in his ear that anything could still happen at the last moment. And when at last Pepone, on the pier, untied the moorings, and the clatter of the chain over the bow told him that he could stop looking at the alley where he had expected all night that the priest or the corporal or perhaps the one-eyed man with his wallet would show up, because the *Albatross* was moving away from land, he hardly found any relief for his anxiety.

VII

“Verrà la notte
e avrà i tuoi occhi”
(Night will come and will have your eyes)

Cesare Pavese

Contrary to the distant and decisive attitude that he had promised himself that he would maintain and had adopted since the previous night and all through the day, and perhaps moved by a fear or a premonition that had not abandoned him since Andrea had shown up on deck dressed and made up, or perhaps even earlier, when she had pronounced those enigmatic words in the Blue Cave, he put his head through the hatchway. The *Albatross*, with almost no rolling, was making headway in the night over the slight undulation of the waters on the high sea. The stillness was complete; distant stars, dimmed by the faint light trembling at the top of the mainmast, did nothing but increase the immensity of their distance. The continuous vibration of the engine absorbed the sound of the waves and the beating of the air on the rigging, and the monotony of its rhythm drew a straight line in the endless darkness of the sea. Martín knew where Andrea was but had to squint in order to find her in the bow, wrapped up in herself, her legs covered with a shawl. She might well have seen him, because she had been in the same position and in the same place since before dinner and her eyesight would have adapted to the gradual darkening and eventually to the diminished light of the night, but she neither looked up nor moved. Her head was down, and when the light crossed her face in a sudden rocking, he saw on her cheek a trickle of tears that were shiny but dry, like the trail left behind by snails.

“Andrea, come to bed. It’s late,” he said in a whisper.

He was sure that she had heard him, but just in case his words had been drowned out by the engine, he repeated, louder, “Andrea, come on.”

More than wishing that she would come to the cabin, Martín wanted to oblige her to leave that attitude, to say some word or other if only to cancel and deny those other words that, in the silence, had increased and distorted the threat that the echo had pressed against the moist and viscous walls of that Wagnerian stage set. A space of outsize proportions and almost as phantasmagoric as the one that Pepone had described to them with pompous adjectives and eloquent gesticulations once he had finished telling the story of the woman in rags. The Blue Cave, he said, is a bewitched place that still holds mysteries yet to be uncovered and fragments of history yet to be researched. “It is said,” and he would bend down, lowering his voice as he slowed down so that his words would be heard better, “it is said that because of some strange phenomenon that no scientist has yet been able to explain, the water contained in the cave has the highest known salt concentration: no birds or fish live there, no crustaceans nest in its sandbanks, no snails or oysters or limpets hang on to its rocks. The water is viscous and dark, leaving the air still with coldness, a coldness that’s compact and doesn’t penetrate, but stays on the surface of the skin like a bandage and changes the roaring of the sea outside into a dull echo of a giant seashell, into a velvety, enveloping sound, which encloses the space even more emphatically than the very rocks that make it up.

The vault and the smooth walls, sweaty and oozing, of an intense and dark blue, made iridescent by the beam of light that is concentrated on the monumental horizontal ridge of the entrance, were prisons where the Turks took their prisoners to die. They would leave them on the slippery platforms of the cave with shackles on their feet, and when, after two or three weeks during which they had closed off the way out with their ships, they sailed back to the coast, only silence and quiet were left inside. It is said," and he slowed down even more as he lowered his voice, as if to reveal a secret that had been hidden for years, "that they are still there, intact, on the bottom of the waters, with no living being ever having come close enough to gnaw at their faces or bodies or to tear at their clothes; and if, on a stormy night, lighting falls on the east at the very moment when a wave recedes with the same force as when it hits and leaves the entrance clear, there happens a moment of such clear transparency that it reaches the deepest cracks, and if a fisherman lost in the storm happens to see this miracle, he will see an army of men and women swaying underwater, held down by the weight of their shackles, with their hair and arms floating with the current, and their eyes still open with the shock of their last moment."

"That's enough!" Chiqui, who had joined the others to hear the story, had shrieked. Andrea, on the other hand, had not seemed upset, and when, a little later, Pepone, taking advantage of the low tide, had slipped the launch into the cave with a stroke of an oar, Martín had felt for the first time that disquiet, which he then confused with a new onset of the same fear of returning to harbor and being found out, but even so he had not taken his eyes off her. Andrea had looked at the iridescent blue with extreme coldness, unperturbed and unsurprised, and had smiled ironically at Chiqui's shouts before she dived into the water, shouts that echoed on the blue, moist and ghostly vaults, as Pepone had said. And while the others played with the light and the voices and moved around with the help of the oars and the boat hook, looking in vain for the transparency of the water that was to reveal to them the secret of its dark cavities, she, in a moment of confusion, had placed herself at his back. He did not remember exactly the words she whispered but he knew her well enough to know that, though not explicitly, she had come to tell him, and not because she believed it but because she wanted it so and had decided that it would be so, that our fate is sealed and that by an interconnected series of inevitable mistakes we make our own destiny until we gradually attain the certainty that there is no salvation or redemption, not even rectification. And he would have been unable to find the boundary between where advice ended where the threat began, as she added: "And I'll see to it that it will be so."

She had not said another word, neither in the cave nor on Pepone's launch on the way back to port. She had boarded the *Albatross* – this time helped by Tom, who was finishing the cleanup of the footsteps and the black grease spots left by the mechanics – and shut herself up in the cabin. A little over half an hour later she had shown up on deck with her sandals in her hand, wearing a white dress that she had not put on during the entire voyage and a necklace of large amber beads that Martín had never seen, her hair not pulled back, wavy and bulky, with neither a kerchief nor a hat, held back only by the blue elastic band of the glasses that, with her made-up eyes behind the lenses, gave her look an expression that was more innocent but more self-assured, like the ratification of the unappealable sentence that she had left suspended in the Blue Cave.

Upon seeing her Leonardus, who was sitting on the aft bench while clinking the ice in his glass, smiled one could still see the pink tones that at summer's end become fixed in the horizon in late afternoon and delay the twilight, and by that light the white of her dress acquired phosphorescent tones over the matte quality of the dusk and, with the calm of a slow-flying bird, left the glass on the table, carefully removed Chiqui's head from his knees, stood up, approached Andrea who had stopped at the

top of the stairway and without taking her hand or grasping her by the arms or shoulders he gave her a superficial, though long and pressing, kiss on the lips. She let him do it and if she shut her eyes, thought Martín as he watched the scene without understanding it, it was not so much to concentrate on what was happening but precisely to remain outside it.

Then, not looking at anyone, her eyelids still half-closed, she passed by his side with a partially recovered nimbleness, picked up a linen shawl that she had forgotten on the bench, and, as though it had been an obstacle overcome on the road she was proposing to travel, she disappeared towards the bow and did not move from there. She accepted the whisky that Tom had brought her then, and another after dinner, but she responded only with a vague gesture of refusal to the invitation to go to Giorgios' to have something before setting sail – *it will be a long night*, they had told her, *we'll be sailing until dawn* – and did not lift her head when, with darkness already set in, the engine was started and Tom went to the bow to weigh anchor, not even to look at how the scant lights of the pier – which, even before they had left the estuary of the harbor and began to make headway towards Antalya, had crumbled as they dissolved their own reflection in a mist of shimmering light – were growing distant.

Until dinnertime Martín had not realized that the negative attitude shown by Andrea, who after the Blue Cave seemed to live for herself alone and to be in another world, bothered him as much as the urge to get away from that setting, where any person could be an accuser, any shadow could be a menace. Leonardus and Chiqui had not asked her what was happening, as if it were quite normal for her not to eat or talk, not even to respond when asked, nor had Leonardus, at dinnertime, given any explanation of his strange behavior of that afternoon. When Giorgios, the café owner, had joined them in order to tell them once more about the pursuit of the old woman *a rare event in this place that is lost at the end of the world*, he said Martín, fearful as he was, did not attend to Chiqui or converse with her because he wanted nothing more than that dinner would end as soon as possible so that they could sail once and for all. But even so, from his place under the mulberry trees of the terrace, he kept his eyes fixed on the white spot that was the prow of the *Albatross*, a sight he would not have let go of for anything in the world.

At last they decided to set sail. Seated on deck, the three of them watched as Tom was beginning the maneuvering and the men on shore were loosening the moorings. The couple had come out once again to the balcony. They had turned on a light inside the house and now, backlit, they looked like shadow pantomimes of themselves by the humble twenty- or thirty-watt lightbulb, and as the stern left the pier, Leonardus, standing, laughingly raised his glass to their health. They did not seem to notice, nor did they change the direction of their gaze; motionless, they followed the course of the *Albatross*, strangers to the destruction to which the distance was slowly submitting them. They vanished amid the darkness and Tom, who was to be at the helm and to be relieved by Leonardus at three in the morning, put on his headphones, went to the refrigerator for his first Coke, got back behind the wheel and set the prow to the open sea. Chiqui, her face bored and claiming to be sleepy, stood up and pulled Leonardus with her with one hand. But before entering the cabin she turned towards Martín, who had followed them, and said:

"Don't forget to get your wife down from the deck, sweetheart."

"I won't," he replied without showing his reluctance, but he did not go. He closed the door behind him and remained standing with the lights out, not knowing what to do. His impatience for setting sail had taken away his sleepiness and left his mouth dry. He couldn't sleep and didn't feel like reading, and though they were on the high seas and out of danger, this fact had not eased the strange anxiety that gripped him and kept him alert. After a short while, from the other side of the partition the voice of Callas began to be heard, and above the notes of "Poveri fiori" the laughter and the knocking that had

drained Andrea's patience for so many nights. And, on checking the time and realizing that it was already ten o'clock, as if this had been the pretext he had been waiting for, he got into the hatchway in order to call her.

