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Rooms of Exile

Angela Monserrate Bourdages

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada**

July 1985

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ISBN 0-315-37079-3

ABSTRACT

Rooms of Exile

Angela Monserrate Bourdages

Rooms of Exile, a short novel narrated in the first person, dramatizes different forms of alienation within the island of Puerto Rico. This theme of alienation is explored at the social, familial, professional and personal levels. The novel follows the efforts of a young psychologist working in a public psychiatric hospital to understand and come to terms with the distressing social biases in her background which suddenly manifest themselves through a haunting obsession with the memory of an exiled great-uncle. This inner search gives her the courage to herself become an exile in order to offer refuge to an abandoned psychiatric patient. The action throughout the novel is sparked and fed by the psychologist's relationship with her great-uncle, whose strange influence over her continues after his death.

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ONE

The Underwater Laboratory

Tfo Manuel's ghost inched open the door to my office with awkward pecks of the hand, then shuffled back to let me enter. My eyes were drawn as usual to its four-fingered hand still poised against the door. The missing index finger created an oddly noble, unconquerable gap between the thumb and the other fingers arched on the opposite side of the white, crenelled scar. I thought the intricate pathways of veins webbing the skin seemed more swollen than last visit, as though a tide were rising within.

I walked into the office and nodded my thanks to the ghost. I remembered that first display, in front of the Director's office, when the ghost had casually risen out of the drinking fountain to press the button for me then lifted my hair ever so gently so it wouldn't get wet while I drank. I had choked on the water. The memory made me smile; the ghost didn't smile back. I watched its translucent fingertips rub up and down as if to feel the three drops of varnish that slid like solid rain along the surface of the door. Or perhaps it was a gesture of greeting, or farewell.

I searched the ghost's face for an answer. It wore that sheepish, startled expression of someone caught in the act of waking up: an in-between-two-worlds look. But then, Tfo Manuel had often greeted my mother and me like that. As in life, the ghost's eyes were its most arresting features: two watery brown pupils flecked with sun splinters and shrouded in pale blue age-rings, as distant as planets enveloped in private skies. They told me nothing. I studied the ghost's clothes. The white short-sleeve shirt had the same slept-in appearance of Tfo Manuel's shirts when he was alive. The baggy khaki pants had the same just-about-to-fall look which always made me suspect they were conducting a private compromise with gravity. The fingers against the door twitched once more. Tfo Manuel's face developed the abstracted air of someone trying to remember if he'd fed the dog that morning. The ghost faded, then vanished. Only the space created by the half-open door remained of its visit.

And that was precisely the most exasperating thing about Tfo Manuel's ghost: that it proved to be as artlessly enigmatic, as ostentatiously ineffectual, as Tfo Manuel himself. For just over a year it pursued me, flustered and vague, along the dim labyrinthine corridors of the Hospital Público Central de Psiquiatria where I worked. Once it shimmered through a metal door to offer me a crumbly almond cookie then, without waiting, shrugged and ate the cookie itself. Another time it materialized spectacularly - arctic lights, rainbows, the works - out of an intense, gossiping

huddle of social workers on their coffee break, then hobbled diffidently by me with eyes averted to the ceiling, as if hoping I hadn't noticed. Sometimes it would trip out with no warning through pieces of furniture, as though pushed from the other side.

Another vexing thing about Tío Manuel's ghost in its early days was its piecemeal assemblage: a lone bony freckled arm here, a disembodied, pointy satyr's ear there. I got the impression each part of its anatomy had been stored separately for the eight years since its death and was reluctant to meet the rest, or perhaps didn't know how to. There would be a sudden agitation in the humid hospital air, an almost audible rustle of light just before each fragment appeared. This billowing of air and light made me think of children in a school play fidgeting and wrestling behind a makeshift curtain. A few seconds later a blunt nose stellared with purple vein-ruptures or a narrow foot ending in startlingly crooked, knobbed toes would lurch forward. Sometimes the ghostly fragment dragged along with it some item from past surroundings as if for balance or courage: a dog-chewed cardboard slipper, a furred umbrella with a defiant metal elbow jabbing out of one side.

Tío Manuel was my maternal grandmother's oldest brother; brother also to the Three Undaunted Virgins (as my father calls them behind my mother's back): Tía Encarnación, Tía Concepción and Titi Felicia. For one of those secret reasons which orbit invisibly around family

conversations, he had fallen from the collective grace of his fifteen brothers and sisters and had lived ignored by them for many years in New York City. There he had somehow lost the index finger of his right hand and the use of his right leg. Mangled and impoverished he had plunged into my tidy universe of maids, pets and crayon drawings when I was six. He was then seventy-nine.

Perhaps if Tío Manuel had been a family legend, even a soiled and discarded one like Tío Tuto (who disappeared when he was eighteen with five of my grandmother's gold chains for hanging fans around her neck, then made a fortune selling trays of frozen food to an airline in Bogotá), there would have been a place reserved in the structure of my smug and gaudy kindergarten world for him, a shelf with his name underneath left empty for him to comfortably clamber up on when he returned to Puerto Rico. As it was, I didn't know where to put him. That the so-far mythical world beyond the ocean could spew out an unsuspected legitimate relative like that seemed to me far more strange and suggestive of the mysteries of creation than if I'd had an apparition of the Virgin Mother anaemically offering me roses from her cotton-candy cloud. The Virgin had been showing herself off to dozens of saints and children for years. She had her shelf. Tío Manuel was my own private miracle. I had no other cousins on that side of the family old enough yet to share him with. Due to one of those spectacular retributive tricks of fate, all but two of my great-grandfather's

sixteen legitimate children were barren.

And now here was Tío Manuel again, choreographing another explosive entrance from beyond another mythical darkness.

This cautious recital of ghostly bits and pieces was performed during the early months of my job at the hospital. One Monday morning, zig-zagging my rust-colored Volks bug to work through a snarl of traffic down Avenida Fernández Juncos, I noticed a curious rippling over the steering wheel, as if it had suddenly been plunged into fast-moving water. Out of the ripples poked Tío Manuel's four-fingered hand. It was reaching for a crushed paper bag of pastries coyly held back in my mother's also disembodied hand. Next to Tío Manuel's, my mother's flawless hand with its five incurving fingers struck me as obscenely cluttered. Each detail of the reaching and withholding attained a brilliant flash of eerie precision - every pleat on Tío Manuel's swollen knuckles alive with spidery freckles, every wine-jade facet of my mother's alexandrite ring, every greasy stain on the white paper bag - then began to fade. It was as though a light inside each hand were being slowly extinguished.

The waning of the hands returned me to a concert of ecstatic car horns and threatening voices. A small newspaper boy in a painter's smeared cap was pounding a compassionate fist on the hood of my car. "The green,

missi! The green!" Tfo Manuel's reaching hand was almost transparent by then. It overlapped the boundaries of and contained within it the newspaper boy's chummy, pummelling fist. Then the air-curtain billowed once again and both my mother's and Tfo Manuel's hands pulled back into the newly-perceived folds of space.

Next afternoon I was wading back to my bug through the chains of red mud puddles that choke the hospital's parking place when I suddenly felt the scrape of an unshaven chin: a rum-scented kiss was being planted on my cheek. My skin experienced once again how the kiss matched the gruffness and hoarseness of Tfo Manuel's voice asking, "A little cookie? Ay..." then trailed off. The billowing of air and light settled down. I was left staring at a wet litter of kittens huddled under a rusty pick-up truck with no licence plate. On Wednesday, the four-fingered hand again - this time coiled into an accomplished and curiously complete-looking fist. Thursday: the first of those elaborately embroidered handkerchiefs Tfo Manuel always sent me for my Saint's Day. Friday: a sardonically rueful shrug of the shoulders. Saturday and Sunday: nothing.

Each apparition was so vivid that in a patient I would have called it a hallucination. Afterwards I might find myself stumbling into a trolley full of sheets and towels, taking a sip of someone else's coffee, or glowering with incomprehension at a nail file in my hand during an all-staff conference. I developed a fortunate reputation for

absent-mindedness. In time, Tfo Manuel's anatomical fragments overcame their suspicion of one another. Or perhaps they simply discovered each other. By my fourth month in (the hospital, the ghost was fully assembled and ready for business. But never once during the following year did it set foot outside the hospital grounds. I noticed it began to flicker and pale when we approached the periphery of the parking area, as though its source of power were centered somewhere in the hospital and had a limited extension. The apparition of both hands in my car was to be the only exception.

Somehow, it seemed reasonable to expect that the experience of death, or at least the novel one of haunting, should have added to or subtracted something from Tfo Manuel. But apart from the histrionic, mechanical ghost tricks which appeared to disconcert the phantom as much as me, I could detect nothing different in looks, mannerisms or personality. The ghost seemed as defiantly apologetic, gleefully disenchanting and inexplicably solicitous as did Tfo Manuel when he suddenly plummeted into my life the summer of 1952.

And yet, surely, people just couldn't wander in and out of time unchanged.

The space created by the half-open door to my office had through some alchemy become an extension of the ghost's visit. I sensed it as fuller than ordinary air. As though all

the shadows behind Tfo Manuel's past words and gestures, all secrets orbiting around everyday family conversations were sealed into that rectangle of space the size and shape of a coffin. Behind this vibrant transparency, the khaki wall of the hospital corridor outside my office acquired the remote familiarity of an enlarged snapshot. Standing, squatting, lying down, the usual blue or pink-clad patients waited pressed against the wall for Chucho Medina next door to wave his magic wand.

It was already eleven minutes to twelve. The monthly staff conference - memorable only for the fact that the Director's eternally active pea-green swatter finally felled a fly - had made me cancel my last morning appointment. I looked through the coffin of space again. The hands of the round electric clock on the hallway wall pointed with their air of innocent mockery to three nineteen. As if to protect this feat of paralyzed time, the clock wore a metal mesh mask not unlike a baseball catcher's. But the clock's insistent hands no longer irritated me as they had during those first few months at the hospital. Perhaps I had become too well-trained against useless gestures. I no longer ached to throw the balled-up paper wrappings from my lunches at the clock, or rehearsed metaphors about caging time inside an insane asylum to lace through my conversations with Pedrito Gandia.

Thinking of Pedrito's startled, lopsided grin made me forget about Tfo Manuel's ghost. I began to clear the desk

of my last patient's traces: scribbled Rorschach scores, TAT cards, a soggy Dixie paper cup with a silvery skin of water on the bottom. I walked my fingers over the tops of the files in my cabinet until I found the one for Carlos Beique Rivera, my first afternoon patient. I tossed his file on the corner of my desk then sat gingerly in the whimsical wooden swivel chair (sometimes squeaky-stiff, other times given to licentious floundering) and rescued my lunch bag out of the anarchic clutter of the bottom drawer.

"This afternoon. Return this afternoon without fail," Chucho Medina's voice boomed suddenly over the coughing and hissing of his personal air conditioner. The blue and pink shapes in the hallway stiffened to attention. The ones on the floor rose or were helped up. A thick bundle of files hugged to his chest, Medina strutted past my door engulfed in a clutch of patients. Three seconds later he was framed in the space of my doorway again, his red puffy face coaxed into that utterly stunned smile he reserved for me, as though he never ceased to marvel at my unaccountable (but of course charming) presence in the Hospital Público Central.

"Señorita Molina de Soto," he announced, although in private he always called me Inés Marisa, "I am expecting a telephonic communication of extreme importance. Long distance. An affair of immense complexity and delicacy. Be an angel and do me the great favor of taking a message." Then his tone and face became avuncularly roguish. "If, of course, it should not interrupt any plans with our

distinguished, illustrious Pedrito." Without waiting for an answer he was gone, followed by his retinue of pink and blue blurs calling "Mihtel, mihtel, doctol" after him.

The corridor grew quiet. That sort of nobody's-here quiet which sometimes wakes one in the middle of the night and one can't remember one's name. Gradually, I became aware of a suffocated, distant howling; a low, gray, solitary wave of sound slowly arching, twisting, descending. In some absurd way, the sound seemed to grow directly from the silence.

My office is exiled at the end of Pavilion E. The constant barrage of clanging bars, shouts and moans rising from the solitary confinement cells in the basement of Pavilion D is usually attenuated by the intervening walls into a mere pulsation of anger, a rumble of panic which breathes in and out of the other hospital sounds: the shuffling of patients' feet, the squeal of medicine trolley wheels, the peremptory banging of metal doors, the murmured conversations punctured by sudden errant shouts. But sometimes, while writing a report, I lift my head and allow my mind to drift in search of the right word to describe a fleeting impression left by a patient's gesture, and at that moment it is as if a hundred little doors were pushed open. Then the sounds from the solitary confinement cells seep uncontaminated through the pores of my office walls and collect like an urgent sediment on the floor. Those are the moments which help me understand why the hospital staff

always take their breaks in noisy twos and threes, why one never sees a nurse or social worker on his or her own looking out of a window or smoking a solitary cigarette in the staff room. That day, in the deep noon hush after Medina's departure, it was like listening to those sounds without the muffling effect of the walls. The low, gray voice rose, spun and fell, howling and whipping, gliding through pain as if pain were an element with no beginning and no end. The voice would diminish into a whimper, almost transparent, more a shadow of a sound than a sound itself, only to whip into a fury once again. The sound was neither male nor female. It made me think of a hurricane wind trying to penetrate a barricaded window. The majesty of this wind-voice was punctuated by the impertinent clatter of tin banging on metal. Behind the uneasy counterpoint of both sounds bounced the echo of an amused, strangely familiar chuckle.