He repeated her name for a third time before he lifted himself with his hand and jumped on deck. The floor was damp and he had to hold on so as not to slip. But the stuffiness had barely let up; the *Albatross* was dragging the heat like a dead weight, like an incandescent spider web in which it was caught and from which it could not get out even on the high seas.

Andrea's face was leaning on her shoulder and her hand still held the empty glass. Martín had to repress a show of tenderness but he knew that at that moment he had to be cautious because everything he might say or do would have to be accounted for, just as he was sure that one way or another he would have to pay for those three calls from the hatchway and even for his silent presence there, now, if only for that brief hesitation in the struggle that they had been settling since the previous night. He would say nothing, aware that so many hours of contention and meditation needed only a spark in order to blow up, and he didn't want in any way to get lost in arguments that would only weaken the determination he had taken, and that, until he would be able to separate from her, the only thing he needed in order to prevail was silence. And since she likewise would not get out of her reserve, he would try to get her to go back to the cabin with him.

But not even five minutes had gone by, nor had any word passed between them, when Andrea, giving up the aloofness that had been her armor since before settling down on deck, had launched her monologue of recriminations and accusations with such surprising energy that Martín – without responding even once to those *Won't you say anything?, Have you no heart?, Won't you even bother to respond?* or *Don't you even know what to say?* with which she would every so often interrupt her extended harangue in order to give momentum to her crescendo of grievances – was on the verge of turning around and abandoning her there, to the night, to her somber premonitions and to the unleashing of her insults, and leaving her alone under the dark and distant sky, with no interlocutor, no audience, no victim. But he didn't move from the deck, perhaps because somehow he was hoping that the threat and the danger that he had noticed in the air would be diluted in the endless chain of litanies which – he knew it well – were dictated to her by the resentment over not being to change to her liking a decision that his silence confirmed minute by minute. *No, it isn't that*, he said to himself after a while, *it's fear, it's fear that's making me stand here imperturbably, fear of what she might do, fear of what she could be plotting, fear of appearing to her as a coward, a simpleton, a hick*. A ferocious fear of that woman, who nonetheless had managed to convince him that the relationship that joined them was basically of a free nature, even more, it was in itself the example of the choice of one's destiny which, by some magical chance, they had in common. Or perhaps it might be he who had himself clothed that fear with the trappings of the magic and the fascination of those first months that were to determine the rest of his life; fear disguised as devotion, submission and even love, fear of acknowledging that he had been incapable of maintaining the passion on which he had meant to build his life forever, the same fear as on that night in New York, when she came to offer him her whole life as he had begged her so many times that of confessing to her that the Greek girl was waiting for him in her apartment on the 14th floor; fear of telling her that he no longer remembered if he loved her as he had then; fear of telling her to her face that it had been she who had sent him far away, fear of unveiling the mystery of her sudden and absolute renunciation, fear of being nobody without her, fear of mediocrity, of failure, of loneliness, fear of

everything, fear of fear itself, and fear, as he had thought on that already distant afternoon on that black-pebble beach, of being, after all is said and done, just a kid.

"Wretch!"

The word had come apart from her speech and floated in the air, conjuring the cloud of obsessions that, like a swarm of flies, would not leave his mind in peace. "Wretch!" Andrea repeated and roughly moved the blanket off her knees, uncovering her bare, restless and trembling legs and feet; she then slid over the deck until she stopped at a pulley. Martín took a step in order to pick up the blanket and she, thinking that he had decided to leave, stood up shakily, frightened by the idea of now staying alone with her rancor, grabbed him forcefully by his shirt sleeve and, in a tone that would been a shout if her voice had not come out so hoarse, wasted and somber from the humidity, or perhaps deliberately forced so as to underline the non-deferrable quality that she wanted to give to her command, said to him: "No, you won't go now, now you'll hear everything that I have to tell you." There was fire and hatred in her blue gaze, and there was even more brilliance in her pupils than under the sun, more steel in the intensity that in the lenses of her glasses caught and multiplied the twinkles of the light on the mast, only to throw them back into the black night, like signals of extraterrestrial beings, signals of emergency, of danger, of attack.

"So much success and so much pride, and you'd never have come to anything if it hadn't been for me. Or did you ever believe that you had achieved it all by yourself?" She did not stop but took a breath in order to go on. "It was to me, not to you, that Leonardus sent the contract. Did you notice that? No, you never notice anything, you always live convinced that everything is owed to you. You think you're the king of the world, adored for your merits, for your successes. Wretch!" she repeated. "Wretch!"

Wrapped in the white tremor of her dress, she had moved away from the bow railing and leaned on the lifeline, lifting her head toward Martín, who, holding on to the stay with one hand, tried to keep his stunned body calm. Where had she pulled that word from? Where did that woman hide such a determination to hurt him, which, like the amber necklace, he had never seen?

"I'm not moved by the desire to annihilate you," she said in response to his astonishment, "but I want you to know that you won't be able to do anything without me, because if I've managed to make you into a rich and famous man I can just as well get you to be ostracized, so that your name, your face and your work will disappear into an abyss as deep as though time had passed over you."

"Let's go to sleep," he said, as one talks to someone who is momentarily out of his mind from pain, and he repeated, this time in a flat tone of voice so as not to irritate her even more, "Let's go to sleep."

But her voice rose over the drilling of the engine:

"Don't you believe me? Do you think I'm lying? It isn't that easy to make it big, no one does it in such a short time. Don't you forget it: you owe it to me."

"Maybe I owe it to Leonardus," Martín acknowledged.

"To me," she insisted. "It's because of me that Leonardus offered to get you back to Spain. Because of me, not because of your gifts as a filmmaker, or that ridiculous short that was your whole résumé. Because of me, only me," she repeated, though by now she could barely speak because some tears were struggling to gush out, tears that, with a strange grimace of her upper lip, she managed to hold back in her pupils, where they remained suspended like a prism increasing the thickness of her lenses and making her momentarily short-sighted.

Nevertheless, standing in the bow she seemed to have forgotten her dizziness and regained the composure and stability with which she had moved aboard the *Manuela*. She was not leaning now, her feet were firmly planted on the moist deck, and with a reflex motion recovered from a lost memory she

made her body sway with rhythm and counter-rhythm of the *Albatross*; her head held high and her haughty bearing showed the roundness of her insult like a huge figurehead that had come apart from the prow of a mythical sailing ship.

"He did it because of me, because only under that condition did I agree to go to New York when Carlos filed for separation..."

At that moment, the very moment when she began her sentence, what he had always known became manifest. He didn't need to hear exact account of the things that happened and that made her end up with him, nor did he now need to know the details. He finally saw the husband take on his role, which had nothing to do with the one that he, and she as well, had assigned to him, she in order to round out the grandness and truth of her passion, he in order to let himself get carried away by her once more. And not because her words might tell him anything, since they told him nothing just as they had told him nothing that first time when he heard her talking as she was seated at the table in her beach house, but because the song of her voice, soured by hostility, like the singsong of the old woman on his walk, had strangely become more explicit than the words and contributed by itself the exact solution to the old suspicions and conjectures; hidden and compressed inside themselves, they were now becoming revealed through rancor the way Chinese paper balls expand in contact with water and only there acquire their full shape and their true dimension. And he then seemed to understand that her endless weeping had not been weeping from sadness or of one who can't struggle against a passion that forces him to take decisions that necessarily must hurt another loved being, nor of being torn apart by having to decide between two equally possessive loves, nor of one who is consumed by longing for children left along the way, but the weeping of a loser, the weeping of someone who miscalculated and fell into his own net or trap, of one who would never again find rest or comfort because he knows that there is no turning back from a mistake, the weeping that Adam must have shed when expelled from paradise.

One need only take a bus at a different stop and at a different time for the face of the city in which we live to change, and now, from this unexpected angle, he barely recognized his environment, nor the strange figure who had presided over it. So much so that he wondered, horrified, how he could have lived for years with someone in whose eyes he had been incapable of determining the transparency of the deception, nor the spontaneity of the caution or the guile or the premeditation, not ever daring to cross the threshold of uncertainty.

"Are you surprised?" Andrea was saying with defiance in her voice and in her bearing, much firmer, even much more erect, perhaps to make up for the slip she had made in her speech, and she went on, emphasizing it even more: "He was the one who wanted the separation, of course," and she now said it knowingly. "He was the one who, when I came back from my first trip to New York, accused with me of desertion and adultery. Not me – why in the world would I? – he was the one who got the evidence and got a hold of the documents that proved my guilt. And he won the case. In those days men had an easy time of it in the courts. And now too," she added to herself. "And not because he cared about my adultery but because he wanted to go off with another woman." Her tone had lost all trace of aggressiveness, and she said in a whisper: "He fell in love with one of those girls who suck men's brains." And at that point she finally dropped her head and her body lost its firmness, defeated by the wrong that even now, after so many years, was still lacerating her wounded heart, but she went on: "He brought witnesses of all of our meetings. Desertion, that's what he accused me of, bad behavior, adultery. It was all very easy for him, he was a lawyer, and we were still under the laws of the Church and the dictatorship. Besides, he had already made arrangements with the political forces that were preparing to

take over. Look at what this liberal man that you and I know turned out to be. What could I do?" and she added, as though Martín were no longer her opponent: "Everybody took his side, everybody, even my own parents who to this day haven't forgiven me."

A gentle breeze had risen and a certain cooling intention could be felt in the air. The *Albatross* purred and moved quietly ahead over the dark waters and in Leonardus's cabin the diva's limpid song repeated her lament over and over.

Andrea covered her mouth with one hand as though she wanted to contain a sob or hide her face, and she made the glass that she held in her other hand bump into the stanchion.

Martín spoke only in order to break the silence, to take the edge off her words and to make them both forget so much humiliation, because in reality he wanted to have said nothing.

"Maybe what bothered Carlos, or your family, since they were friends and had common interests, was that when they believed that it was all over between us you went to see me in New York."

Andrea removed the hand from her face and looked at him with disdain: "Nobody felt offended by that," she almost shouted. "I don't even know if they found out." And she added arrogantly: "What they never forgave was that I went with Leonardus."

A metallic jab, more penetrating than his anxieties before his high-school exams in Sigüenza, more painful than the emptiness over his father's death when he understood that he would never give him the words of recognition and support that he had been hoping for since childhood, more than his tears on the plane bound for New York, even more than when his second script was not accepted in the competition, not even receiving an honorable mention, and they could not even return the original to him because it had been lost and they had no record of it, more than when Andrea told him that she would never have children again. He then realized the nature of love is so volatile, so little definable that it is subject to all kinds of confusions; everything is disguised as love, envy, self-love, pride, the craving for success, jealousy, sex, work, convenience and history, and love itself is confused with itself, as if it leaked out or slipped out and changed so that no one could ever hold it or handle it, as if its very essence were in transformation and everything could be love and at the same time everything could be not love. But it was a feeling for a mere moment, a sudden flash, and almost exactly at the time he felt it he whispered:

"You fool!"

He let go of the stay and started on his way back to the cabin, this time not through the hatchway but by the starboard handrail. She threw herself back, frightened; she raised the hand that was still holding the glass, and, more to defend herself from a reaction that she believed to have guessed than to add violence to her harassment, and in any case driven, without knowing it, by the inertia of the vehemence that had led her to it, she threw it blindly at Martín. He, perhaps drawn by the angle of the glass tearing through the air, or perhaps in order to see her one last time before submerging himself in the torment of disappointment and hate, turned his head backwards with a short twist of his neck, which was truncated by the jolt of the glass against his eyebrow. He was not fazed by the impact nor by the destiny of the object, which, once its first momentum was lost, rebounded from the hatchway beam, rolled over the deck and was submerged in the murmur and the darkness of the night. He moved his hand to his forehead to ease the blow and completed the walk he had begun, longer than expected so as not to bump into the chock. But he did not have time to look at his wife. Had he done so he would have seen the panic in her eyes, panic perhaps due to understanding that she had overstepped the boundary beyond which no return was possible like the cornered criminal who has indiscriminately fired all his ammunition, convinced that he would never run out, and observes with horror that he hasn't a single bullet left and realizes too late

that this last burst of fire has done nothing but change the nature of things, overstepping the threshold of what he might have yet been able to control and going well beyond what he might have been able to change, and, defeated, realizes that his time is up and there is no more hope in the same way that a string that been overtightened by a trice breaks in two, or that after a certain repetition a caress becomes torment, or the way love that goes beyond its limit becomes hate, resentment and pain. And he also would have witnessed how at that moment her waist bumped into the lifeline by the force of the backlash and her feet were losing their footing or sliding forward because of the dampness of the deck, and as she stretched out her arms trying to hang on to a stay or a shroud, they became lost in the emptiness having no more use than that of displacing the body's poise and being in the end added to the weight of the head. Or perhaps what was lost was not so much the concatenation of forces and effects of her movements as the dread in her eyes when she turned around in search of something to hold on to and found the emptiness that the dark abyss of her vertigo had taken on, and its irresistible and unappealable call. And when, at last, he took his hand off his eyebrow and finished the turning of his neck in Andrea's direction, she was no longer there.

Not even when, much later, he was able to think again about what had happened did that moment awaken any feeling other than that of resentment over the offense, so brutally and intentionally inflicted that it could not, nor would ever, supplant the brief shudder of the *Albatross* as she freed herself of the body of the woman whom he had loved so much, a meaningless denouement for an outraged conscience that was concentrated on itself, closed to the outside. An absurdity.

And yet she had been there a second before, there, almost within arm's reach, standing barefoot in the bow, pathetic in the useless triumph of her proclamation. There he had seen her for the last time and there he still saw her now, her corporeality lost, transparent like a spirit, intangible like a dream. There she was swaying to the rhythm of the boat when she had said "It's Leonardus, it's always been Leonardus, since I've had the use of reason, the rest of you haven't even existed, I only love Leonardus." Yes, this is what she had said, and then, suddenly shaken by her own words, or by the useless "You fool!" she had thrown the object at him and then had fallen or had jumped – could it have been like that? – giving shape to the threat that had been in the air from the time she had spoken in the Blue Cave. And, paralyzed, not yet by fear but by the spite and resentment that at last were not only showing up but combining with other, previous ones that he had never acknowledged up to then and taking shape and scope as the tide laps the sand on the beach ever farther, he was not aware that her scream had been cut off. He could not even isolate the impact of the body falling into the water from the beating of the sea against the sides of the boat, nor hear the whirlwind swept by the swell that the *Albatross* raised as she moved.

The return to reality through the door of fear, which is maintained only in petty details, came later. He noticed then that there was no one at the helm and the ship was advancing in obedience to a previously given command, while he made out the fleeting image of the lad with the headphones, clumsily insinuating the rhythms of distant islands. The light in the cabin deck, the Coca-Cola. He lifted his head above the hatchway door. The voice of Callas was still sounding amid stifled laughter, and they were still playing and laughing, strangers to the brutality that had picked him as protagonist and her as victim. No one had heard anything. *No investigation*, he thought, anticipating events even before having taken a decision that once again time would have to take for him, *would ever determine what had happened. There will be no witnesses*, he thought with a steely lucidity in his mind, *no one will be able to accuse me of what I didn't do.*

A silent flock of seagulls flew away almost at sea level, as though someone had thrown garbage overboard, like tiny white spots suspended over the water, like fleeting lights in the chill of the night.

But fear dislocates and invalidates every intention, every plan, every strategy, and never becomes the accomplice of the one whom it grips. Martín let himself fall on deck with so much excitement in his body that it was duplicated in the shaking of his knees and countered the rhythm of his heart, and in the stifling sensation in his face emerging from the opaque heat that enveloped him. His temples ached and he touched his eyebrows: he felt the viscous touch and, as his hand neared his eyes, he saw the dark moisture of a drop of blood. *She could have died,* he thought. *Died? She is going to die.* He came back to reality. *I have a minute to call for help. I have to do it. Now, right now. If I don't do it I'll be a murderer. Now. Now.* But he didn't move. He remained waiting for a split within him that would spur him to shout. A dull thud rose over the beginning of *Poveri fiori,* which was repeating for the n-th time: the refrigerator door as it shut. Then the thuds on the steps of the stairway.

If I don't shout right now I'll become a murderer, he had said a moment ago. Tom was sitting down again behind the wheel but he did not call him. *She's gone,* he thought as he realized that that part of him was refusing to call for help, *she's gone, without any noise, without anyone finding out, gone the way a puff of smoke is gone.*

Sweat was dripping down his forehead and his body felt icy in contrast with the boiling blood that was hammering in his temples, his wrists, his legs, until it became a compulsive shudder that kept him from sitting up. He grabbed the mast with one hand, and with the other wiped the sweat that was dripping down his face, mixed with the humidity, unable to stop the trembling that made his teeth chatter. He sought the hatchway with his feet because he was blinded *I'm blind and she's dead,* he thought and gropingly put down his legs and let himself fall onto the bunk. The clash of his body against the mattress frightened him and he then heard the crash of her body against the sea, which he had not heard, and her truncated shout.

He tried to cover up with the sheet but it burned on his skin like wool in the sun. He took the half-empty bottle of whisky from the self and took a long swig, then another and yet another until he drained it. In the confusion of his image-less thought, mysterious shadows, heard or remembered words were spluttering and pushing like lava from a volcano sliding down a mountainside. Something in his memory, something that his will had covered up for years, was struggling to get out: vague indications, pretexts for strange absences, trips with the children never sufficiently cleared up, silences about them, the apartment she had received from the parents that she never saw again... *For whom had she suffered, for me or for him? To whom had that woman been faithful, whom had she trusted?* She had lied to each and every one, including herself, busy only with accommodating events to the personality she had created, with manipulating them so as to construct with them a tale that she was the first to believe. Whether what she had said was true was now of the least importance. For the first time he realized how real intentions can be, as much as or more than the facts that they are meant to cover or invent. *Because it can't be true,* he reflected, *she said it only to hurt me.* But the suspicion gave him no comfort; it only increased the resentment and hatred toward that being that was sliding and blending around his mind, and of whom all that was left now were her stammering between tears and the metallic shine of her blue gaze.

He stood up and went into the bathroom. He turned on the light; he barely recognized the white, sweaty, marble-like face that looked at him from the mirror. *Renunciation,* he concluded a second before he vomited in a single stream all the alcohol he had just swallowed mixed with the remains of his dinner, *doesn't work as proof of love, all it does is sap the very vitality, strength and energy, and the very identity*

of whoever believes that by renouncing he has raised himself to the category of a higher being and made the other his debtor for such elevated grace for the rest of his life. His face was now flushed. *You idiot!* he yelled at the Martín he had facing him: *She didn't even give anything up, not willingly and certainly not for you!*

He cleaned the bathroom carefully, taking his time with the little spots that the vomit had left on the floor, and he stopped wiping it over and over with a rag he had found under the washbasin only when he noticed that the noise of the water pump was increasing and he was afraid of alerting the others. He then rinsed his face and hands and looked at himself again. The mirror gave him back a dark-skinned face with a two-day beard not matching either his shaving of that afternoon or that smooth, beardless skin that had so drawn Andrea's attention with big dark eyes fixed on his with a questioning air: *what are you looking at? what are you looking at, jerk? You haven't figured out anything, you've never suspected anything, you're an idiot. For years you've been an idiot of a dummy.* He fell silent, clouded by those eyes, almost hypnotized, and remained that way as he had so many times at the zenith of the reconciliations stopped in Andrea's vague gaze in order to liquefy love in her and to get lost in the static expression of her pupils until all meaning was gone from the face and the dark, moist hair over the forehead, and in the prolonged immobility thought stopped for a moment and the face merged with the content-less shadows that were gnawing at his mind. Only a moment of relief.