I jumped when the telephone rang in Medina's office. The swivel chair went into moderate hysterics then jammed. Without making a conscious decision, I let the phone ring itself out. Afterwards, the quiet was not the same.

I looked around my office as if I'd lost something. The space created by the open door seemed to stare back. It reminded me of that between-two-worlds look in the eyes of Tfo Manuel's ghost. I began to rise out of the swivel chair. The chair stuck, tittered and reversed, plopping me back with it. I didn't feel like fighting my way out of it merely

to close a door. But I also lacked the courage to face that full-empty space. It was as heady as looking down the edge of a tall precipice. With a shrug of the shoulders, I spun the chair ninety degrees and turned my back to the doorway instead. It's always awesome after the event to identify the exact, insignificant action which had the power to drastically change our lives.

In all my dedicated six years as a professional snoop, I had never heard anyone in our family speak about Tío Manuel before his return to the island. Not even in those perturbing, exhilarating front-porch conversations after my bedtime I wasn't supposed to have heard. His resurrection in 1952 was handled with the same phlegmatic decorum as the mystery of his missing finger: even its non-existence did not seem to exist. Yet for me, Tío Manuel's first advent was tantamount to a meteorite suddenly crashing into my father's rose garden. The unanimous disavowal of the event only added to its momentousness. Somehow Tío Manuel had managed to plunge back to Puerto Rico in a curiously transparent state. His history, or non-history, challenged all my notions about the possible shapes, textures and ingredients of people's lives. How could somebody merely exist, unattached to events, uncluttered by genealogy?

That summer I collected facts and impressions about him with the avidity of a geologist confronted with an errant

chunk of outer space. But apart from one short visit to him, and my mother's sporadic, cryptic comments, this collusion of silence was broken only once that I can remember.

It was during Wandita's twins' christening party soon after Tío Manuel's return. Between the cake and the coffee, a rowdy argument about chaperoning broke out. The older male and female cousins championed the cause of no daytime chaperoning after a certain age. "Else how is one going to grab a husband? Saintly Virgin of the Providence! A girl needs every possible help after twenty-one!" But the older aunts and uncles insisted that without a "decent reputation" a girl, no matter what age, stood no chance of marrying a man of "good family" no matter how rich the girl. The argument revolved around Titi Clarita's reckless intention of going with Luis Felipe, her fiancé for eleven years, to an afternoon circus performance - unchaperoned. Titi Clarita was thirty-one, Luis Felipe thirty-nine. "Manolín couldn't have also lost his mind," Titi Felicia had suddenly snorted in her resonant, rusty can-opener voice, "he'd already lost that before he left." Except for the immediate abeyance of all arguing voices and the fact that Titi Felicia was staring oddly at her own raised right hand, index finger bent out of sight, I would not have suspected it was Tío Manuel she was rambling about. My guess was confirmed when Titi Felicia was instantly declared "drunk" and hustled off in tears by three fussing middle-aged nieces upstairs for a siestecita.

This mystery surrounding Tio Manuel was deepened by his habit of sending me an embroidered, lace-edged handkerchief every year for my Saint's Day. Though supposedly penniless, he did this for ten years. I was painfully aware no other cousin or aunt received one. The handkerchiefs were made of fine white linen, delicately starched, almost transparent. Taking them out of their flat white boxes made of something that felt like crocodile skin, I was always impressed by the freshness of their world, as though each cloud and snail in them had just been created by the very action of my opening the box. Faint pencil marks would still be visible around the edges of swooping sapphire birds, their violet-tipped wings tilting with the unmistakable euphoria of a first flight. Wistful ivory daisies discovered the sky from cushions of almost prehensile sepals.

The memory of one handkerchief haunted me so persistently during those early months, at the hospital, I suspected for a time Tio Manuel's ghost was only a messenger and the real meaning of the haunting was to be found within the handkerchief itself. It was the last one he sent me, peopled with miniature Chinese couples promenading under flamboyantly colored umbrellas. The umbrellas sprouted open from the ends of tilted handles resting over the girl's shoulders and were cunningly striped, crossed and knotted with gold and silver threads. The strollers' arms stuck out from their bodies with stiff but gracious dignity, their shell-pink scarecrow faces inclined at judicious angles. I

imagined their conversations to be leisurely lectures on archaic, mystical styles of playing the bamboo flute or of painting fireflies. Each couple was aimed at one of the five or six pagodas bursting out from between dainty grass stitches. All around the couples cherry trees exploded in an ecstasis of bloom. On the surface of every leaf floated three dark green veins, as delicately arched as eyelashes. Clutches of three gray stones littered meandering footpaths at fixed intervals with a naïve artificiality I found strangely endearing. Here and there among the gray triads of stones, three bewildered amapola flowers marked the places where their creator might have momentarily abandoned China and dozed off into another handkerchief.

Inspecting this gift one last time before burying it in the back of my sock drawer along with the nine previous handkerchiefs, I'd had a strong impression of the number three as an entity in itself, an integral part of the landscape. Only then did I notice how some of the trees' gnarled roots snaked alarmingly across the footpaths. This created an element of future danger for the strolling couples, offered a sense of time beyond the frozen present. Perhaps it was something as simple as that, a thread-root snaking across a linen pathway, which was responsible for that sense of expectancy I was discovering in these memories of Tío Manuel's handkerchiefs eight years after his death. But no. That detail would not have swelled with subtle implications of a future time then if something else

in our relationship had not hinted at a conspiracy of some sort, a stubborn sense of kinship, which could not be explained away by our tenuous family ties. Whatever it was, that last handkerchief seemed even then to provide an alternate time and place for us. As though Tío Manuel and I were one of the leisurely strolling couples heading inevitably towards a prominent root.

These handkerchiefs had been a great source of joy and pain to me as I was growing up. Joy, because they were so beautiful. Pain, because they were so useless. Surely their unflinching loyalty deserved a better fate than a young girl's snivelling nose. Better than the dank interior of that same girl's purse on Three King's Day, accompanied by a melting candy lipstick or two mossy stones found under Tío Felipín's hexagonal aviary. But it wasn't only their obvious beauty and uselessness which accounted for the joy and the pain. I was uncomfortably aware that coming from any other uncle the gesture of the handkerchiefs would have been buried under the avalanche of both my families' stupendous generosity. Coming from Tío Quique for example, the Superior Court judge with his fat scaly fingers always looped around an unlit green cigar (the same one for the past fifteen years according to my cousins). Or coming from my godfather Tío Danilo, the electrical engineer who owns a chain of bowling alleys and button stores but after whom, inexplicably, four public schools in the island have been named. The paso

fino horse he gave me when I was nine, which won three first prizes in a row, should have alone obliterated the memory of the handkerchiefs. Yet I have to think a while before I remember its name.

For almost a decade before his death Tío Manuel lived, not quite forgotten and not quite forgiven, in humble rented rooms in parts of San Juan and Río Piedras. I had never known existed.

You couldn't get there by car. You had to enter through an alley or behind a vacant lot encrusted with rusting car doors and refrigerator parts. Then came a maze of narrow, lopsided footpaths smelling of rum and urine, strewn with sodden garbage and with shards of broken bottles. There were thick foamy puddles even in dry weather, as if the earth were festering from inside. Along the edges of the footpaths lay the bodies of dead or dying animals and the crumpled forms of sleeping atómicos. The atómicos bore a greater resemblance to piles of abandoned clothes than to terminally drunk human beings, their unshaven sun-blistered faces insecurely attached at one end like irrelevant afterthoughts. And yet, perhaps because of their name, the limp, emptying shapes held the dark menace of bombs. Sometimes, a barefoot woman with sweat-shiny skin and greasy strands of hair clogging her eyes would appear at the jagged doorless opening in the wall of a tin hovel. From there she'd swing

out the contents of a pail of sudsy laundry water or of pumpkin rinds and fish-bones into the middle of the footpaths. Naked boys with knobby knees and elbows would straddle the puddles and arch their pee as high in the air as they could. Laughing, they watched their jets travel through the sunlit air diffusing rainbows in all directions.

Perhaps because of the great distance these paths to his rooms seemed to cover, I was not surprised that Tío Manuel's handkerchiefs always arrived a few weeks late. Sometimes well over a month after my Saint's Day in mid-April. They were handed down through a lengthy chain of older relatives, only a few of whose names recalled faces to my mind until nudged by my mother's vivid, often brutal, identifying phrases as she religiously recited each name. "Tía Pepina: wiggly wart between breasts. Mama Concha: elephant legs, tiny mouse steps." Milagritos always seemed the first link in the chain - and the last. Why she never brought the handkerchiefs straight from Tío Manuel's many rooms of exile to me and instead left them to float for weeks from hand to hand, visit to visit, collecting names and creases, was never questioned by anyone, least of all me. The handkerchiefs merely followed the natural circuitous flow of energy of my mother's predominantly unmarried, female family where any direct action guided by expediency - such as writing out a shopping list or using the phone to extend a dinner invitation - was considered

wantonly crass.

Although Milagritos is close to ninety now, we still call her by the diminutive - Little Miracles - and fittingly so. Deafened by a pierced eardrum and crippled by arthritis, she still mothers with humble devotion my three formidable great-aunts: the misanthropic and gluttonous Tía Concepción - who raises the most impertinent and spiteful chihuahuas I have ever met; the simpering and hypochondriac Tía Encarnación - who still crochets mile after mile of knobby, lopsided lace to decorate all my younger cousins' party dresses (to their unbounded mortification as it was to mine when it was my turn); and the mustachioed, unexpectedly funny Tití Felicia, the ex-nun. Tío Felipe, who belongs to my father's side of the family, met them the time my mother's and father's relatives got together one New Year's day. He's always said that if a film were made of that historic fiasco, those sisters could have only been played by three Marx brothers in drag.

Milagritos is my mother's family's official messenger. She is the only one of my great-grandfather's reputed platoon of illegitimate children actually known to me. This great-grandfather was a Spanish tobacco dealer from the Azores Islands who settled in Havana at seventeen to collect gambling debts and mistresses. He eventually immigrated to San Juan for more of the same and managed, somewhat inadvertently I've always thought, to also acquire one wife from a rich land-owning family and raise sixteen legitimate

children. Other illegitimate relatives surfaced once in a while in our old Condado house but remained at a distance: dark-skinned, faces blurred, nameless. A gardener in a gray floppy felt hat showed up one day when I was thirteen to dig around my father's rose bushes and throw little white pellets around their roots. He left with a restless load of coconuts from our palm trees hugged awkwardly in his arms and an overlarge pair of my father's mocassins slapping the pavement behind him. That evening I overheard my mother say he was the son of Milagritos's twin sister. Until then I had no idea Milagritos had a twin sister. No one remarked that the gardener was my mother's second cousin and my uncle once-removed.

Another time, when I was ten, a tiny bald baby with a black mole the shape of the island of Culebra on his skull cried for half a morning on our back porch because his penis was swollen to the size of a milk bottle. It dribbled a greenish pus. The baby's legs were as thin and nervous as twigs twitching in the wind. After my parents drove him to the Hospital Presbiteriano, I discovered he was one of Milagr^orito's godsons, a grand-nephew, thus my cousin three times removed. But again the link was not acknowledged. My mother visited him every day for a week. I was aware my parents paid not only for that but for subsequent operations. Yet even after the baby died six months later, his name was never spoken in my presence. I was not taken to his funeral. I never asked why. Children always know - by

the unnatural hush in the air, by the begging restraint in all the adults' gestures - when they are in the presence of something extremely breakable. For years the thought of that bald baby was mysteriously associated in my mind with a particularly fragile antique glass bowl of my mother's which had the color and transparency of a red grape peel held up to the light. The exterior was rainbow-glazed; clusters of gossamer strawberries tumbled along the sides. In its presence I could only hold my breath until the bowl was safely locked again, in triplicate, inside the trapezoid mirrored stage of the china cabinet. Perhaps my parents were afraid uttering the baby's name might have shattered a carefully wrought and tended illusion of distance like a piercing scream is said to shatter glass.