Who knew the truth? Maybe everybody in the world, maybe I'm just a clown who is applauded so that in his vanity he doesn't figure out what's happening and keeps playing, unknowingly, the role that has been assigned to him. We'll never know what we are to others, he repeated again, *we'll die without knowing our official image, the woof and warp that they all weave until they form the personality that we walk with and live with and carry without really understanding what it's made of.* He went back to the cabin and let himself fall on the bunk. He reached out with his hand and stretched it on the sheet. A wide bed, as extensive as a tableland that from now on he could go over endlessly without obstacles, looking for hidden pitfalls and anthills, and he let himself be enveloped by the strange placidity that was spreading through his body, as if vomiting had freed him forever from some old dead weight. He would no longer awaken with the sensation of another's breathing beside him, a body submerged in its own abyss, leaving him only the carcass; he would no longer hear those noises of an absent life, opaque, attempts at snoring like the puffing of a sleeping animal, without understanding what was inside it. Nor would he have to sail. He hated sailing, he hated people, he hated his work, he hated himself playing at being important, acting and hoarding as if it were true that we build for eternity.

He did not hear the beating of the waves against the hull of the *Albatross*, nor did he hear reproduced the scream that he had not heard or the crash that because of a beating of the sea would never burden his memory. But his sense of smell betrayed him, because, as he restlessly turned over, the smell of the pillow implanted once more the presence he thought was gone. And then he wept, the way a widow weeps disconsolately over the man who had mistreated her, for death transforms the body of the absent one, and without witnesses to contradict or correct it, fixes forever in the survivor's memory a story that will redeem both of them, and the death of the beloved then becomes a death that is more death than any other death, while in reality it is merely same death as everybody's and everything's, only at different moments. But he put aside the image that was being repeated in the abstraction of a time without rhythm or hands in order to leave his mind blank. Nonetheless he was capable of seeing how she had come out of the water after the fall. At first she must have thought that the *Albatross* had stopped and somebody had dived into the water in order to save her, and she almost must have let herself die in an attempt to

aggravate the situation in order to make his guilt heavier and more obvious, when she must have realized how vain the attempt was when calm set in again and the engine of the *Albatross*, devoured by darkness, moved away and vanished in the distance, a shadow among shadows following a course that she could not make out because the lenses of her glasses were wet and her eyes were stinging. She must have understood then that he was going to let her die. And she probably screamed with all her strength while she moved her arms, her body enveloped in stupor and powerlessness. Perhaps it took her as long to understand it as it took her to accommodate to the darkness. Every so often a stray beating sound that was carried by the wind or that might slither through the hidden currents of the sea to her legs and sharpen her senses among her sobs and shouts so she might better know in which direction to call for help. Until she finally stopped hearing it.

She then remained at the mercy of the empty spaces of the world that existed by themselves, without witnesses, endless steppes by moonlight or in the dark, mountain rivers that rushed down the cliffs in the silence of solitude, open magnitudes of ocean before sunrises and sunsets, nights and days since the beginning of time without a human eye to give account of them, just like that piece of sea that had taken her in until time would devour her skin and her memory. Since we have to die, we are already dead. Perhaps at that moment she would see, coming over the horizon, the quarter-moon as it had surprised him the previous night, and the atmosphere would take on a tenuous light and the lines of the deep-blue horizon would appear. Oh God! Who knows the insides of our own selves? We are nuclei that contain potentially all the possibilities of development, the whole range of behaviors and reactions, all the gifts of nature as well as all of her imperfections and monstrosities. Eternity will be what awaits me before I die. The dawn; will the dawn ever come? or when will death come? My strength will fail me and I will drink water and drown. Thought is succeeded by the dread of absolute solitude enveloped and imprisoned in the black water, viscous as in the Blue Cave and the endless vault above it, distant but precise, with the deep sound of the sea's movement reproducing her own slow and overlapping howls, layers and layers of murmurs, explosions of tiny waves that die in themselves as they incorporate into the global movement their own roar dissolved in the other, dull, distant and close at once, like the one of a gigantic seashell. And the abyss beneath the water, deeper than that of empty space, deeper yet and more impenetrable, dark, compact, full of life, sighted and sentient beings that fight and swarm, move or rest. Whole universes under her bare feet, their soles white against the opaqueness and the uniformity of the color of life they will see them and they will run to bite them as they bite and eat one another in order to survive, or will they wait for their flesh to have the quality of death and pounce on it only when the end comes? She will be afraid and dizzy without needing to lean over the abyss. She will vomit as I did and she will drink water. Her lips will turn purple, as will her arms and legs; white will be her soles and palms and nails, like her face and her transparent teeth. And the cramps will come before thought. What fraction of one's life is remembered before dying? She will remember nothing because she won't accept that she's dying, she won't want to die. She won't know that the last moment has come when she misses the sax of that guy on the little terrace in New York, just as when she arrived in New York she missed the noises of her apartment in Barcelona, of her house in Cadaqués, the echoes of the children's voices; will she miss now what her life should have been, nostalgia for a future that she is not to live, or nostalgia for what is lost, for passing friends, as surprises pass and memories vanish only to be replaced by more recent or older ones? Or will there now appear, like a final accusation, the frightened face, fuzzy in the rain, of the man with his arms raised in a sign of surrender, of pleading, of despair on the threshold of aggression, drenched to the bone, while she, from the cushioned comfort of the car's inside, drove around avoiding

him, forgetting him, and went on her way, staring at the rain on the road and hearing the clinking on the roof in order to escape the vision of that face begging for help and to forget it with such conviction that she refused to talk about it then or ever, nor did she probably remember it again until now, at the last moment, when, they say, the deepest-buried feelings of remorse show up. And then she will simply die, swallowed by the sea, eaten by the fish. She will die and it will be as if she had never lived. What will be left of the woman that she claimed to be and that she perhaps became at some moment? Of that girl who ran from the police at the university? Of the woman who with a firm step walked into gathering places full of people? Of the cheating, the alcoholic, the loving Andrea of the depths of the bed? There she is in the center of the universe in the dark, submerged on the lowest rung on the ladder of indignity, victim of hate or spite or perhaps of cowardice and revenge, almost killed, murdered. There will be people who may die at the same moment as she, of hunger, of a shot, of cold, who all agonize at the same time and yet cannot escape being alone. What difference will it make in a hundred years how she died, even in fifty, what difference will it make whether she died now or after a hundred and twenty years or ten years before, whether she died a natural death or was murdered willingly or unwillingly on a September night? And what does it matter now whether she went to New York with him? Who cares about motives? What did she make up so that no one would know what had happened, in order to rationalize the situation? Only passion could redeem her. He was that passion, he was the justification of her bumbling. She had gone to him and not to another because she had already gone halfway, to him, whose youth and easy temper would let her boss him at will. Had it been Leonardus's idea that in this way she had the perfect solution of which she had spoken so many times? What did Leonardus do during those two years? What was he waiting for? Why didn't she go with him, then? *I didn't go with him because he didn't want it. "The situation has changed for you*, he said, *not for me. I'm no good for being always with a woman, with one woman, I would only miss all the others, choosing is giving up." But he was the only one who helped me. Leonardus couldn't offer me what I wanted, he didn't know how, he wasn't capable. It took two years, two long years, but he called me again.* Leonardus with them in the theatre. Leonardus on the trips, Leonardus the inseparable friend, the protective old uncle to whom one tells one's youthful sufferings beyond relief, for which he always has at least some advice and the resources of money. Leonardus calling him from the Ritz where he lived in order to arrange a game of billiards with him at the Velodrome while Andrea gave one party or dinner after another. Leonardus, who always delegated requests or complaints about work to his strange and submissive underlings. Leonardus, so much older, so important, never seen as a rival, only as a friend of the mother and a partner of the father. A friend? Why then did Andrea, from then on, never see her mother or her father again? What did those estrangements hide? And those trips, when she would disappear for a few days and never let him join her: *I don't want to burden you with my children, you hardly know them.*

Nor could he even attribute her constant, increasing and irrational attacks of jealousy to love. What strange artifices are a person's defenses built with! The river of hate makes its way into his thought: *dead*. And without recognizing himself in that morass of meanness, *dead, she's dead*, he repeated. Failures strip us of our own history, they take away the vain efforts, the useless hours of insomnia, the hopes that lit so many wakeful nights.

Exhausted but lucid, he looked at his watch, convinced that it was almost dawn, and like someone who falls asleep and wakes up an hour later fully awake only to find out that there is still a whole night ahead of him, he realized, horrified, that barely an hour had passed and understood that his agony was only beginning.

And, as though he could thereby speed up the catastrophe so that the waiting would stop torturing him, he sat on the bunk, lit a cigarette and remained in the dark, attentive to the outside noises that would lay his new status bare.

He heard steps on deck above his cabin. It must be the changing of the guard, Tom's turn must be over and Leonardus, who was to replace him, was making the rounds before taking over the helm. The steps speeded up. Voices. Faster steps. He heard them go down the stairs of the cabin deck, they must be passing the refrigerators, now they must be in front of his door. Now.