In the words of Tía Encarnación, Milagritos "is considered." Translated into actions this means Milagritos is allowed to enter our homes by the front door and takes coffee with us in the front porch but, if fed, eats in the kitchen with the maids. She is particularly small, even for our family. Her kisses are like an accidental grazing of her cheek to ours, as if a moth had winged by. They leave a sour, soapy smell. Her dresses are made of limp cotton prints in all imaginable combinations of mourning colors: small white raindrops falling against lavender and purple-striped hills; steel-gray four-leaved clovers peering out of beds of black and white forget-me-nots; tiny black apples, each topped by two mauve leaves and ingeniously piled into

tiny white baskets stored against some coming famine in a pale gray frozen land. Beyond that I can't remember if her skin is dark or fair, her eyes large or small. Apart from her dresses, I can't describe Milagritos any better. Somehow, the habit of looking delicately away from her person was inculcated so early and irrevocably in me, only my sense of smell has kept a clear imprint of her. Hers is not the sour smell of rancid grease I associate with most poor people. It is the uncomplicated smell of unpowdered and unperfumed female flesh decaying. We must have all been very subtly trained to look away because she is neither family nor servant. She is like some disturbing crippled presence: an amputated limb, a headless doll. So well-trained she is too, I am sure if by chance I would now look into her eyes, or watch her lips as she delivers a message from a great-aunt, which could have easily been phoned, or studied the hands with which she offers me a box of guava paste she has made specially for my father, Milagritos would reject the cup of coffee my mother would so graciously be stirring for her, and flee. Exiled from her person, my eyes have through the years taken refuge in that tidy repetitive mourning world of her prints. White raindrops and tiny black apples have substituted whatever characteristic gestures others might know her by. Compared to our maids - usually intense, vociferous creatures, always warning me to lower the hems of my skirts ("What will your novio's mother think, anh?"); capable of calling down wild imprecations on my

father's head for leaving a mess in his study just before a party, and much given to pulling the skin under my mother's upper arms while wailing, "But look how rickety this hide, Doña. What man is going to want this chicken scalp?" to prove how recklessly emaciated they think her - compared to them, Milagritos is invisible. What's more, she had been the accomplice to her invisibility for so long, that by the time I met her she protected her right to it with timid but undeniable fervor.

Such was the first and last link in the chain between Tío Manuel and me.

My fingers flicked paper clips back and forth over the scarred topography of my wooden desk. Again Medina's phone rang and again I ignored it. I was all too familiar with his "important affairs of immense complexity and delicacy." I twirled a yellow pencil on its blunt point as if it were a top and tumbled the stapler on its side. I recognized the symptoms: I was spoiling for one of my lunchtime rituals in search of Tío Manuel. The gray howling of the wind-voice and the hauntingly familiar chuckle seemed to be extending an urgent invitation. But I had that early afternoon appointment.

I decided I was hungry. Tata Nina had made me a white country cheese and tomato sandwich. The juice from the three pickles rolled in silver foil had run through the veil of

wax paper wrapping the sandwich and now made little yellow-green rivers along the creases. In her incessant crusade to "put a little meat on my bones" she had included an indecently fat slab of the latest guava paste made by Milagritos, three home made merengues, all crumbs by now, and a plastic hemisphere full of rice and beans she knew full well would return to her kitchen untouched. I remembered the alarmed look on her round face that morning when I'd teased her that just carrying her lunches was enough to burn off the calories from her cunningly sumptuous breakfasts.

"Look that you are going to turn yourself into a ghost if you don't have care. And then what, what thing is your pretty little senator going to grab, anh?" Tata Nina had countered, roughly slapping a ball of dough from the palm of one hand to the other. She was the only person not impressed with Pedrito's recent success. She had still not forgiven his engagement ring to me: a black oval baroque pearl which had been in his family for over three hundred years. ("Two Mercedes and he can't afford one little diamond? A wrinkled black pearl! That's not Christian," she had complained at the time, as affronted as if he'd pushed away a plate of her famous cannelloni.)

"Tata Nina, your sister is a spiritist. You must know about these things," I ventured on the spur of the moment, then checked that neither my mother nor my father were nearby in the courtyard. "Have you ever seen a ghost? Do you

believe in them?"

Tata Nina dropped the dough, a flat oval by then, on the kitchen counter and crossed herself, bestowing a little star of white flour on her forehead and another on her shoulder. "Me, I don't believe in ghosts," she tossed her head of electric hair - like a rowdy black sun - and yanked open the refrigerator door. She returned with a huge fresh salmon cradled in her arms and slapped it on a cutting board. "But that they exist, they exist." Two of my mother's Siamese cats materialized from nowhere and pounced, fiercely graceful, on the fish. Tata Nina had run for the broom.

A sudden burst of emphatic clanging from the solitary confinement cells seemed to mock the music of the church bells ringing noon in the distance. I stared without enthusiasm at the soggy triangles of bread on my desk. The problem with ~~T~~ Manuel's ghost, I'd ~~just~~ diagnosed, was that it did not behave at all like a ghost. It seemed to harbor no message for anyone, displayed no penchant for scaring, required nothing. It didn't seem to be suffering nor did it seem particularly happy. Its presence was as frustrating as receiving a properly addressed envelope with no letter inside.

I flicked the last paper clip off the edge of my desk and considered the walls of my office. The imprisoned humidity of the hurricane season had condensed as sweat, giving them a live, worried look. Like all other walls in

the hospital, mine are slashed by a monotonous horizon. Above it they are painted green. Not the pale mint green that is considered "soothing" for sickrooms and classrooms but a vigorous, shiny, utilitarian green; easy to clean but hard to dismiss. Below the horizon the walls are painted a sickly brown: the color of slime underneath a pond. From the first day I felt like I was working inside an aquarium. Often I feared I was drowning. Leaving the office was like surfacing. The stratum of slime rises three feet from the tiled floor and manages to almost camouflage one day's collection of footprints from our nation's classical male pose: leaning against a wall with one foot propped against it. There is no space to waste on waiting rooms here. By Friday afternoon the halls in the hospital look like an army has magically materialized out of the walls' horizons and marched mercilessly down leaving a ragtag of dusty tracks, most of them headed by a semi-circle of toe-prints. The small, barred window high on the wall to the left of my desk is blurred with the fossilized trajectories of years of raindrops through years of dust. It refuses to open. In the splotchy sunlight that filters through, the air appears dingy and moth-eaten, as if microscopic organisms were busy decomposing patches of it. From my desk I am regaled by a view of eternity trapped in the moonface of the paralyzed clock.

It was that noon, a Monday about six months ago, when I began to suspect it was perhaps because of this and all

other arrested clocks in the hospital that Tfo Manuel's ghost was able to haunt me ~~as~~ as efficiently as it did. By eight-thirty when I arrived at my desk, I had passed at least a dozen other masked clocks, their hands all authoritatively pointing in different directions. This official thumbing of nose at the conventional passage of time must have gradually conditioned me (as well as the patients) to accept the world inside the hospital as existing in some detached, dateless limbo. Past, present and future became three more psychotic inmates constantly switching identities.

Furthermore, the air inside the hospital seemed somehow a continuation of the one trapped inside Tfo Manuel's many rooms. It had the same stale, smudged quality of the air inside cramped quarters where people cook and sleep in one place. The air in the crowded hospital lobby, where whole families from remote villages wait for days sustained by homecooked snacks sold by hawkers, might have been flecked with the same tiny wheels of oil sprayed from Tfo Manuel's sizzling tostones; might have been dimmed by the same steam rising from the same pots of re-heated milk-coffees.

Hurrying into the lobby late one morning, I heard a raspy voice rumbling from one of the knots of families waiting frozen-eyed in front of the Director's office. The voice sounded pleased and surprised. "Come in. Sit yourselves. Ay..." In the middle of the group, I saw a rubbery lumpish claw of a hand energetically swiping things off an

aluminum tube chair to the floor: three black-ribbed socks gritty with sand, a green and yellow flowered umbrella, jagged bread-crust crumbs stained with ketchup. "Here! ay..." and four imperious claw-tips rapped against the plastic brocade seat of a chair where little entrails of stuffing burst out of a large triangular tear. That "Ay..." of his, slowly exhaled, punctuated everything he said. It was like a dark hole full of unspoken old-man things I couldn't see into. "Aquí. Come. Ayy...!" I almost obeyed. In mid-step towards the voice I watched the claw, the chair's entrails and all the objects swiped to the floor fade and disappear as if sucked into the black hole of Tfo Manuel's "ay..." The smudged hospital air clamped a lid on it. The knot of frozen-eyed faces waiting for the Director returned. Young and old, each was stamped with the same family features in a way which both compressed and defeated time. That day the four-fingered hand must have borrowed fragments from one of our earlier visits to Tfo Manuel. In later years he turned sullen and angry against my mother though he always remained unaccountably gentle with me, as if he suspected I were suffering from some incurable disease.

Another day, just as I reached the heavy metal door to the courtyard of Pavilion E, three orderly-guards suddenly flung it wide open from the other side. I jumped back. The door slammed vengefully into the wall, loosening a storm of plaster flakes. As if called up by the impact,

Tio Manuel's ghost hobbled out of the door: secretive Mona Lisa smile, outstretched freckled arm offering me the small pale golden disk in its hand. "Toma, take it. Toma. Ay..." the ghost urged, arm bouncing encouragingly, then seemed to remember something which deepened its smile. It shrugged and took the disc into its own mouth instead. Gravely munching, it disappeared back into the closing door. All the chains, bolts and safety catches of the door continued to rattle and clang long after it clicked shut behind me. I stepped into the courtyard of Pavilion E. With a shivering lurch in my stomach I suddenly identified the pale golden disk in the ghost's hand.

I remembered standing with my mother in the large shabby lobby of a hotel for old men in Calle Galeza in Old San Juan. Three towering carved doors with broken glass panes opened over the bay with its white ships and blue-gray smoke columns rising from the chimney stacks of Cataño factories on the other side. Old men in pyjama pants and cardboard slippers read newspapers or dozed open-mouthed in tilted-back cane chairs. Ragged strips of torn straw poked out of the chair's bottoms. Then my mother and I were caught inside an elevator, shivering-clanging up to the impossibly high, fly-specked ceiling. It was an ancient, wrought-iron cage installed in the center of the lobby, its entire mechanism apparent. We could see out of all four sides through a railing made of black diamond mesh. As we rose, a ring of pink uptilted faces stared at us from the tops

of open newspapers with the unsmiling, unswerving curiosity - so intense it seems almost indifference - achieved only by the very old or very young. Up we went, past gliding ropes and spinning pulleys and slabs of metal weights stacked over each other. The cage clanked and shuddered to a stop at the second floor. The operator was an old crotchety man shrivelled inside a bright X of purple suspenders. His face, furrowed and acid, might have been pickled in vinegar. Wordlessly he trundled off with a letter in his hand and left us swaying - clanging first against one then against the opposite side of the opening. More pink faces stared at us over the tops of open newspapers from more back-tilted cane chairs all along the corridor. It smelled of rotting wood and urine. The operator ambled back, still clutching the letter. Suddenly, he dropped the elevator half-way down into the lobby, remembered where we were going, and yanked an enormous iron lever that seemed to belong more in a train than in an elevator. This set us rocking and heaving in mid-air like an unhinged ride in a carnival. The audience of uptilted faces swinging beneath us stared up with a breathless anticipation that made their eyes dance. Then oh so slowly the elevator began to climb, past whining ropes and pulleys, in one unbroken dignified ascent with me holding on to my stomach all the way up to the seventh floor.

Tfo Manuel was waiting for us in front of his room. "You want a little cookie? Here, take it. Ay..." He proudly

offered me a huge almond polvorón with tiny multicolored candies pressed into the thumbprint in the center. I threw up all over his bed. My mother washed me at a sink in the corner of his room. There was another old man lying on the floor with his head under the sink and his eyes rolled back so you could only see the whites all criss-crossed with pathways of little red veins. His hands were folded over his chest like someone pretending to be dead. But with his thin whistly breath that threatened to choke him each time, he seemed to be doing just the opposite. He didn't move when my mother washed my face and hands. We both stood with one foot on either side of his body and even when some water dripped down his cheeks and over a wrinkled hairy mole on the side of his neck (at first I'd thought it was a wad of chewing gum pulled out of someone's hair), he didn't flinch.

That hotel survived mainly on contributions from rich Spanish immigrants. My mother was furious when Tío Manuel walked out one day leaving no forwarding address. It had taken her almost a year of research to prove he was of pure Spanish descent on both sides and therefore eligible to be a resident. It had also been the only one of his rooms she had found; and the only address we could actually drive to. Apparently Tío Manuel objected to signing the register every time he went in and out. "Like in a blasted prison. Ayy..." my mother crossly imitated his voice later at Oscarcito's first communion party, the kind of mockery she would have disdained in another under normal circumstances. But,

hearing this, Tía Encarnación cackled, "The very títere. Won't stay any place unless there's a skirt!" My mother had not mentioned Tío Manuel's name.

By my sixth month at the hospital, I was spending many lunch hours pursuing the vivid memories which always followed in the wake of the ghost. Once resuscitated, I ransacked them for a clue to Tío Manuel's haunting. With its wet green walls and slimy horizon my office became a sort of underwater laboratory where I sliced and analysed samples of Tío Manuel. I spent hours comparing the different styles of his two advents into my life. I could not avoid the conclusion that perhaps I was doubly haunted. Not just by the ghost, but by the process of its haunting, fascinated by the recurring patterns and ironies in it. I found this strangely amusing. And I sensed that this amusement was being shared - somehow, somewhere, by the ghost itself. Sometimes I seemed to hear, stranded in that black space between two thoughts, the echo of something I could only describe as a cosmic chuckle: eerie and distant, yet as if originating in some dark familiar place deep within myself. I assumed it was only the influence of those eternal shrieks of laughter, curses and clanging sounds emanating from the solitary confinement cells. Those muffled eruptions which act like underwater pulsations: tiny, barely perceptible pressures affecting the rhythm of everything here in the hospital. Sometimes when one is tired, fragments of our different worlds can collide into fleeting and misleading

configurations.

After all, amusement of any kind would have been the very last quality I'd have associated with Tfo Manuel or with our very few meetings.

The bodies of the dogs littering the footpaths to Tfo Manuel's rooms had caved-in bellies and pink furless skin mapped with huge continents of stiff scabs. Sometimes it was hard to distinguish the dying from the dead. Pearls of blood and pus burst from the cracks that travelled through the scabs like earthquake faults. From far, their lolling tongues were black masses lit with sudden flashes of iridescent green. Up close, the tongues were alive with the frenzy of scavenging flies. My mother always walked slightly ahead of me, zig-zagging raggedly from one side of the paths to the other like someone crossing a familiar mine field. Her greatest fear was that I'd catch some disease from these animals or, worse, would again insist on taking one home as I had that first time we tried to visit Tfo Manuel.

We had been picking our way through a maze of puddles and tarpaper shacks for about ten minutes. The puppy's red-rimmed eyes were still haunted with trust, its skin still flaunted some healthy patches of bristly white hair. The puppy had been recently gutted by a car, then either crawled into or was abandoned by someone inside a ditch

full of wet, lopsided cartons with torn flaps. Wordlessly I slipped down the ditch, placed the puppy inside the smallest, driest box and continued to skirt the puddles behind my mother. I hugged the box to my chest. The puppy squirmed and scrabbled until it managed to poke its head and one paw over the edge of the box. It began to whine. My mother whirled around and was immediately paralyzed: her lower jaw dropped as if to receive communion, both her elbows froze jutting out of her body like fledgling's wings. I realize now that her particular brand of enlightened humanism and outspoken social activism was being sorely tested. She had studied at a time when no black Puerto Rican was allowed entrance to our University and came from a family whose women were religiously trained to cross the street to the opposite sidewalk whenever they saw a very dark-skinned man approaching. (I believe the safety margin was considered to be about fifteen feet). Their idea of Christian charity was to once a year dispatch the remains of their Christmas dinner to the nearest poor. By comparison, my mother's sense of social justice, which led her to devote half her time to defending poor clients for free, was just short of miraculous. That she dared visit Tío Manuel's rooms alone and was courageous enough to take me with her was truly revolutionary. It lay her wide open, I later learned, to her family's ambivalent mixture of critical gratitude and thinly-veiled scorn.

I know that now. When I was six however, I accepted the

generous offerings of her crippled soul at face value. Her reaction to my picking up a sick mongrel puppy shocked me. Bursting out of her paralysis, my mother wrenched the box from my arms and began to trot in that unpredictable, zig-zagging fashion, as if eluding enemies only she could see, back to the car. All the time she squealed orders at me over her shoulder. "Careful with that 'English glass'" - her euphemism for dog shit, "Don't step on that vomit!" Soggy and tearing down one corner, the box wobbled at the tips of her stiff, outstretched arms. The puppy's balding head and one paw thumped bonelessly over the edge as if made of rags. Once at the car, a cream and turquoise 1952 Thunderbird she'd christened "Pumba" after a Walt Disney cartoon, she heaved the box into the trunk and tied the lid with a string so it would stay open a few inches. She drove home at such a furious, reckless pace two taxi-drivers shook their fists and screeched "Vaquera!" after her. At a red light, a man stuck his head and stretched his arms out of his car window to illustrate a comment so colorfully gross about her style of driving ("Doña, your balls are this size! One is purple the other blue!"), I did not understand it for years. At home she tore off my dress, three layers of stiff ruffled petticoats, underpants and socks, dumped me in the bathtub and scrubbed me from head to toe with an abrasive solution of vinegar, starch, Alcoholado 70 and hot water. Her hands scoured with maniacal force. I wasn't sure if she was disinfecting me or warning me. Then, forearms still

dripping from her efforts, she left a frightened Tata Nina armed with talcum powder and cologne-water to dress me. From the bathroom we heard the tires squealing as my mother shot down the driveway with the puppy still whining in the trunk. She returned about an hour later, breathless, raking her fingers through her hair. She tore off her own clothes and announced that the puppy was safe in a veterinary hospital. Then she scrubbed our three miniature silver poodles in the deep laundry room sink and hosed down the trunk of her car - two things she'd never done before. Waves of exasperated martyrdom exploded from her every move.

I spent all afternoon alone balancing on the highest branch of our mango tree in the back garden trying very hard to believe the puppy was in an animal hospital. That evening I ate my dinner alone in my room - I can't remember if by choice or by command. The navy blue dotted-swiss dress I had worn that day, with the two rows of red cherries embroidered down the front, disappeared. The next time we went to visit Tio Manuel, my mother spied on my every move as if I were a creature from an alien land. But strangely enough I understood the nature of my crime: I had trespassed over an elusive, sacred frontier whose boundaries could not be learned by words alone. (At least not words the stubborn humanitarian in my mother could bring herself to utter.) The angry, atavistic scouring had nothing to do with my health. And, basically, nothing to do with dogs.

From that day on, whenever confronted with a stray

healthy enough to struggle approximately upright, my mother would drag me to the nearest dry ground and stamp the earth with one foot. If the dog merely cocked an intrigued head, my mother would stoop for a rock. Not that she'd actually pick one up with her white gloves on. The simple motion of a human reaching for a rock was enough to hurl the bravest creature whining and scampering crab-like into the tall feathery weeds that edged the footpaths.

The eyes of the sick dogs along the footpaths were usually rolled back so you could only see the surrounding sclera: filmy yellow hemispheres crisscrossed with purplish-red veins. These globes reminded me of a picture of a fertilized yolk in a children's science book at home written by one of my parents' friends. The caption underneath the picture read: Baby Chicken, twelve hours old. But all I could see in the photo was a thriving network of shiny red pathways all stemming from an invisible center. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't imagine something throbbing and alive in that tiny, white pin-space the arrow in the photo was so helpfully pointing to. It was just as hard to imagine something throbbing and alive in these half-closed yolks of eyes - until a paw twitched or a spurt of saliva dribbled down a black tongue causing a sudden cloud of flies to buzz indignantly over a hairless skull.

"Don't look, querida." Too late, my mother's gloved hand would yank me faster along the footpaths. Without a

downward glance, with the sole aid of that internal radar system of hers I'd noticed before, she would regally navigate us around the puddles where rotten mango skins fermented with chicken shit in the boiling sun. Here and there among the tall weeds at the edges bloomed small clusters of bewildered blue or yellow wild flowers, as if to mark the places where their creator had momentarily dozed off into the footpaths of another country.

Back at home after these infrequent visits to Tío Manuel, my mother would come sit beside me on my bed where I'd exiled myself and take my hands in her now gloveless ones. She would still be wearing one of her two-piece linen dresses reserved for working in her law office, shopping in Old San Juan, and visiting older relatives. This included Tío Manuel, slum or no slum. The dresses consisted of short, sleeveless tops with matching straight or A-line skirts. Both pieces were lined with some slinky satiny material that hummed, when rubbed, like a breeze squeezing through the branches of a tree. All interior seams were finished with a trimming of lace. One of my mother's basic tenets of life is that every dress should be wearable inside-out. (Not that she ever would.) The only variable in her uniforms was the color. Not just pink or green or orange but, she insisted, "interesting" shades such as coral, jade, salmon. Sometimes a distinctive detail over which she and a seamstress labored hours in conference was added: a delicately scalloped rim at the bottom of one blouse, a piping of a slightly lighter

shade around the sleeves and neck of another. There were similar dresses in black, gray and violet for her different mourning needs. With these official outfits went a single string of pearls, a gold pin near one shoulder, a pair of short white cotton gloves (usually worn over both hands but sometimes merely clutched in one hand like a passport), a mother-of-pearl folding fan with a gory hand-painted bullfight scene on either side, and a pair of aggressively polished white pumps. This was Puerto Rico in the fifties, when seeing a flock of garishly sunburned tourists in Bermuda shorts and preposterous straw hats parading through the University campus was an amusing novelty to be talked of for weeks. The days before air conditioning, wall-to-wall carpets and iron bars over every window. I think this meticulous memory of my mother's mode of dressing is so insistent because no familiar detail quite symbolized for me the radical change in Puerto Rico as when a few years later, in the early sixties, my mother put away her white cotton gloves for good. I remember clearly, still with a sense of shock, that she did not wear them to Tío Manuel's funeral.

"I know it's difficult for you, mi amor," my mother would console after each visit. She spoke in a loud, practiced whisper to be heard above the indolent drone of the fan suspended from the ceiling like a huge moth. "But you're his oldest grand-niece. And he never forgets your Saint's Day. He always asks about you. Besides, he's

very sick. He can't last long," she confidently assured me for ten years.

"It's not that." I had to explain each time. And each time she sighed and released my hands. With the side of one thumb-nail she'd press back and forth over a wrinkle on her old-rose or ripe-olive linen skirt. It was time for her clinching story.

"You know, before you were born, your father and I were asked to show Old San Juan to a group of social workers from New York. This new government - you know Tío Felipín is a good friend of the Governor - had invited them here to help organize our health services. His daughter called us - you remember Pepita, she married Irizarri, the artist who just sold that sculpture of the hummingbirds to the New York Museum of Modern Art. We gave a party for him last month. Bueno. The government functionary scheduled for that tour was sick and she thought, Pepita, we could help out. Answer historical questions and give the social workers a little insight on the new laws, take them to some art galleries and the new ceramics factory. You remember Mal - the American who owns a Cessna like Tío Quique's and was once engaged to your cousin Mari-Nel who finally dumped him for that plastic surgeon with the nervous tick in one eye. Pues, you know Mal is manager of that factory."

Both my mother and father are incapable of talking to me about anyone without adding some graphic morsel of information about them. I always supposed it was a natural

offshoot of their legal minds trained to identify Party A, the undersigned, by virtue of his/her domicile, age and occupation. I often wondered by virtue, or sin, of what either of them would have described Tío Manuel to a stranger. "Everything was going really well. We had just shown them that seventeenth century house Timoteo was renovating - you remember Timoteo, the Venezuelan architect who gave me the turquoise and silver watch which had belonged to his mother, the celebrated singer from Vienna. Bueno. We had just crossed Bulevar del Valle to walk on the old city walls and were looking down at that slum La Perla - I told your father not to take them there, these Americans never understand - when one of the social workers - a young girl from New Jersey who wore orange shorts and a blouse the most atrocious shade of chartreuse green, imagine! just like a pumpkin, and who was all covered with mosquito bites, you know how they always like American blood better for some reason, tired of ours I suppose, practically scratching her skin off she was."

As she talked my mother, rocked herself back and forth, imposing the soothing rhythm of a rocking chair to the immobility of my bed. As part of his ceaseless campaign against our people's "laziness," my father had steadfastly refused to allow rocking chairs in our home, including the maids' quarters, on the grounds that they were "only for old people rocking on porches waiting to die." But I noticed that in moments of grief or confusion the swaying

pattern of comfort internalized as a child from inside the cocoon of lap, chest and arms made by my rocking grandmother would unknowingly overtake my mother. "Bueno. This girl suddenly grabbed my elbow and screeched at me - really mad, really mad at me, as if it were my fault - 'Oh, why don't you do something about all these sick dying dogs?' She was crying, you know, hysterical. And slapping at her neck and arms where the mosquitoes were buzzing. She kept raising her legs one at a time to scratch them and losing her balance and hanging on to me. Imagine! The other social workers had turned to us. They were waiting for my answer. They were all people from the States. What do they know? How can they? What we've been through. When I was a child. So I said, loud as I could, to the whole street, 'We must first take care of our sick and dying people. Then we can think about the animals!'"

My mother was proud of that story. She believed that all we needed in the island was time to correct old ills. My father would repeat the story, deleting her personal labels and substituting his own (the pumpkin from New Jersey, for example, transformed into a striking blond, Marilyn Monroe's twin if not for her unfortunate spaghetti legs) every time a visiting American lawyer complained about the skeletal kittens staggering through the market places and the three-legged, one-eyed mongrels prowling through luxury hotel lobbies, delivering puppies in restaurant washrooms.

"But until then, mi cielo," the ending always went,

"You have to learn not to look. It's a habit. After a while it won't be so hard. I know." A sort of exile of the eyes. My mother was offering me a temporary peace settlement with an indefinite time clause. (I wonder if at her office she would have allowed a client to sign such a document.) But she seemed so certain, sitting there on my bed, ironing wrinkles out of her tangerine or egg-shell skirt with the side of her thumb-nail. "Just wait until the people receive education," she'd say, as if "education" was a finite substance which, efficiently folded, awkward corners neatly tucked, could be wrapped into a package and mailed to a specific address. "Just wait." Her priorities sounded so fair. I never bothered to explain again, "It's not that. At least, not only that." Perhaps because she might have asked, "Then what?" And I wouldn't have known how to answer.

So I nodded to her story and developed an aversion to eggs instead.

In the beginning the aversion was only to eggs with a clearly defined yolk. I was tortured by the suspicion that somewhere in that filmy yellow hemisphere an undetected, invisible foetus was pulsating. I would eat the rest of the food served on the plate and leave the egg untouched. Only Tata Nina noticed. Soon the aversion spread to include scrambled eggs and omelettes. I could no longer eat any food that shared the same plate with an egg. My parents began to

notice. In time the aversion became an active repugnance and extended to include dead chickens, live chickens and chicken feathers. My cousins invented mocking ditties about it. My teachers were warned not to make me draw hens. I wouldn't go to Easter parties. One doctor patiently drew one hundred and seventeen perfectly equidistant blue dots along both my arms and applied one hundred and seventeen solutions, one per dot, to discover I was only mildly allergic to dust and rabbit hair. He introduced the word "phobia." My parents ignored it. The doctor kept sneaking it more and more into his conversations. We stopped going to that doctor. A phobia would have needed an explanation. An allergy played a legitimate role in God's mysterious design. Finally, the repugnance turned to panic at the sight of all poultry, hats with any kind of feathers in them and to feather pillows, then to all pillows.