A violent knock thundered in the cabin.

"Andrea! Martín! Martín! Is Andrea with you?"

"No," he replied in a flat tone of voice because he didn't know what attitude to take, nor had he prepared any strategy.

"Is Andrea there? I'm asking you. Answer, dammit. Open the door!"

He got up unsteadily and opened.

As he was facing him with a torn piece of white cloth in one hand and a sandal in the other, Leonardus' eyes were still sleepy, swollen with fury and terror, and his huge body was trembling. Behind him Tom, with the headphones dangling on his neck, stared at him. Martín said nothing.

Leonardus grabbed him by his bare shoulders.

"Where is Andrea?" he screeched. "Where is she?"

Martín looked back at him.

"I don't know," he said.

"Imbecile! She fell into the water and you don't know! Imbecile, you're a real imbecile!" And he shook him with such anger that his head hit a frame. Martín rubbed the place where he had been hit with his hand, but did not move. Tom had disappeared and suddenly the ship veered around; Leonardus, who noticed it, was about to leave when he suddenly turned and their gazes met again. Neither one turned his away, both of them being aware of the other's impotence to discover anything more than a mere conjecture. Finally Leonardus, urged on by the engine which was now gathering speed, making the timbers creak, the boxes on the shelves tumble, the glasses and the dishes clatter, pushed him onto the bed.

"Imbecile," he screeched, "you don't know anything." And he left.

Martín sat up and remained seated on the bed, countering the increasing roll of the *Albatross* with the movement of his body. *If I had been standing without holding on to something I would have fallen,* he thought, attentive only to the counter-rhythm and to the precise inverted simultaneity of the ship's rolling.

After a short while Leonardus returned:

"Did you go up on deck with her?"

"Yes."

"What time was it?"

"I don't know, when we went to bed." He remembered well that it was ten o'clock, but a dim feeling of defensiveness kept him from saying it.

"And when you went back down, she stayed on deck?"

"Yes."

"How did you get into the cabin? I didn't hear the door."

"The way I had come out, through the hatchway."

"Was there still music in my cabin?"

"Yes."

"What time was it? I have to know."

"It was after half an hour, maybe an hour."

"And then you heard nothing."

"No."

"Did you fall asleep?"

"Yes."

Leonardus, comforted by having his mind busy counting hours and distances, began to calculate for himself:

"We sailed at nine, we went to bed at ten, let's suppose that this imbecile came back at eleven. It's after three. Four hours at nine knots, between thirty-six and forty miles. Our top speed is fifteen knots. Two hours!" He went off, screeching. "Two and a half hours! Tom, it's two and half hours at full speed!"

Chiqui had come out her cabin and was crying in a corner of the cabin deck like a frightened little girl who doesn't understand what's happening. She had covered herself with a sheet and kept repeating *Dear God how awful poor Andrea poor Andrea* in a monotonous voice.

Leonardus, who had gone up on deck in order to decide with Tom what course to take, came down the stairs once again, turned on the light in the opposite corner of the cabin deck and began fiddling with the radio. He had a hard time getting it to work. Through the antenna came overlapping voices in Turkish and Greek and intermittent noises that drowned them out, then they came on again. He had pinched a finger and his oaths could be heard over the cracked, distant tunings and the broken sentences in unknown languages, until he managed to connect with a station that in turn connected him with the police. "I can't hear a thing! Shut up! And stop whimpering!" he bellowed at Chiqui. "Problems, that's all you are, all of you, problems! Shut up, I tell you!"

Frightened, Chiqui went back to her cabin, sobbing, and shut the door.

It did, in fact, take two hours to retrace their course. And for half of that time Martín remained seated on his bed, absorbed in his own movement. The counter-rhythm had become autonomous and did nothing but move his body forward and backward, with a precise, regular, uniform cadence, independent by now of the *Albatross*'s rolling. The door had remained open and was beating on its own; the hinges creaked for lack of oil and the handle kept bumping into the wooden wall.

"Shut the door or open it or stop it, but make it stop banging!" screeched Leonardus, who was still arguing on the radio, trying to conclude a conversation that endless static had been interrupting. "God damn it!"

The sea must have become choppy now, or the wind must have come in. Suddenly Martín, in the seclusion of that pendular monotony, realized that his hands and feet were ice-cold. But even so he did not stop.

Leonardus had taken out two lanterns from the aft storeroom, which turned out not to work, and, carried away by despair, devoted himself to looking for batteries by emptying drawers onto the floor and crushing the bottoms of lockers. Around three Tom made coffee, hopping from the helm to the kitchen, and then, not stopping his drinking, put on his yellow jacket because it was cold. The sea was now heavier and Martín felt dizzy spells. He then put on a sweater and went out on deck. There were stars in

the sky, but the night was so dark that it was hard to tell where the stars ended and where the scant light of the faraway coast began.

When, much later, he would try to reconstruct those hours, only concrete and tangible details would appear, such as the viscous dampness of the deck, Leonardus's oaths, the bang of the useless lanterns and the rusty batteries against the wall, and that sensation of cold mixed with the aroma of coffee and Chiqui's whimpering and the sky full of stars and the slice of moon that had risen from the horizon unable to illuminate the darkness, like yesterday's when the irremediable had not yet happened. He remembered Tom's face, the forehead cleared by the swelling wind, and Leonardus's expression each time he realized that all their efforts were in vain and lost hope and dropped onto the bench with his elbows resting on his knees and his face held between his hands, he, the greedy possessor of unknown worlds.

It would be almost half past four when Leonardus said that they were already sailing in the area where, with the aid of the sextant and the compass, he calculated that the fall must have happened, but Tom the way the Bedouin walks the desert, interpreting, without the need of maps or compasses, signs that don't exist for the traveler, whether stones, or dunes, or the undulating profile of the horizon or the outline of a ravine that is drawn by a stroke of light paid no attention to the commands given him and followed the estimated course without slowing down, and, certain that the moment had not yet come, steered the *Albatross* unhesitatingly towards its destination.

He was to remember, however, the roar that thundered to the sky when some time later – he could not specify how long – Chiqui, who had silently come up on deck, now dressed and covered, and was likewise surveying the dark water from the stern, approached Leonardus and put her hand on his head.

"Go away! Go away! Get out of here! Leave me alone. And you go on, keep turning around," he snapped at Tom, who had set the engine to idle, probably coinciding with that explosion of anger. "Go on, at full speed!"

"It's better to go slow now," said Tom, raising his voice for the first time in order to make himself heard over the bellowing of the waves. "These are the only lights we have," he pointed to the ones on the crosshead and the masthead, "and we could run across her without seeing her."

"We won't find her, it's impossible," said Leonardus then, "it's impossible." And he went back downstairs shouting: "Those cretin policemen, the Greeks claiming that we're in Turkish waters and the Turks that we're going into Greek waters, won't even come close." Meanwhile the radio was sending into the air scratches and meaningless words.

He felt pain in his eyes, forced open for hours in order to penetrate the darkness, to see across the distance with his breath held, and to make out shadows of reflections in order to find a foreign body in them. How many times did they believe, endlessly making wide turns, even their sense of orientation lost, that they saw in the distance a spot that was darker then the changing shadows of one wave on another! How many times did they correct their course, impelled by a hope that would fade like the crests of waves in their troughs, leaving them in emptiness!

The sea had become rough. The *Albatross*, her speed cut now, was pitching, pushed by a bottom current that was increasing without the sky becoming covered, as though some distant tempest had sent the winds against her and those who were moving hidden in the bottom of the sea were going ahead of them. The moon had reached its highest point. It must have been almost a quarter to five, perhaps five o'clock, but it was still night. The noises of the radio stopped and Leonardus came back on deck, sat down on the bench, gestured and called in a quiet voice that she could not hear: "Chiqui, come, come."

She nonetheless approached and sat down beside him. Leonardus opened his arms and closed them about her, enveloping her in his huge body, rested his head on her hair and burst into sobs.

VIII

It was he who found her. He, the expert at spotting the gaze of her eyes behind her glasses, for which he had looked so many times by the reflection of the light on them. From a distant point, which gave even more depth to the opaque and thick darkness of that night, extended in fear and discouragement, a fleeting double gleam cast shimmering glints by the reflection of that pale moon that only had enough glow for itself. He could not speak or shout or even move, he could do no more than raise his arm, trembling, in the direction where he had seen the two flashes and kept it that way until he realized the others, following the direction he had shown them, had also seen it and the *Albatross* was righting her course.

Tom leaped into the cabin and came back with a blanket that he left on the ground.

The waves began to peck at the vessel's hull and gusts of wind started to come in. Clinging to the gunwale, the four of them were following the reflections that now, even with a heavy sea, were becoming more defined. Leonardus was the first to call her, cupping his hands, and with his vitality recovered he went down to the cabin deck and came back with a megaphone: "Andrea! Andrea!"

Tom cut down the speed as much as continuing to steer the vessel allowed him, until the voices began to overlap the vibration of the engine. When they were close, sailing off course by almost a quarter turn in order to keep the current from pushing them over her, he kept the gas at its lowest point, passed the rudder to Leonardus, hung the rope ladder over the gunwale, took off his sweater and pants and jumped into the water.