By the time I was twelve I slept with a folded blanket under my head. The sight of an egg or a feather made me vomit. The accidental touch of either made my skin erupt into red, burning welts on my neck, across my chest and down my legs. My eyelids became so swollen I could not see. I scratched and scratched until the skin tore open and my mother was forced to tie my hands behind my back. Again and again she patted on a cold pink lotion smelling of alcohol and peppermint all over my body. It stung like hell. I cried and kicked my legs and flung my body around the bed until I finally fell asleep with my hair wet and plastered across my

forehead.

Next day I woke up to a brand new world. Raindrops on the grass would be brighter and bigger than I remembered, filled with radiant, provocative slices of reflected garden. Chains of gold and fuschia clouds over the neighbors' rooftops were fiery caravans from a far-off desert land come to visit me. I was free. I felt like I always expected to feel after confession and communion but never did. Somehow, the pain of the day before had been a forgiveness. Now I could enjoy the bright new world. Until the next touch of a feather.

Sometimes I even found myself sneaking into the kitchen when Tata Nina was out in the laundry room. I'd open the refrigerator door and dare myself to touch an egg, to touch off that chain of agony, screaming and release that would deliver the bright new morning where I could play without fear of turning a corner and finding ... of seeing ... what? I had finally forgotten. I was in control. In control, if not of the cause, at least of the effect.

By the time I was twelve I had learned to navigate the maze of puddled foot-paths to Tio Manuel's rooms safely behind my mother's white-gloved hand.

The corpses had become as invisible as Milagritos.

The wind-voice from the solitary confinement cells howled unhampered through its endless space of pain. Like

the voice, the memory of Tfo Manuel's ghost seemed no longer limited by boundaries but composed out of every ordinary detail of life. The sweaty, horized walls of my office could have been one of the ghost's arms. The three hundred years behind Pedrito's engagement ring could have been the other. That noon, swiveled defiantly away from the articulate, insistent challenge of the open door, I had the impression all paths led to and came out of the very center of the ghost's existence. Either everything would explain it; or nothing would. Like my mother, I assumed all I needed was time.

I closed my eyes and again saw the hand, four fingertips rubbing up and down over the door in greeting or farewell.

TWO

The Courtyard of Pavilion D

All the inmates at the Hospital Público Central de Psiquiatría wear uniforms: pink shapeless cotton gowns that come down well below the knees for the women and loose pale blue cotton pyjamas with most of the shirt buttons missing for the men. That first day sixteen months ago when I set off alone to find my office through an intricate tangle of dim windowless corridors and fenced external passageways, the uniforms made me think of those maternity nurseries where the sex of the new-born babies, the only differentiating trait in their lives so far, is announced by the color of their blankets.

I don't know when I began to consider the hospital itself as a main character in my story with Tfo Manuel's ghost. Those cave-like hallways where voices boomerang uncertainly and one's footsteps are always a little bit ahead or a little bit behind one. The rat-maze quality of its five irregularly-shaped buildings, randomly scattered, unidentified, haphazardly united by narrow covered passageways. Those grassless courtyards between Pavilions bisected by the walkways into two large fenced-in cages: one

for the men, one for the women. Those eight-foot tall walls of Cyclone fencing perpetually darkened by pressing bodies and distorted faces, intertwined with patients' coiling and uncoiling fingers: live, seething murals of anatomical fragments. The rain which collects on the flat roofs of the Pavilions and spills over like a cataract well after a storm is over. The way we are all virtually trapped inside a waterfall during hurricane season and even our thoughts adopt the liquid thudding rhythms of the surrounding walls of water.

Other buildings provide a setting for action. This hospital seems somehow to insinuate itself into the foreground of the action.

I may have already begun to perceive this on that first day. After a short interview during which the Director mainly inquired about Tía Concepción (he owns a champion chihuahua she had bred), he excused himself for not being able to show me to my office. As an afterthought he had gallantly provided a pencil sketch executed with lavish detail on the back of an advertisement for a 3-D movie: The Monster from the Black Lagoon plus spectacular second feature at midnight only The Thousand and One Wives of Aladdin. From the corner of my eye as I left his office, I saw him raise a pea-green fly swatter from his desk, poised for action. I had not noticed any flies.

In spite of the generous sketch, I got royally lost. The hallway clocks disoriented me. In the first half of

Pavilion A it was ten fifteen; in the center of Pavilion B, four thirty-three; just around the corner either noon or midnight. I had to stop every few feet along the almost deserted hallways to try to dislodge two gluey wads of chewing gum with the edge of a quarter from the sole of my right shoe. Fresh speckled mop-trails meandered through layers of older faded mop-trails. Having nothing else to lead me, I followed first one then another mop-trail.

At times, shrill drawn-out screeches or low, growling howls accompanied by a chorus of banging metal noises made me stop and look around. The cries sounded subterranean and oddly personal, as though directed specifically at me. They were almost deafening in one of the Pavilions and hardly audible in others. From behind closed, unmarked doors I didn't dare knock on came the drone of secretive, sometimes angry voices or the confident clatter of typewriters. The details of the Director's sketch seemed irrelevant to the puzzle of corridors and passageways. Inside the courtyard cages I watched dusty blue or pink-clad patients playing dominoes on overturned Coca-Cola crates, trying to bat cinammon-colored rubber balls with wooden rulers, and rubbing their breasts or testicles with the absorbed absentmindedness of ritual. As I walked between the cages, I noticed their walls had originally been painted ironic nursery colors: sugary orchid, teddy-bear blue, baby-aspirin orange, but the star-shaped splatterings of red mud thrown

up by the rains and the rivulets of rust fanning from the metal bars obstructing all windows had almost obliterated the colors.

According to my calculations I should have reached Pavilion Z and well beyond. I longed to take off one shoe. Putting my weight on the outside of my right foot as I walked to avoid the active centres of the two wads of chewing gum still clinging to the sole of my shoe was making the edge of a buckle dig into my ankle bone. Following a familiar mop-trail down a corridor, I recognized a small 'inviolable visitors' room I must have passed half a dozen times. The door was open. It was the only one with a sign on it. I walked in to be greeted by an army of cigarette-scarred plastic armchairs the color of bile. A low coffee table protected by a shield of chartreuse marble arborite confronted the chairs and offered, in doubtful promise of peace, three yellow mould-flecked paper gladioli out of a dented plastic vase. The gladioli struck me as having a temporary and aggrieved air - as though someone had brought them there under false pretenses and they were still waiting to be taken to their rightful place. A gray-haired male patient with no shirt on stood in a corner, his back to the room. He seemed to wait with the same impatient unbelieving air as the flowers, as if expecting the walls to suddenly disengage and let him through. There was no one else in the room. The flabby laps of the chairs looked more challenging than inviting. But ironically, I saw it was this quality of

adamant, plastic unbreakability which gave the visiting room its sad, vulnerable air. It was a survivor. A refugee rather than a refuge. The patient's back suddenly arched, I watched each vertebra protrude in a graceful rippling motion through his skin. His arms contracted and flew up to his face as if to ward off a blow from the walls. Quickly, I tore a strip off a Kleenex out of a pack in my purse, folded it and tucked it under the offending buckle. I walked out of the room. Now I avoid it whenever possible.

But somehow the visitors' room filled me with a reckless strength. Across from the room was a heavy metal door which I had tried opening twice before and had finally assumed to be locked. This time I managed to push it open. I stepped down into a different courtyard. Later I learned it belonged to Pavilion D. Instead of the usual Cyclone fence, these cages were enclosed by ten-foot tall iron bars with sharp triangular spikes on top. The cacophony of screeches and lamentations was loudest and most compelling here. But somehow, released into the open air, the cries were no longer missiles aimed at me. The navy blue uniformed orderly-guards did not patrol this passageway as they did the others. Here the guards clustered inside the cages in watchful knots of threes around the doors to the wards. I was immediately awed by the serene absence of litter. The other courtyards were virtual gardens: exuberant flower beds of crumpled wrappers and banana peels set in deep, rich lawns of flattened cigarette butts. Here, there

was only a thin red layer of dust occasionally dented by an opaque mud puddle. I remembered the Director saying that the most deteriorated patients were not allowed games, magazines or snacks. About a dozen women sunned themselves in the cage to the left of the covered walkway where I scraped along, still trying to free the sole of my right shoe. Two women lay coiled on their sides facing one of the mud-splattered ward walls: bare feet tucked under thighs, uniforms bunched into pink flaccid folds shrouding their bodies. They made me think of sacks which had been violently thrown against a wall, had burst, and were now slowly emptying of their contents. Soon, I thought, perhaps when I walked back to the Director's office in Paviljon A for my first staff conference, they would be totally deflated: two pink rags at the foot of a wall. Other women paced woodenly, or sat blinking in the sun, or wiggled urgently as if huge spiders were crawling up and down their backs. The women were all barefoot. In the middle of the cage, a chunky girl of about fifteen stood singing with her eyes closed and her head flung back. The skin on her round, sun-glowing face caught my attention. It had the blurred texture of wood coated by a scratched layer of varnish. The gown had slipped off one shoulder to reveal a map of interconnecting bruises ranging in color from the green of new leaves to night-time hues of purple. All the shades melted into each other like those of a water-color painting left out in the rain. Her dark brown

hair, raggedly short, stood up around her head in petaloid tufts. With her face swiveled sightlessly up to the sky she resembled a grotesque, unwilling sunflower: so readily unfurled to, yet so deliberately cut off from, the light. As I walked past her, careful to keep out of arm's reach, as I'd been warned by the Director, I recognized the song she was singing. A lullaby. "A la nanita nana, nanita nana, nanita é-a..."

Tata Nina always used to sing me to sleep with that song. I hadn't heard it for years. I smiled and automatically began to yawn. All of a sudden, two hands grabbed my right arm from behind and jerked me back against noon-hot metal bars. I was pinned against the other fence, the one caging the men's half of the courtyard. So intent on keeping my distance from one, I had walked too close to the other.

"You! Who are you? I know who you are," a toothless voice wet with saliva accused, pushing the challenging familair "tu" hot and dark into the back of my neck. Without turning, I pulled and tried to wriggle away. Two other hands caught my left arm. "A cigarette, missi," a new voice demanded, a small shrill voice, sharp with contempt. Other voices, male and female, took up the chant. "A cigarette. A cigarette." They reminded me of school children repeating a lesson: some wheedling, some querulous, others vacantly. The hot dark breath continued pressing into my neck.

I was both terrified and embarrassed. Each state,

rather than invalidating the other, intensified it. I remembered nightmares I'd had as a child in which I was being attacked by cannibals. My knees buckled under me and my stomach churned. Only getting away mattered. At the same time, an image instantly produced itself in my mind: a vivid incongruous picture of myself, Inés Marisa Molina de Soto, M.A., meticulously groomed for her first day at work in a sky-blue linen two-piece dress with white piping around the pockets and gold charm-bracelets inanelly chiming from both wrists, pinned to the bars of a cage by a band of (in my imagination) wild-eyed drooling patients. And this spectacle created a more insidious grown-up terror: that of being laughed at. Which I suppose is another form of cannibalism, its accepted civilized counterpart: the eating away of another's self-confidence, a peculiarly Puerto Rican and highly polished art form. Suddenly, there were three loud bangs against the iron bars. The hands let go.

"Ey! You two thieves, leave her quiet! Shooo! Get away!"

The orderly-guard hurrying down the passage from Pavilion D had unlooped the wooden club from his belt and swung it menacingly in the air, but his face remained placid and amused. It was a very flat square face, jutting out at right angles over his temples and again under his cheeks, almost as if one side of a child's large building block had been used to sculpt a man's face. The reverberations from the struck bars died away slowly. By then most of the

women had crushed their bodies against the fence and thrust their arms into the passage. The arms waved and crisscrossed in threatening confusion. They made me think of tentacles of sea creatures caught in the midst of opposing currents.

"Nueva, nuevita, hueva, huevita, nuevecita, huevecita."
New, little new, little egg, small new, small egg, a rasping female voice rhymed senselessly and tonelessly above the harangue of male and female voices reciting, "One cigarette, missi. One little cigarette. Ahn?"

The guard banged his stick against the men's bars three more times, then tucked it under one arm. "Look. You. Get going!" He flapped his hands like a farmer clearing his porch of unwanted chickens. He turned and banged on the women's bars. The women jumped back then scrambled over each other to crush their bodies and thrust out their arms further up the fence.

"Ey! And who told her to walk so close? Ey? The demon sends his women and his grapes to create new curvatures of space between the stars!" The wet, toothless voice defended itself with messianic fervor above the metallic ringing. It belonged, I saw then, to a wildly gesticulating midget of a man with only two teeth, both solid gold, in the lower gum of a cavernous mouth. His patchy murky skin seemed actually colored by his indignation, as if the blood in his veins had turned black. Both of his arms pumped quickly, jerkily up and down in rhythmic contradiction to the sweeping majestic

cadence of his words. I had the impression the pumping arms belonged to someone else, to a mindless body-builder lifting weights in reponse to a chronometer while a raging poet elsewhere discoursed with leisurely gusto on interplanetary curvatures of space. On his feet he wore lace-less, ankle-high black and white sneakers. Both their tongues curled rakishly, articulately out over the toes in what seemed to me at that moment a perfect pantomime of freedom. Other voices, male and female, took up his harangue, each one distorting the original words, making them go in different directions I couldn't follow, stretching and looping them as children do with strips of hot toffee. My knees had stopped buckling but my stomach hadn't stopped churning. I stood very close to the guard.

"Give them a few little cigarettes this time, miss. To calm them," the orderly advised. "It's not regularly permitted but..." He tapped his club absently against the bars of the women's cage. Behind his shoulder I noticed that the chunky girl with the blurred face had stopped singing the lullaby and had opened her eyes. "They'll be at you every day anyway for a while." He shrugged encouragingly. "But a bit less each time." I fumbled through my purse and took out an almost full pack of filtered Lucky Strikes. "Make sure you tell them it's the last time ehn," the orderly-guard cautioned me and it struck me he had the calm, polished bedside manner of a doctor handling a distraught mother with her first sick child.

But I was not quick enough, or far away enough, again. The pack of cigarettes was grabbed from my hand and swiftly disappeared into a whirlpool of waving arms and blue pyjamas. I carefully centered myself back in the middle of the passage and ransacked my purse for an unopened pack, my last. This time I gave it to the guard who still hovered over me with his professional soothing air. He made the interested male patients line up along the bars and began to hand out cigarettes one at a time, slapping away with friendly expertise the hands that made a second or third appearance. About half the men in the courtyard ignored us and continued to pace their own private orbits. Reluctant to continue my trip alone, I turned to look at the women.

The grotesque-sunflower girl was searching vaguely around the courtyard, as if trying to find her unfinished song. She felt my gaze and, suddenly furious, turned abruptly to me. Fascinated by the unexpected change in her, I could not look away. Her black eyes ignited the air, between us with her anger. Perhaps she blamed me for loosing her song. Gone was her tender love affair with the sun, a sort of human photosynthesis. Now she pawed the ground with enraged muddy feet, as calloused as hooves.

Then all of a sudden she charged in my direction. She ran heedlessly gaining speed until she crashed against the iron bars of the fence. It was as if she had not seen them at all: a wild animal duped by a transparent window-pane. She was momentarily stunned. She stared at the fence in

disbelief. Then her anger transferred itself from me to it. She climbed four feet up on the bars and began to shake them as if to wrench them loose from their cement base. She held on with strangling fists, knees pressed inwards against two bars, flexed toes pressed outwards against the bar on either side. As she rattled the bars she bellowed curses in disjointed, ululating syllables. Sometimes she sliced one word into two or three. Other times she linked the ending of one word to the beginning of the next. Or as many as five words together to make one. The wails had the effect of incantations in a foreign yet strangely familiar language. The jagged sounds seemed to rip out of her stomach walls and emerge bleeding to rise over the top of the fence and spear into the pale belly of the sky. As she bellowed, she tried to devour one of the iron bars. Her teeth were clamped around it. Her jaw muscles rippled. The skin over them stood out crisply white in her strangely blurred bronze face. Her stubby teeth rasped continually up and down the bar setting my own teeth on edge. I raised one hand and bit on a knuckle. Soon her tongue turned black with flakes of rusty paint. When I swallowed, my own tongue felt gritty.

Behind her, near the dented metal door to the women's ward, three orderly-guards held an animated discussion among themselves. Each had one foot propped against the wall and his arms folded across his chest. Once in a while, one or the other gesticulated with his wooden club in our direction as if to demonstrate a point. My orderly-guard finished

handing out cigarettes to the men and began with the women crushed against their fence, tentacle-arms waving. I searched though my purse again for something else I might be allowed to give them. I was irritated by its useless clutter. A gold fountain pen with my name engraved on it which had seemed earlier that morning an absolute necessity rolled annoyingly from side to side clanging against my fan and car keys. I snapped the purse shut and looked at the men's cage.

Three male patients were also trying to wrench their bars in sympathy with the girl on the fence. One of them was laughing, another was sobbing. The last was barking like a dog. Behind them, a little to one side, stood an emaciated old man with wet flabby lips and a few stubbly patches of white hair on his shiny pink head. On the side of his skull near one temple, was a large U-shaped scar with one leg slightly shorter than the other. It made me think of the imprint of a horse-shoe left behind on a thick mud puddle. The old man imitated to perfection the girl's contortions, the angle of her head, her biting, bellowing motions. But although just a foot away from the real bars, he had chosen to shake and devour imaginary ones. Not a sound came out of his mouth as he wrestled with a fence only he could see. The simple eloquence of his silence frightened me more than all the screeching and barking around him. I was afraid that in one second I would begin to hear the soundless incantations which emanated like heat waves from his skeleton, afraid I

would see his bars. I lowered my eyes and pulled open my purse. I finally chose two half-used books of matches from Pedrito's and my favorite night-club where instead of bar stools they had swings, and hurried after the guard. He waved the matches away.

"They're not allowed to smoke." He turned back to the women with the last three cigarettes in his hand, but not before I saw the beginning of a grin on his building block face. I couldn't tell if the grin was mocking me or not.

Then I noticed one exceedingly tall male patient with a giraffe neck and shaved head give me a dignified wink and solemnly stuff a cigarette into his mouth. He chewed it with the unhurried celebration of a cow - or a Buddhist monk. Two other patients next to him followed his initiative and with much less solemnity kept winking at me as they chewed. I was determined not to be surprised at anything anymore. I had trained for this, though at university we had called them case A and case B and tested them only in two-way mirror rooms with professors anchoring us to sanity on the other side. I felt certain that if I were to know all the patients' histories and their projective and intelligence test results, after a few interviews I'd be able to plot feasible diagnoses and outline tentative therapeutic programs for them. Probably this cigarette-eating was the only safe luxury allowed them. Not so long ago their parents and grandparents had been chewing tobacco.

"Oh. They eat them," I observed as nonchalantly as I could to the guard's navy blue back.

"I don't think so, miss." The guard sounded surprised. This time his response was unmistakable. His shoulders shook with silent laughter. I looked back at my dignified monk. He winked solemnly at me again, unbuttoned the fly of his pyjama pants, and began to masturbate.

By then my guard had run out of cigarettes and was shouting something about a movie he had seen to the three guards still in animated discussion near the women's ward entrance. Most of the women continued to wave their arms through the bars. I rummaged inside my purse again. I considered by turns my comb, an almost new book of airmail stamps and a rosary made of tamarind seeds. My guard waved his hands at the women, crossing them repeatedly in front of his face, "No more. finished." One thwarted woman kicked the fence with her bare foot and winced. The girl still ululating curses on the fence seemed to resent this attack on her own private enemy. She dropped to the ground and began to paw the dust again with enraged feet at her new foe. The three orderly-guards detached themselves from the ward wall and ran to the girl. They caught her under the armpits and began to drag her away. She tried to bite their hands but one guard jammed his club under her chin and forced her head so far back I could only see the tip of her nose. The dry dust rose around their feet and blurred their legs.

"Come miss, follow me." My guard was walking away. I

slipped my crushed, half-empty pack of Kleenex to the woman who had kicked the fence and still had her arm outstretched through the bars. Other hands made a grab for it. As we entered the dark main hallway of Pavilion D, I looked back. The pack of Kleenex had dropped in the middle of the passage between the two fences, unreachable from both sides. The two women resembling burst sacks at the foot of the wall had remained immobile throughout. I fancied they looked a little emptier. Seen from this new perspective the staff passageway between the two cages had the appearance of a third cage, a longer narrower one.

"It's like a sport, miss. They have nothing else to do," my guard explained, unmasked, as we walked along the khaki corridor with its painted brown horizon. The corridor was lined with the closed doors of doctors' offices and crowded with the shadowy shapes of waiting patients - standing, squatting, or lying down - on either side. "They trade the cigarettes with the less severe patients who are allowed to smoke. The ones you see walking free around the halls and yards. For pennies, or candies, or sometimes, they're so..." my guard sought delicately for a word, "you know, gone, they'll trade them for pebbles or sticks." We came to the end of the corridor, pushed open a heavy metal door and stepped into the blinding sunlight.

"Better ignore them this time, miss," my guard advised as we prepared to walk between the cages of Pavilion E. He was the perfect physician steering a distraught mother again.

There was just the right amount of pleading in his voice, fused with a very real compassion. "Act like they don't exist. That's the best. You'll get used to it." He didn't bother to lower his voice. I walked close behind him, at that perfectly calculated distance to be just out of arm's reach from both sides. As my eyes adjusted to the sunlight, I became aware of unfocused blue and pink blobs swarming at the edges of my vision. I lowered my head and glued my eyes to the guard's wooden club swinging from his hand with the measured, inevitable rhythm of a pendulum.

At lunch that day I was unable to swallow more than one bite of my egg-salad sandwich. By two o'clock when I called my mother to come drive me home, I could barely see the numerals on the dial disk through my swollen eyelids. The allergy-monster which I had assumed forever vanquished during my five years of university in North Carolina had crawled back out of its lair. Like my parents, I also invented names to avoid calling it a phobia.

In time I learned to walk effortlessly through the vague pink and blue blurs in the hospital. I learned again to avoid chickens, feathers and eggs. I developed a perfect internal radar-system which allowed me, without looking, to navigate safely between the gray lumps of discarded chewing gum that mushroom like cancerous growths along the hospital corridors and passageways. But though I never consciously saw them again, I remembered the sunflower girl and that old man with the horse-shoe lobotomy scar branded on his skull

more clearly than any of the patients I examined since. Often during the next few months I struggled with a detailed insistent memory of the old man's arched back and limb contortions, of his oh so silent bellowing and biting motions trying to wrench and devour those bars only he could see.

After all, if we could turn the visible into invisible, why shouldn't they do the reverse?

It wasn't until I'd been working at the hospital for four months, while cleaning out my desk drawers, that I noticed that the Director's gallant pencil sketch on the back of the advertisement for a 3-D movie was quite misleading. In it, Pavilion E was placed parallel to Pavilion C while it is really on the other side, perpendicular to D. There were also two pairs of bold lines indicating two non-existent walk-ways: one between C and E and another between A and D. I tapped my index finger a few times on the misplaced Pavilion then, on a hunch, took the sketch to Chucho Medina, my office neighbor and immediate superior.

Medina (not one of the Medinas from Mayagüez according to my mother) leaned far back on his swivel armchair and gave the sketch that initially impressive, thoughtful consideration he gives everything from a new pilot study on the adult application of the Goodenough Draw-a-Person test

to a fly posed on the rim of his coffee cup. It is the watchful concentration of a fraud who is constantly on his guard against exposure and which sometimes succeeds in passing for intelligence and strength of character. But two things give Medina away: those fussy, almost illiterate curlicues at the beginning and end of his twos, threes and fives, and those bizarre, meaningless conclusions in some of his recommendations. "This bus driver is suffering from a constipation of his mathematical powers," I once read of a manic-depressive who on several occasions had abandoned a bus-load of passengers on the Condado bridge and disappeared without a word for five or six months. And another time, of a fifty-seven year old widow who had just tried to drown herself and her youngest grandchild during a family picnic at Luquillo, "The Thematic Apperception Test results clearly indicate a positive anemia of her sex drive." Medina's wavy mane of hair is a suspiciously uniform and distinctive rusty-gray - that shade of nicotine-stained gray which chain-smokers' moustaches and beards often acquire. He has been working at the hospital for twenty-two years, since before even Bachelor degrees were required of psychologists here, and was trained on the job. He is always expansively paternalistic with me, often insultingly so. I assume he resents me because I was chosen over his youngest son, a recent high-school graduate whom he had hoped to also train on the job.

To the rest of the staff Medina is a cross between a

joke and a nanny. To the patients he is a cross between a magician and God. On their first interview after admission he always claps the men on the back or passes an affectionate arm around the women's shoulders promising, "Now don't worry yourself. We'll have you out of here in no time." And such is his outrageous confidence, no patient ever begrudges him the fact of being still, years later, committed to the Hospital Público Central. An important paper has been mislaid by a new secretary, someone higher up has still to sign another petition, the social worker who is a "special friend" of Medina's (those two words always accompanied by an insinuating wink even the patients copy when retelling the story) is on holiday, etc. "...But don't worry yourself. I'll get you out of here, trust me." And they do. The diagnostic tests he must administer are dismissed by both him and his patients as trivial bureaucratic red tape. The patients come to him if they mistrust the color of the medicine a nurse has swabbed on a cut, if they are afraid of having chest X-rays taken because the evil spirit of a dead aunt inhabits the machine, or if they suspect an orderly-guard of having an affair with their wife who, has suddenly begun to visit them three times a week.