When Martín looked at the sea again, Tom, with Andrea on his back, was grabbing with one hand a rope tied to the sheet-winch that Leonardus was pulling while holding Andrea's two hands with the other of his. The waves, already very high, would sometimes cover them, and Tom had difficulty keeping her on his back: pushed down by the pressure of her arms on both sides of his head, he barely managed to keep it out of the water so as to breathe. Twice he let go of the rope in an attempt to grab the ladder, and both times he missed. And once again, moved away by the current and blinded by the water, he came back to grab it again. He finally managed to hold on to the ladder, put one foot on the first rung and lifted himself up with much difficulty, because what he was carrying was but a dead weight with a hair-covered face, made into a tragic mask by the glasses that were tinted red by the light on the port side. The beating of the sea had increased and when Leonardus, who had flattened himself face down on the deck and was holding on to the bench with his feet, managed to grab her under her arms, Tom went up another rung and she with him. Martín lay down beside him and in a useless gesture stretched his arms out toward them. "Leave it! let me do it," Leonardus managed to say, almost voiceless from the effort, "stop the rudder!"

Martín walked away and grabbed the rudder wheel with both hands, and without knowing what to do with it held it firm while he heard the banging of the rope ladder and the beating of the sea against the hull.

When they lifted her over the gunwale and left her on deck he was certain that she was dead. The transparent skin had become stuck to the bones and the paleness of the flesh had the consistency of glass

and the color of chalk. Dripping, she was bearing the hours of anguish and suffering that were marked on her visage, and the change in the features of her face showed the gigantic effort to survive clinging to her, becoming her, deforming her, it being impossible to determine where her body began and where the traces of her agony, the way amphoras have incorporated in them shells and stones, hardened seaweed and crystallized jellyfish, and have amalgamated the color until they attain the pale and depressed tone that precedes the transition to non-being.

That's her, he thought, *that was her*, and as he experienced the magical influx that joined him to that woman – now overcome by torment – and as death again became manifest with the inexorable repetition of the tides and the incontinence of springs, and remained steady in the face of pitfalls, vile acts, deceits and crimes, he understood that this had to be the epilogue of the plot of meanness and misery that they had hatched between them.

Tom left her on the ground and immediately turned her to one side, and with both hands pressed on her stomach until water came gushing out of her mouth, and almost instantaneously repeated the operation. Then he covered her with the blanket that he had left on deck, tucked her in and removed her glasses with the gentleness that dead people's eyes are closed with, but the elastic band had become tangled in her hair and he had to cut it with the scissors that Chiqui had handed him; then her open eyes appeared, glassy with the viscosity of a mollusk, opaque like the eyes of fish just before they undergo the process of decomposition. Then he put her face up, knelt behind her head and placed one knee at each side of her face, bent down, put his mouth against hers and systematically blew air into her lungs.

The three remained standing as they waited and when at last Tom, out of breath and flushed, moved away from her, Andrea's eyes were shut and she was breathing normally.

Martín, driven by a an irresistible and urgent desire to touch her again, took a step and began a movement of his hand, but Leonardus's look dissuaded him.

They brought her inside the cabin and left her on the bunk. Tom tucked her in again, pushing the blanket in under her body, and added two more on top of it, as well as a sleeping bag.

"Shouldn't her wet clothes be taken off?" asked Chiqui.

"No," said Tom simply, sat down beside Andrea, put his hand under the blankets and took out hers. He took her by the wrist and did not let go. Chiqui sat down beside him.

"Do you want any coffee? Do you want any water? Should she drink anything?"

"No, thanks. We have to wait."

Leonardus, who had removed the rope ladder and was steering the rudder, set a windward course for Kastellorizo.

Martín went up on deck. It was beginning to dawn and he could already distinguish the profile of the mountains on his left. The gusts of northeasterly wind had become stronger and were becoming more frequent, and now the *Albatross*, at full speed, was moving shakily over the waves whose frequency and volume were increasing. As the grayish light was covering the sky, that same infinite space of the night acquired a human dimension, the distance between the horizon and the coast was reduced, and the cloudy sky came down until it became as one with the sea.

Standing in the bow, holding on to the same shroud that hours before had condemned Andrea, he observed a shred of her white dress that still flew, dripping, caught in the lifeline stanchion, and stayed in that position while waiting for the rain which did not take long to come down. The black sky was accumulating restless clouds, the sea roared in overlapping roars with the mobility that precedes the cataclysm, here and there a new eddy began or a burst of wind would let up, only to charge even more

forcefully in isolated that gradually multiplied the power of the waves and rippled forcefully only to fall and then amplify again. Until sea, wind and sky merged into a single bolt of lightning that struck over the entire breadth of the firmament, and burst over the universe in a deafening thunderclap that broke across space.

The downpour that fell at that moment relieved the tension that had been accumulating in the atmosphere for many days. He did not move, the rain plummeted down on his body and his faith without easing the heat in his blood that was beating in his brows or the stupor or his wounded soul.

When he was thoroughly drenched he remembered the ending line of the last scene of the serial that he had finished a few days before going on the trip, "rain doesn't get the dead wet." And, for the first time in many hours, he smiled.

The storm was heavy and rain fell vertically down on the sea with so much power that when it suddenly stopped it had flattened the crests of the waves and swept the foam from the breakers. On the surface there were left the deafening remains of deep currents that had moved with the winds and the clouds to other latitudes. Behind them the sun began to delineate the contours of the coast, shedding light on the reefs and gradually giving the water back the transparency that the opaqueness of the storm had taken away. They were sailing while pitching to the rhythm of the convulsion of the waters, and every so often, mixed with the odor of saltpeter, there came from the shore outpourings of wet soil, while birds chirped, scraping the air over the lost din of the storm. After a couple of hours the island became clearly detached from the mainland and took on center stage against the scenery, and as they rounded the cape in order to head for the harbor the cormorants appeared, standing on the rocks, clean and shiny, green and black, silent and fearless, their beaks raised to the sky, like great clay sculptures left out to dry.

At the end of the bay the Rhodes steamer was showing its disproportion in relation to the line of houses along the port, and what at first was confounded with the amalgam of colors dissolved in the light became more defined, and there appeared the flaking purple, almost carmine, paint, even more absurd than her dimensions, over the burnt ochre, copper and terracotta shades of the village behind her.

Two boats came to meet them: Pepone's, with two more men on board, and an old fishing-type military boat that had been stranded for years in the old dock, steered by one of the two soldiers that two days before had accompanied the priest; the other, the corporal – the chief of the detachment, as Pepone had called him – shouted at them through a megaphone. One boat took its place to port and the other to starboard alongside the *Albatross*, and they escorted her to the pier, where Tom tied up with the help of several volunteers who were ready to grab the rope that he threw out from the stern. He completed the maneuver by himself because the others had not even shown up on deck. Leonardus, through the porthole of his bathroom, looked at the crowd that had bunched together under the couple's balcony and the men sitting in the shade of the mulberry trees on the square and the previously unseen children playing in the street, while the two boats were veering around each other, waiting for the landing to be completed. And when Tom cut the engine they tied up in turn between the *Albatross* and Giorgios' café. The human hedge became denser. No one could have imagine that the island had so many inhabitants, and not even when the Rhodes steamer had arrived the previous day had so many people been seen together.

As he disembarked, the corporal gave orders to the soldiers and disappeared. One of them boarded the *Albatross*, opening the way for two men who were carrying a handbarrow.

"*Kalimera kirie*," he said to Tom.

"Good morning, sir," replied the latter.

The other remained on the pier and, assuming a certain degree of importance, played with his truncheon and dispersed the crowd that had formed a compact ring under the balcony.

Tom helped place Andrea, whose eyes were still closed and who was now wearing a caftan of Leonardus's, in the bunk, and they took her, still covered with the same blankets, up to the handbarrow and they carried her up the stairway with some difficulty to the upper deck, they walked carefully across the gangplank and they made their way among the crowd to the hospital. Tom went with them.

The soldier then spoke to Leonardus and gave him a series of instructions in Greek, which he, his mien serious and hardly looking at him, transmitted to Martín as he was leaving his cabin.

"You'll have to watch what you say to these people, there are things that I can't do for you," were the first words he addressed to him since he had forcefully entered his cabin at two in the morning. "They'll take you the police station for the questioning, then they will start with us, but first they'll allow you to see Andrea." He stopped and looked at him perhaps to find out, or maybe to corroborate, what his attitude and his silence concealed, and added: "For now they'll make you wait here until they get their orders. In an hour – at least – it will be possible to see Andrea, they will themselves take you to the hospital. That's what the policeman said. Oh, and don't forget your passport, you'll need it," He turned his back and without another word got into his cabin.

Martín had changed and shaved but his hair was still wet. He must be have been chilled by the rain because he did not take off his sweater, not even when the soldier made him go up on deck and to sit on the poolside bench under the sun, exposed to the stares of the crowd. *Leonardus's statement must have been forceful and explicit,* he thought. *From it that soldier, with his thick brows and his fisherman's hands, must have deduced that I was the one who threw her overboard, and that's what he'll tell the corporal.*

Before going up on deck he had taken his hands so forcefully that Leonardus himself had to tell him not to handcuff him – Martín, not looking anywhere, had obediently extended his wrists – because it was obvious that he would not try to run away, and even if he had tried, he had no way of escaping from the island. The soldier, not answering, kept the handcuffs on his belt but put the palm of his hand on Martín's shoulder, as if he were taking possession of what was his, and with no expression on his face other than the deep conviction that with that hand he was guarding someone who had been confided to him, kept it there for over an hour. Martín did not move. He remained with his arms resting on his slightly parted knees, not lifting his head, not looking, and hardly hearing Chiqui's contained sobs, which were coming through the door of her cabin, or the murmur of the island's inhabitants, who looked at him with the same respect, surprise and emotion that they would have had if they had been made to watch a convict and his execution.

After half an hour or more Leonardus came out of his cabin without saying anything, passed in front of them and leaped on land, only to come back with Tom ten minutes later. From that time on, for over an hour now, he had hardly shown up on deck: he was wandering around the cabin deck, not knowing what to do, and went in and out of his cabin slamming the door. The lines of fear had disfigured his face, he had recovered his true age and had become an old man. *Yes, he's afraid*, Martín said to himself, *not afraid of Andrea's death, or of the detachment chief, or of the investigation, or of what might happen to me in the next few hours. He's afraid because the embassy will have to intervene and he can't take care of the situation by himself. Perhaps it wasn't fear, but with his soul stripped of the condition of the obliging man of power, the tireless lover and the perfect host, despotism and cruelty were now emerging in his voice and his look and in his search for a victim to turn them on to. Chiqui's whimpering in the*

cabin only made him more furious. Or perhaps age, which is implacable, had accomplished what a lifetime on the edge of legality could not, precisely now that he believed to have attained a definitely respectable position, now that he was friends with the great men of the little worlds in which he moved, now that he – unlike then – had something to lose. Or perhaps he had known that undefinable fear that appears for an unknown reason when the borderline situations have already been left behind, when we have faced death and have understood how close ours is in the course of a time that doesn't wait, and one's whole life emerges, so confused and tangled, so flimsy and so rotten that with one pull of a string everything we have done and imagined comes apart. Martín felt himself enveloped by a deeply buried hatred towards him. *Take it easy, Ures,* he said to himself, *sooner or later his time will come too: I've seen men loaded with riches, not knowing what to do with them in order to ease their dread of loneliness, men who were unfaithful from the cradle and who on the threshold of death are in turn cheated on by the only woman they loved, people who boasted of their health and collapsed of exhaustion, privileged minds who flaunted their intelligence and drooled over a children's game, powerful tyrants who in turn were whipped by a wretched weakling.*

The sun was high in the horizon but had lost the strength and authority of the previous days. The rain had cleaned the atmosphere of its mists and a light breeze rippled slightly the surface of the bay's waters, making them crystalline. The pennant was fluttering, and at times the crashing of the boats, pushed by that gentle gust, pierced the morning. The village had a festive air that no one would have imagined when it was dozing under the weight of the sticky heat.

Around noon the corporal came to the boat, accompanied by another soldier who made way for him through the crowd that was bunched together on the pier, waiting for something to happen. He approached Martín's guardian and whispered to him, in Greek, some words that barely produced any expression on his face, but he slightly strengthened the grip of his hand on his prisoner's arm as if defending his ownership of him. Meanwhile the other kept himself somewhat apart and spoke with Tom, who had picked precisely that day to do a thorough cleaning of every corner or the deck and to shine up the turnbuckles, the portholes, the winches and the stanchions.

Martín did not lift his head when the soldier pushed him and made him get up. He did not even move it aside so as not to bump into the awning, which, on that side, was leaning down almost to the deck. It was then that Leonardus showed his head. Perhaps in contrast with his unshaven beard, his hair looked more white and his anxious expression had turned him into a mask of himself. Only the questioning eyes showed life; the rest of his face – defeated, more defeated than if he had been the killer or the victim – had taken on the quality of parchment. But when he saw the corporal his capacity for organization and command took on new life. He went up to him and spoke to him in Greek. The corporal shook his hand and answered him respectfully. They both smiled, as though each had recognized in the other the right person to talk to, and they sat down to talk and to drink some lemon juice that Tom brought them. The corporal gave the soldier a sign telling him to wait, and Martín, without turning around to see what was going on, also stopped. When after ten minutes they got up and shook hands several times, both men were smiling broadly and Leonardus's voice had been transformed. Even his gestures had become self-assured; he gave a last slap on the corporal's shoulder and accompanied him to the gangway. And when a concerted shout by two or three people came from the pier, he turned to Martín and said to him: "They're calling you murderer, you see. They're all against you." Nonetheless there was no accusation in his voice, as there had been up to then in his look, and it could be said that he

was making a show of a certain irony, as though in reality nothing had happened and it was only a matter of a fortuitous accident in which neither one of them had taken part, as if those characters in the village were protesting over trifles that did not need to be taken into account. "I will go in a while," he added with no reserve, "now I'm going to rest, I'm bushed." He went into his cabin and closed the door behind them.

The corporal spent a little more time with Tom, who was still shining up the shackles, and on a command from him the soldier pushed Martín gently but firmly to the gangway. They both walked over it and finally leaped to the pier, where the other soldier joined them. The crowd had divided in two and made a passageway, and from the balcony the couple, who on that day had given up their nap, observed the show with the superiority of the big shot who attends the opera in the royal box.

It's Andrea's testimony that they need, Martín thought. *Whatever she's going to say. She's the only one who can convict me. What can I do? It will always be my word against hers, which Leonardus will certainly support. I can't deny anything, it'll be useless for me to argue. What's sensible is to fight for things until you realize that there's nothing to be done, then you have to give up. Everything except dying in the process, everything except dying.* In this way his thoughts came one after another, but they did not affect him, he could not have affirmed that what was happening had anything to do with him. He was watching the people's show without curiosity, and with no shame whatsoever he followed the soldier obediently through the pier, the square and the market and its adjacent alleys, so different under the sun. He was not even bothered when he saw someone disengage herself from the group of people that followed him: the old woman in rags, estranged as always from what was happening around her but free, not – as Pepone had said – held, perhaps for life, in the police station in order to pay in one way or another for absurd death of the priest's dog. He did not think about it now, nor did it surprise him to see her go down the street humming her monotone melody, nor could he have understood how frightened he was over that act, so innocent and trivial. He knew well where he was going, he knew what would happen to him and what consequences Andrea's testimony would bring him, but he knew it with a rational kind of knowledge in which feelings hardly played a part. Perhaps it's true that nature marshals its own survival mechanisms to prevent us from dragging to our death more of a burden than we can bear and that in the end will keep us from getting, at the right time and with the right amount of wear, to our inexorable and pointless end.

The hospital was in fact a rudimentary clinic in a small house in the second row of alleys behind the market. The only sign on the door was a large red cross and a red crescent painted on the wooden board over some Greek letters. The freshly whitewashed walls showed the adobe sticking out but were spotless. The inside smelled vaguely of disinfectant, the coolness of thick-walled buildings was felt, and the silence was denser. One of the soldiers made him sit on a bench in the entryway, also whitewashed and luminous, as if it were in a house on some other island or as if the island had changed place. And they sat down, one on each side of him, but they remained as alien to him as he was to them, to their language and to their threadbare uniforms.

Martín was prepared to wait. He had no hurry or worry whatsoever, he had a slight headache – probably from lack of sleep – and he felt more tired and weaker, but not more vulnerable. He had entrenched himself on the front line of a situation of which he had foreseen everything, except death, and he knew that he was damned. Nothing more could surprise him, nothing could make his situation worse. Sitting on the wooden bench next to two closed doors and a few meters from a rudimentary consulting

room, he remained as quiet as he had been the whole night, though now he was paying attention only to the back-and-forth rhythm of his own thought. Perhaps this was why he did not recognize the woman who was coming down the hallway as the pony-tailed girl he had seen in the house with the vines. It must be the doctor who's taking care of her, he thought as he saw, with a sideways glance, the stethoscope hanging from her neck. She approached him and looked at him with a smile. Her hair was covered with a kerchief tied at the nape and an open white coat.

"Are you the husband of Mrs. Andrea Corella?" she asked in English after reading the name on a piece of paper she held in her hand.

"Yes," he answered and raised his eyes.

"Spanish?" she asked.

"Yes," he repeated.

"The lady is fine, in a few hours she will be able to leave." And when she noticed the presence of the soldiers she asked, "did anything happen?"

"Nothing," he said and added nothing.

The woman tightened her eyelids to focus her look.

But he did not see her because he had again lowered his eyes. And even if he had looked at her he would not have seen her. There was no room in his mind for anything other than that he would go into that room and Andrea would explain to the corporal what had happened, a version that he would be unable to deny. And in consequence he would be charged with murder. He was not afraid, but he could pay attention to nothing else.

At that moment someone must have called the woman from the sickroom because she gave a sign of agreement and left somewhat reluctantly. Her steps rang on the tiles and she still turned her head before entering the room.

It must have been at least three o'clock when the corporal and Pepone came to the hospital. A very old doctor, leaning on the woman's arm, came out to receive them. He informed them of Andrea's condition and they immediately went into the room that was next to the bench.

They must have brought Pepone to act as interpreter, thought Martín.

One of the soldiers opened the door and let him in.

Andrea was sitting on a cot, her back to the window, a rectangle of light and sun framed by the somber penumbra of the room.

The corporal moved a chair next to the bed for Martín, while he stood at the foot with the doctor, the woman and Pepone, and the two soldiers a step farther back. Martín sat down but did not dare to look at her and fixed his sight on her fingernails – still purple – and on her swollen hands on the cloth that, like a sheet, covered her up to the waist. Nor could he know what her face was saying, nor whom she was looking at. He was expecting the accusation, or a question, a reaction, but Andrea was silent and so was the corporal. The silence in the whitewashed room, an apparently improvised bedroom, was complete: no noises came from the outside and no one moved in the room. At some moment or other someone would have to speak, someone would have to begin. Why was she saying nothing? Maybe she couldn't, maybe she had not recovered the faculty of speech yet and still had her mind immersed in her agony. Perhaps she would never speak to him again.

He would not have wanted to look at her but he raised his eyes. With her head resting on a large pillow, the view against the light gave prominence to her big wide-open eyes that now, without glasses and surrounded by dark bags, gave him back a look that was languid and steely, like that of a

consumptive. And with the calm and the condescension granted by the conviction of one's own goodness, she took on that mien of disinterested virtue that she would never abandon again: she put one hand on his with unaccustomed strength and said to him in a barely audible voice:

"It's all over, sweetheart." She stopped in order to press his hand a little more, and added: "So much suffering over a simple dizzy spell, so much pain!" And she tried to sit up.