From my office I can hear him forever on the phone shouting over the chronic coughs and hiccups of his consumptive air conditioner. He pleads causes with the dietitian, ("...but baked chayote gives her diarrhea!"),

referees arguments, ("...but he only hit you once this time, you didn't need a single stitch..."), or shamelessly pulls strings. ("Do it for me. You owe me one. Remember the car battery..."). He is not above a little blackmail. I think the patients relate to him - better than to some of us - because he is the reincarnation of a familiar type of island authority: that of a small-town mayor personally known to all, a purveyor of enough unessential favors to make everyone forget his initial unkept promises. In short, all the patients worship Medina and he in turn basks parasitically in the importance created by the hurly-burly of his manipulations on their behalf. Whenever I complain about him at home, my mother blames it on his not being one of the Mayagüez Medinas. "Poor little man. What can you expect? No one has taught him any better." As if it was all a lapse of good manners. My mother finds no contradiction in being simultaneously a passionate believer in democracy and a passionate snob. Medina makes me both despair and laugh. But for a certain kind of information he is unbeatable. That day he studied the Director's sketch as if it were a work of art of doubtful provenance which he must either authenticate or disprove. Then he tossed the paper on his desk with a dramatic flourish of the wrist, sank further back into his swivel armchair, and transferred his unwavering thoughtful consideration to my face.

"I bet he was too busy to show you to your office. And his secretary was on holiday. And his assistant on an errand.

True?" He gave an uncharacteristic bark of laughter.

"Let me see. He said he had to go to the dentist soon. And that his assistant had sprained something - an ankle. And the chief psychologist had been called on an emergency."

Nodding, Medina slipped out a pencil from the top of one ear, held it ominously still by the fingertips of both hands for a moment then began to twirl it methodically like a roasting rod over an open fire. "The very shameless one!" He suddenly laughed again with grudging respect, then shrugged. "It is his way." He eased his chair down and pushed the sketch over to me as if expecting applause. Authenticity had been duly established. With an attack of fanatical absorption Medina bent his rusty gray mane over a stack of uncorrected Stanford-Binets which had been on his desk since my arrival and were to remain there for at least four more months. Behind him on the high windowsill, crammed between two iron bars, I noticed a tin can with a single struggling branch of ivy. The stem was manacled by three rings of string to an upsidedown yellow pencil stuck in the earth. The plant's spindly top half had grown beyond the attaching string and collapsed over double, as if trying to burrow back into the earth, back into non-existence.

"Don't worry." Medina looked up unexpectedly. "You'll get used to it," he said with a sincere simplicity which surprised and shamed me. Back in my office I speculated on what Medina had meant by it: the suicidal plant, the

director's artful duplicity, Puerto Rico itself? With a jolt I wondered if he could possibly know about the ghost.

I noticed however, that the experience of having been pinned against the bars by the patients on my first day brought me acceptance from the rest of the staff instead of scorn. A subtly mocking acceptance to be sure, but acceptance. I was one of them now. Once I began to talk about it, I found they'd all gone through variations of the same initiation rite. And worse. One young radiologist had been completely undressed and almost raped by five female patients last July. No wonder my orderly-guard had seemed so practiced and amused. Unknowingly, he was member of an elite elusive substructure: a conspiratorial scheme between the old staff and the patients to train the new staff. I began to see the sport of the cigarettes as a form of inverted shock therapy. Began to guess why a lullaby-singing sunflower would transform into a mad bull.

That was around the time Tío Manuel's ghost finally integrated all its recalcitrant members and snuck out in one piece through the billowy folds of the drinking fountain.

THREE

A Room With No Doors

Out in the khaki hallway where a new shift of pink and blue blurs had convened and waited for Medina to kiss their sores and make them well, it was still, and probably always would be, three nineteen. In my underwater laboratory it was eight minutes past twelve. I stared with fierce distaste at the two triangles of cheese and tomato sandwich on my desk, immaculate on their sheet of wax paper. Contemplating the ghost's chronic unghostly behavior always killed my appetite.

That first shock at seeing the fully assembled ghost rise out of the water fountain was followed by a zealous anxiety which did not abate for weeks. I thought about it constantly with a physical sensation of being stretched beyond tolerance: my brain literally buzzed in complaint. The possibility that I might be going crazy I initially accepted almost gratefully, then discounted. Observing myself with the frigid detachment born of panic, I detected no other symptoms. No matter how I twisted the facts, I was left with the baffling, translucent presence of a ghost with unfocused eyes in danger of losing its pants at any

moment. Its isolated bits and pieces by themselves had been fascinating phenomenological disturbances of minor importance which I assumed would soon disappear when I settled into the hospital routine. The anxiety over the appearance of the fully realized ghost, however, was surprisingly followed by a sense of growing expectation as exciting and disturbing as falling in love. I could hardly wait for the ghost's next visit. I despaired when I thought it might never return. As when I had fallen in love with Pedrito three years ago, all trifling details of daily life developed an overwhelming sensual clarity pregnant with significance: the sounds of running footsteps in the night ringing on the cobblestones in front of our house in Old San Juan; the tickling-shining of the shower water cascading down my bare arms.

Lately, I had been waking up in the middle of the night to a sense of embracing and being embraced by limitless star-filled space, combined with that incomparable moment as a child when one discovers a tiny tiny yellow wild flower no one else has seen under a bush. It was as if an immense balloon of air had suddenly collapsed and there was no longer any separation between its opposite sides. The tiny yellow wild flower was the boundless heavens. For one second-aeon of time there were no unanswered questions, nothing more needed be done. I would wake to this miracle in the darkness and not dare take a breath. But slowly, the balloon would start filling up. The skies crept away from

the petals. I recognized the walls of my room. I couldn't tell if this experience was associated with my love for Pedrito or with this new relationship with the ghost. There was the same combination of innocence and passion in my feelings for both. The same promise of conquering the unconquerable.

Going for a walk on a deserted beach with Pedrito, rolling up the cuffs of our pants, picking up a discarded blue candle, a child's hollow bowling ball, a beautifully preserved crab's claw, watching the sunset from a blanket of pine needles, sheltering the lit candle between our cupped hands until it burnt out and the night became our light. A day with Pedrito had something of that miracle of sky and flower united but, as with Tío Manuel, marred by the constant fear of loss. And since I could do nothing about the ghost's appearances and disappearances, I sought Pedrito more and more, as if his presence were somehow a link with Tío Manuel's ghost. We moved up our wedding date from November to July. Tata Nina began to forgive Pedrito his engagement ring ("Perhaps the senator will be amiable enough to permit you to marry in a white dress, ahn?"). Soon the ghost's mission would be manifest. Then, perhaps, I could share it with Pedrito. Life was a glorious, glowing waiting I had been chosen by It. Nothing would ever be the same.

But after a few months of It leaning against the cafeteria table next to mine, munching vacantly at the skin around a thumbnail, planet eyes lost in a nurses' plate of

rice and beans, or of it shuffling out of a neurologist's bookcase to nod distantly at me as if to a slight acquaintance, I experienced instead a mounting anger. The more vaguely affable Tío Manuel's ghost became, the more specifically furious I became. The cretin. The insufferable monster. It had led me to hope...

"You are a boring sort of ghost, you know," I'd ventured with the vindictiveness of a jilted bride once when Tío Manuel's ghost had been sitting crosslegged on my desk for five minutes earnestly watching me eat some potato salad. "Are you hungry? Here, take it. Anda. Ay..." I mimicked and to my horror saw the planet eyes cloud with tears. There is something so vulnerable about red-rimmed eyes with no lashes: two open wounds.

Actually, I was beginning to feel guilty. Tío Manuel's ghost was going through all this trouble for me, but if it was trying to make a point, I was too dense to fathom it. The same trouble Tío Manuel had taken over those equally impressive but useless handkerchiefs. I wondered if the ghost had been also haunting others. My mother? Tía Concepción? Surely they'd have made a production of it by now: Psychiatrists. Priests. Mediums. Or perhaps this was the ghost's dress rehearsal for larger, better hauntings to come. I noticed a perverse irony in the way it meandered in and out of my life as whimsically as my mother and I had paid our visits to Tío Manuel. I became convinced the key to Tío Manuel's haunting would only be found by reliving these

visits.

In the six months that followed, I developed an elaborate and fanciful ritual for stimulating my memory. It was not unlike an unwitting parody of a séance. Now, as I stared at the untasted triangles in their bed of crumbs on my desk, I slowly unfocused my eyes. There was no conscious decision. For the first time it simply happened of its own. Slowly, the triangles began to fade into the whorled grain of the wood. The whorls suggested the dunes and ripples of a desert. The unexplained meteorite of Tfo Manuel began to materialize. Eyes still unfocused, I watched past and present travel towards each other: the sandwich and its star-shaped crumbs sinking into the wooden swirls of the desk while the meteorite emerged from the same depths. They locked together for one perfection, then released to travel away from one another once again. I saw a particle breaking off the meteorite. At first it was only an ashy smudge.

I could not appreciate the comic, ludicrous aspect of this ritual at the time. I lost myself within the magic crumbs with solemn superstition. The triangles may have been unlikely substitutes for a crystal ball but they had the advantage of not having to be explained away should someone walk in. The process however, was unpredictable. Often, remembered rooms and pathways remained hazy, as if fog-bound; voices sounded muffled, as if trapped behind walls. That day I was lucky. The speck of dead world began

to squirm with life.

Tío Manuel was living then in a soon-to-be-fashionable part of Old San Juan. I counted twelve steps down from the Cathedral parking place into a winding narrow alley then three left turns up narrower, smellier crooked lanes before losing all sense of direction. My mother stopped often to check instructions on the back of a folded envelope. Suddenly, one house at the intersection of two alleys caught her attention. It had been recently reconstructed to its ancient Spanish glory. In the August noon sun the glare of its uncompromising white walls made us squint. All details acquired the blurred contours of a dream imperfectly recalled next day. Tiny wrought iron balconies where only one person could stand cupped the tall and narrow shuttered windows. Hyphens of red-tiled eaves slashed the walls but gave no shade. Over each of the four ground-floor doors curved splendid transoms filled with different colored glass triangles: blue, green, ochre, red. Only one triangle was broken, a pale blue one. Its remains lay on the much darker iron-blue cobblestones of the alley like slivers of fallen sky. Close by, one little girl in an apricot dress with coy, unexpected puffed sleeves and a gaping broken zipper under one arm played with two little boys wearing nothing but mud-coated undershirts. They took turns throwing cans of water scooped from a nearby puddle over a litter of kittens

that miaowed and crawled among the shards of splintered sky. The Cathedral bells rang the noon hour.

"Twenty-seven families in that one. The Figeroa's. The couple from Coamo - you remember, the father stutters. Took them three years to get all those people out." In that one year of house-hunting my mother had become an expert in every phase of this bold sanguine conversion from contemporary Puerto Rico (noisy, cluttered, smelly, grubby) to Old Spain (heraldic, affluent, cultured, romantic). A wet kitten with hair stuck together into spikes scrambled near my mother's white pump. Without looking she took a few steps back and switched to English. "As soon as Bambi Figeroa - the one who went to law school with your father, threw herself at him - no shame, poor girl - found space in a new housing development for one family and it was legally evicted, another family - you know: nine children, two great-grandmothers, a few second-removed in-laws, the works - would sneak in in the night and take the old family's place. All those people in one room. Imagine!" Don't look, but imagine!

"Bambi - she was always a determined one, you should have seen her go after your Tío Alfredo when your father married me - finally she had to rent a truck and practically move every family out herself, child by child, goat by goat, then had metal doors built to seal up each room until they could begin the renovations." My mother squinted wistfully up at the tiny wrought iron balconies. They were less

blurred now, but whether because my eyes had become used to the fiery sunlight leaping off the walls or because knowing someone who had actually been able to rescue one of those ancient houses from their present colorful squalor brought my mother's dream closer, I couldn't tell. "They discovered a sealed, dome-ceilinged alcove full of old maps and seventeenth century swords off the master bedroom. And a huge wine cellar which connects with a secret underground passage from the Cathedral. For a bishop's mistress probably." My mother's eyes dropped to the freshly-painted spaces between the four equidistant, noble doors on the ground floor. Every inch had already been conquered by strident rococo swirls of graffiti and by flapping remains of torn posters made all the more urgent by the ragged incoherence of their amputated slogans. ELE NA! entr ULA NO Puer, I read outloud and waited, as though for a translation. "But even Bambi Figeroa doesn't dare live here yet."

As we walked on looking for the house we hoped Tfo Manuel would still be living in, I remembered the Figeroa's two children. They had been brought in for lunch one Sunday about five years ago for my inspection. From my mother's anxious hemorrhage of labels before they arrived, I knew she very much wanted me to like them and just as much suspected I wouldn't. (I later discovered Dr. Figeroa was my mother's psychiatrist.) The girl, nine then like me and billed by my mother as a budding poet and musical prodigy,

paced all afternoon around our music room with an infuriating air of detached silence, clutching to her face a lump of perfumed white wax deep within a lace handkerchief and smearing the lump rhythmically and emphatically over and around her lips. As she sauntered by my father's piano she'd strike one single key, a different one each time. For a while I wondered if I was supposed to guess what tune she might be eking out in this miserly fashion, but I became too bored, or too afraid of guessing wrong, to bother linking the solitary notes together into meaningful phrases.