Pepone turned to the corporal and the doctor, and as if Andrea's voice had been the sign they were waiting for, they all began to speak at once.

Martín saw her as she was now and as she had been, and in the fold of her violet gaze he contemplated those placid traits as they would be when eaten away by old age and when her eyelids would be covered by wrinkles and deep furrows would edge her lips and turn her mouth into a twitching line on her face. He saw himself in front of her through the same unerring x-ray, and the future that was in store for them once passion was gone, when all that would be left to join them would be the strength of her will, the way ivy clings to walls and tree trunks and vanishes from them long after they no longer exist.

It's true, ivy covers the trunks of elms, it climbs on them along a line of spokes marked by tiny leaves, and in time it gets thicker until its profile is drawn in green against the sky. Its root runners get stronger and, like snakes, they wind around the trunk, which in time will be unable to breathe or grow or, in the end, live, beautiful, yes, handsome in its romantic figure of being for someone else, bedecked in summer and winter by shiny leaves, so beautiful that no gardener ever dares cut them. In time there will be no branch or twig that is not covered by ivy, and the little leaves of the tree that still dare to come out with the last drops of sap that come up from the root through the strangled trunk will turn dry long before autumn and not even the spring rain, which will fall only to give shine to the ivy, will be able to bring them back to life. So the tree languishes. But it doesn't matter to the ivy whether the tree lives or dies, because all it needs is the support, or the structure, without which it would just collapse to the ground without ever reaching the heights. With it, on the other hand, it can compete, climb and achieve its own heights. Until the trunk, strangled by the ivy, will slowly give way and when, even dead, it can no longer stand up, in its fall it will bring down the ivy, which will perish or creep uselessly over the earth.

He leaned his head against the hand that continued to clutch his, and, amazed by his own inability to foresee his wife's reaction and her words, the only ones that he had not thought about, he cried, huddled up to her, as in the times by the sea.

"Why didn't you tell me that you had killed the dog, sweetheart?"

Martín sat up, incredulous, and immediately felt shame, as though all those present had been able to understand Andrea's words. But no one had noticed them. The corporal had gone out, the doctor was pushing the soldiers and Pepone out of the room, and Martín, not even having enough time to find the words he was going to say, found himself in the doorway, his hand still holding Andrea's hand which did not want to let go of his.

The woman and the doctor said good-bye to the corporal and to Martín. The doctor remained in the consulting room and the woman went on towards the end, and when Martín, still flanked by the soldiers, was about to leave the hospital, as he heard the steps going away from him, perhaps aware of a presence he had not noticed up to now, turned his head to look for her, she had already reached the end of the hallway, had entered the last room and had noiselessly closed the door behind her.

Already in the entrance to the police station, when Pepone – who was walking alongside one of the soldiers – told him that he was going to be tried for killing the priest's dog, Martín thought that he had not understood him. At that moment Leonardus was coming out of the station, a replica of the hospital though dirtier and with the blue-white flag instead of the red cross and red crescent. He was taking his leave, smiling, from the corporal , who had arrived ahead of them, and from the priest, and he was slapping their backs as if they were old friends. Then he saw him, stopped for a moment, and made him a sign to tell him that everything had been taken care of. "I'm waiting for you on the boat," he added and disappeared down the street.

Indeed, Martín was tried by the corporal, who was acting as judge, and admonished by the priest, and he was found guilty of killing the dog for no reason, and though he claimed that he had done it in self-defense, the verdict was not modified, as Pepone translated it, besides transmitting to him the entire speech, to which he undoubtedly added grandiloquent gestures, pauses and an elocution that the priest would never had matched. The evidence that was presented against him was limited to the wallet that was found at the place where the deeds had occurred and to an eyewitness whose name was silenced. And he was sentenced to pay a fine of five thousand drachmas, plus five hundred drachmas for the return of his wallet and one hundred for expenses. Or its equivalent in dollars.

He paid with the money that he had in his wallet, kissed the ring that the priest extended to him, shook the corporal's hand, saluted the soldiers who had accompanied him, and turned towards the door, still unable to comprehend the turn that matters had taken and not knowing what to do next. He went out into the street and, accustomed as he was to the faint light inside the police station, he was blinded by the sun. It was true that he was free, it was absolutely true. He walked towards the pier, looking for his sunglasses in his pocket and not finding them. There was still a group of people waiting to see him but most had left and the square had recovered its calm. At that moment the siren of the Rhodes steamer thundered through the space. Four latecomers were running across the gangplank with their basket and a woman was shouting at the man who was looking at her from the gunwale, full of passengers.

He had not yet reached the age at which loneliness makes one dizzy. He could begin his life story over again from the point at which it had become twisted, he was young enough to start over, he had not even used up half of his energy and his talent was still intact.

The siren howled again. The engine was started. A sailor appeared over the gunwale and began to untie the rope that was holding up the gangplank, and a couple of cabin boys were picking up the coaming that was hanging from the stanchions like little balls. The breeze had given way to the north wind and it was beginning to get cool.

He could hop onto the gangplank at the very moment when it was being removed, when the ship was beginning her maneuver, and once he was in Rhodes he would choose his destiny. He had acquired experience and a name, he would go to New York, or to London where he had so many friends, far from Leonardus and from Andrea and from their little world of local successes, and he would leave behind this trip and the night of agony and the revolting encounter with his own life and with that other self, which would remain in the back of his consciousness like a bad dream. He could do it, he was sure that he could start over.

He approached the pier. He made sure that he had his passport in one pants pocket and in the other his wallet, with the credit cards, that the soldier had returned to him. He would not resort to the money he had in Spain. He would begin from the beginning. But he had to hop on, already. He had to do it, now.

A man on land loosened the mooring from the first post, then from the other, and threw them to the sailor who grabbed them on the fly from the deck and said something in Greek while he was still holding on to the gangplank rope, waiting for the order to let it go.

Yes, it would be difficult but he could do it. He was going to jump, there was no use now in making considerations about what he was leaving behind and what he wanted to accomplish. The first thing was to be on that ship, jump, that was what he was going to do and then everything would be easier, now, he could wait no longer.

When the sailor let go of the rope and the gangplank remained hanging on the side of the hull while the other man was raising it from the gunwale and was preparing to put up the railing, he thought, still not moving his feet from the ground, that he would have time if he really made up his mind to do it; after all the ship had not even moved a fathom from the jetty. But he remained motionless on the pier with his hand on his wallet, observing how the ship was getting farther away, and by the time he wanted to realize it the strident red color had grown faint and was barely more than a distant spot merged with the water. The north wind traced lines of foam that scurried across the bay like feathers, and the sun that came from behind was clean and powerful and turned its reflections into crystals. The spot came free of the promontory and drew away from the mosque to disappear behind it, retracing the route that had brought them to the island two days before; the air was so different from the one that had disabled the *Albatross*, and he himself was so different from the man who had observed the figure on the little square only to awaken lethargies of forgotten times,

The thirst that besets us in childhood, he thought, perhaps to look for comfort in his own cowardice and to learn to live with it, *will remain whole until the end of life, whatever course we might have followed in order to quench it, whatever water we might have drunk along the way.* And, kicking stones like a child, he walked slowly along the pier towards the *Albatross*.

They sailed at dawn the next day. Andrea had come back to the boat on the same handbarrow, feeling better but still pale and weak. They dined on deck, under the awning, on baked fish with potatoes and eggplant, feta cheese and blackberries that Giorgios had brought them from his café, and two or three bottles of retsina wine with which they recovered their initial serenity, to the point that, when before going to bed they still played at seeing who could make the most seaman's knots, Tom no longer found any reason for letting Andrea win as he had decided at the beginning. They slept peacefully and neither Leonardus nor Chiqui nor Martín nor, of course, Andrea, got up at the time of sailing. The deserted town was so asleep at that time that when they passed the pontoon that was tied up to the mainland and that served as a storehouse, the seagulls on the garbage dump did not take flight, nor did any shadow move between the sacks and the boxes. Only when Tom took the boat to the water hose on the other side of the harbor and cut the engine while filling the almost-empty water tank did he hear, from behind the ruins that covered that hillside, a syncopated song that went up and down, as though tracing the topography of the place in the dawn.

The crossing was slower and more difficult than they had expected; they sailed into the wind, which grew in strength as the day advanced, and, though they got to Antalya in the dead of night, the taxi driver that Leonardus had called from the island was still waiting for them and turned out to be such an expert at driving at full speed along the intricate curves of the coast that he managed to drop them at the Marmaris airport in time for the morning plane to Istanbul. They missed neither the Barcelona nor the London

connection. And when, around five in the afternoon, they each arrived at their destination, they realized that they had been delayed by only forty-eight hours from their original schedule.

That was a bewitched island, Martín was to think many times until everything that had happened there was forced into oblivion. He said it to himself, because no one ever again spoke of that trip or of what they had seen, discovered or unveiled. Not even when, years later, Martín returned to the island, already besieged by tourism, to make a new film, this time with his own screenplay and based on his version of the story, the fourth one produced by Leonardus since then and the seventh in Martín's already established oeuvre. Perhaps Andrea and he himself wanted to convince themselves that those two days had been only a temporary setback, a distortion, the uncontrolled growth of some cells that had grown mad for no reason or apparent end, whose memory had vanished already as echoes slip away between the mountains to vanish into nothingness, for only in this way would it be granted to them to remain united until the end, their voices lost in the paralysis of the world's pain.