The boy, eleven and just as unyielding, spent an hour in the back garden mutely trapping coquies in an empty can of Planter's peanuts. At dinner he had suddenly burst into hiccuping tears over Tata Nina's lasagna (eating Tata Nina's lasagna is a religious experience that takes people in unexpected ways) because his mother had, again, refused to buy him a gun for his birthday. With a flirtatious jangle of gold charm bracelets Bambi Figueroa had plucked a pomegranate from my mother's carefully balanced center piece and explained she deplored violence. My mother managed to catch a few grapes and one mango before they rolled off her side of the table and smirked superciliously at my father. Dr. Figueroa never said anything and I missed hearing him stutter. I later found out the girl had been suffering from an allergy attack brought on by either the liquid fertilizer my father had just sprayed over his canna lilies or by the

nylon hair of one of my dolls. My mother thought that should have given us a bond. Actually, I could not forgive the girl her-almost lyrical affliction which left her free to float around strangers' music rooms masked by a lace handkerchief plunking out messages in code in contrast to my own allergy which chained me, unartistically swollen and welted, to my bed.

The house we were looking for turned out to be an unusually wide one at the dead end of an alley, bridging one side to the other. It was three stories high. From far away its walls had that opalescent sheen of the Atlantic Ocean at noon. Up close they were an intricate mish-mash of powder blue and marine splashes showing through burst bubbles of peeling verdigris and lavender. Interspersed were random patches of turquoise and streaks of violet where people through the years had either run out of paint or out of interest. Here and there large rosettes created by fallen plaster revealed unhealed sores of pinkish bricks. I rather fancied the whole effect - which was like a garish version of one of Monet's late waterlily canvases - but my mother pointedly yanked me in before I could enjoy it further. We entered through a deep archway and immediately felt a fresh, humid coolness breathing out from the walls. I had not yet travelled to another country but I was convinced that, at a given wrinkle in space which formed the barrier between two countries, there would be a sudden transformation. The brand new climate would have a separate

air with its own smells and special textures, there would be a different tint to the sky and the grass and people's skins. I imagined a frontier to be like a tapestry begun by one artist and suddenly continued by another using a contrasting stitch and different thickness threads of startlingly different colors. Travelling across a perceptible bump in the fabric, all my senses would be sharpened and every incident crackling with newness.

Going into the house Tio Manuel lived in was like that.

First, the sudden darkness after the bonfire of sun in the alley. Then the unexpected welcome coolness which pricked my skin into goose-bumps. Followed by the smells of fried codfish and stale cigarette smoke, of coffee, spilled beer and urine which seemed to coil out separately or in unlikely combinations along with the dampness out of the ancient walls of the tunnel-like entrance. The sudden blindness threw sounds back at us, ten times louder. Flies buzzed as if caught in bottles. Footsteps slapped, scuttled, shuffled around us as if amplified by microphones. Somewhere a carpenter was sawing a mile-thick plank with a giant saw and someone else was hammering metal stakes with a giant hammer. Radios mamboed, newsed, advertised from all directions and meshed into an almost impenetrable net of noise around us. Out in the courtyard a baby cried with the dull desperation of habit.

My mother's hand found mine in the darkness. She took

small, slow steps. The walls of the deep archway were lined with shapes unclearly seen. They stirred things in pots, or counted things aloud shifting them from one pile to another, or simply lay there - I could not tell if awake or asleep. Half-clothed children darted back and forth through a constantly shifting clearing in the center of the archway. Some stopped to giggle and point at us. We could see more clearly then. The younger ones' eyes were bright with curiosity. The older ones' were grave and opaque with scorn. From the luminous end of the archway a dark negro woman lumbered up to us. She wore a tight red satin dress and had the flattest chest I had ever seen. The dress curved tightly over her prominent stomach ballooning before her in generous compensation. Elongated golden semicircles glimmered on her eyelids. She wore no lipstick. A rhythmic metallic banging directly above our heads made me look up. The loose corner of a rusty scrap of corrugated iron shading the archway flapped reproachfully against the frame it had freed itself from.

"I'm looking for Don Manuel de Soto Sevilla. Could you tell me where..." My mother had taken out another old folded envelope and a stump of yellow pencil from her purse and now stood in blank readiness, pencil poised in her white-gloved hand, as if she were waiting for a message from an unseen caller on the telephone. Behind her I could see the courtyard, as lively as a market place and a school yard at recess-time combined. All the life of the house seemed to

have literally spilled into it and was now ready to overflow.

The flat-chested woman turned ponderously without answering, cupped her mouth with one hand and bellowed into the bustling courtyard, "One for de Soto Sevilla! Manue-el!" Her behind protruded from her red satin dress about the same as her stomach did. If it had not been for her face and feet one would not have been able to tell her front from her back.

A tubby, unshaven man with no neck to speak of who had been sitting at a foldable table in the center of the courtyard playing dominoes bustled importantly up to us. He wore no shirt. As he walked, he wiped his hands vigorously over his violet-splattered khaki pants. A pair of dangling red-and-black striped suspenders clipped to the front and to the back of the waist swung in loops around his hips. His skin was the same "interesting wild egg-shell" of my mother's linen dress.

"Good afternoon, Señora. Is that the Don Manuel, very old he, who lives with the Negra. - " He snapped his fingers twice, "ahh sii, Martina?"

My mother nodded, pencil poised. "He still lives here?" From her manner I could not tell which answer she would have preferred, yes or no.

"Ahh sii." The man rubbed the top of his head with the palm of one hand so hard I thought maybe that's what had happened to his neck, it has sunk into his chest through

years of rubbing. "We play dominoes sometimes." Then, as if he had just thought of another Don Manuel, very old he, who lived with another Negra Martina and had to make a more positive identification, he thrust one outstretched hand in my mother's face and curved the index finger slowly out of sight into his palm.

"H-Mmm," my mother half-coughed, half-admitted, "Where - "

But the man flipped his hand around and held it palm out to us meaning wait. He turned to face the courtyard, stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled Wheeeo-wheet!, that familiar street whistle used by men to call other men. Immediately, two small black children scurried shyly out from behind a wall of wet laundry. A brown and white baby pig scampered squealing out of their way.

"My youngest sons," the neckless man said, slapping one hand affectionately on each boy's head. I could see their own necks were already in jeopardy. "Take them to Ña Lola at the end of the third floor." He pointed to the far right hand side of the tiered gallery surrounding the courtyard. The complex, frothy woodwork of the gallery - countless delicately carved columns, roof-beams and balusters - had in some distant past been painted white. Against the stained, graffitied blue-greens and blotched purples of the courtyard walls, the gallery looked like the foamy crest of a polluted wave. "But take those stairs," the neckless man admonished pointing to the opposite side, the far left of the courtyard. "They're safer."

Ña Lola proved to be a tiny old woman with hardly any hair who lived on a cot covered with newspapers at the very end of the gallery. During a rain storm she had no protection. All the energy of her missing hairs seemed to have concentrated on the three or four remaining black hairs on each eyebrow, forcing them to jut out thick and menacing about one inch from her forehead. They made me think of electric antennas. Ña Lola was eating peanuts from a paper bag with a hand which seemed upholstered with bark. At either end of her cot was a very tall doorway partially covered by a curtain which hung over a rope strung between two bent nails. Above the curtain through both doorways I could see the high-beamed ceilings from which dripped clothes on contorted wire hangers or from nails, coiled mosquito nets, hammocks, yellow-black bunches of over-ripe plantains, heads of garlic on a string and blackened, twisted strips of fly paper. A radio commentator's voice spilled from one doorway. It was giving an account of a horse race at such tongue-twisting speed you'd swear its owner was trying to describe every single step of every single horse just as it was happening. From the other doorway blasted the familiar voices of a radio soap-opera, Los Tres Villalobos, which unknown to my mother I used to follow from the cold cement floor of the laundry room while Tata Nina ironed sheet after sheet, wetting her index and middle fingers with saliva every few minutes and tapping them against the hot underside of the iron to check

the temperature. Tata Nina doesn't trust electricity. Somehow, the little appreciative hiss which followed - the language of that constant painful communion between Tata Nina and her iron - always seemed the most important part of the soap opera to me.

Na Lola said, "Ahh si. Don Manuel. The one with the missing finger," and threw a little bunch of peanut shells on the black and gray tiles of the gallery floor.

My mother scraped a little dried mud off a gray tile with the tip of her shoe. It showed up white underneath. "Mmm. Marble. I wonder if this house is for sale," she muttered in English.

"Fol sale! Fol sale!" Na Lola cackled as if she were mocking us. But her little monkey face was serious. "Ju wang house heeal? Ahh si, I speak dee English, me. I leev gwán jeer ing Niu Jol. Gwán!" She raised one crooked bark-covered finger. Her high-voltage antennas wiggled proudly. "But not this house. Sold already. They tell us six months to move out..." she said in Spanish once more and shrugged, panting a little, perhaps exhausted by her efforts in English. "That house there, behind," She pointed with one hand over the balcony to a rooftop where three lines of pink and red laundry flapped in the wind and with the other hand threw another bunch of peanut shells to the floor. "Juánito. Juan-niito!" Na Lola banged a vehement fist on the wall behind her.

A twelve or thirteen year-old boy with dark blue baggy

pants rolled up to his knees, no shirt, and boasting a hopeful smudge of a mustache over his upper lip elbowed his way out of the curtained doorway where the racing commentator was out-racing the horses. He held a tin plate full of steamed rice and codfish stew in one hand and rapped a gay staccato rhythm on its rim with the tin cooking spoon in his other hand. "Take these people to see Don Manuel," Ña Lola ordered with an imperious twitch of her antennas. Juanito leaned against the door jamb and crooked one bare foot beneath him against the frame. Tin-catatin-catatin-tin-tin went the spoon. "The Don Manuel whose wife is in jail?" Ña Lola shook her head and jabbed a peanut into her mouth. Catatin-tin-tin catatin. "The Don Manolín who owns the fighting cocks?" Suddenly the tallest of our two guides took a step forward and shyly stuck out one outstretched hand in front of Juanito's bouncing musical spoon. Slowly he rolled back the index finger so it disappeared into his palm and quickly dissolved in laughter at his daring wit. Catatin-catatin-tin. "Ahh, sii," Juanito nodded and vanished behind the curtain.

My mother leaned over the once-white balustrade and studied the rooftop of the house for sale, expertly calculating the size and number of its rooms and the thickness and year of construction of its walls through its fluttering red and pink flags of laundry. Perhaps she was already praying for hidden wine cellars and buried alcoves bristling with historic treasures. The two black boys who had brought us there squatted by the balustrade and waited

with that curious attitude of silent belonging yet watchful apartness which fellow voyagers on long complicated journeys often adopt with each other. Although the brown paper bag was not large, Ña Lola didn't run out of peanuts. The hill of cracked shells in front of her cot grew steadily. It was like watching a film on the formation of a mountain where aeons of time are compressed into seconds and the slow evolution of rock is made to resemble the blooming of a flower.

Ten minutes later Juanito came back out with a blue plastic comb instead of the tin plate in one hand and made motions with the other hand for us to follow him down the gallery. As he walked, he combed his already perfect hair and patted it into place. The two black boys, still smouldering with giggles at the tallest one's daring wit, came along. "Don't pee yourselves on those stairs, ahn!" Ña Lola shrilled after us without looking up from her bag of peanuts and I would not have been too surprised if little puffs of smoke had burst out of the tips of her eyebrows. But whether the advice was meant for Juanito, the other two boys, or in some roundabout, subtle way for my mother and me was not clear.

Next we stopped at Doña Remedio's cubicle to collect her daughter Raquelita who was a cousin of the Negra Martina and had some greasy food dripping bright orange drops through a wrapping of newspaper to take to her. Raquelita led all five of us up and down corridors with rotting wooden floors mappd with curling islands of red-flowered linoleum,

through large tall rooms partitioned into miniature windowless cells separated by half-walls and sagging curtains and lit by moth-clogged light bulbs dangling from the high beams, then up some ladder-like stairs with missing rungs and down other regally curving marble staircases lined with garbage-stuffed paper bags and torn mattresses along both sides, and then across a smaller back courtyard festooned with laundry and hammocks in one of which swung three tiny children with a black and white baby goat shared in their arms. On the brick courtyard floor many wooden cages were stacked over each other. Their dark interiors were crowded with live crabs. Raquelita led us along the narrow restless aisles formed by the cages. The crabs lurched around and climbed over one another with loud scrabbling noises. Their panic made me think of people fighting to get out of a burning building. As we walked between their cages they stuck out huge crescent-shaped snapping claws between the bars at us while at the head of the parade Raquelita kept calling, "Watch out for your le-egs!" in a cheerful voice and the food she was taking to the Negra Martina continued to drip greasy orange blobs through its newspaper wrapping. As usual while searching for Tfo Manuel, I was sure this time we'd find him dead.

And in my office nine years later I remembered thinking: How odd that here where Tfo Manuel lives he is known by his missing finger while at home this fact seems not to exist. For our family Tfo Manuel had somehow resurrected in

a curiously amorphous state. All my childhood I kept waiting for those verbal demarcations which would give his elusive being a contour: bits of gossip, anecdotes, jokes. My other relatives had long since been condensed into mind-size miniatures, frozen into the poses of their habitual descriptions: Tía Concepción caught with a smug grin on her fat face in the act of patting a malevolent chihuahua on her lap; Tía Encarnación stabbing a thin silver needle into an eternal crochet loop while miles of the wretched stuff only she could call lace coil around her feet like tame snakes; a half-concealed Titi Felicia, snapped while extricating herself from her black holy garments. But, undefined and undiminished, Tío Manuel refused to join this collection. Surely death, the ultimate label, would once and for all shrivel and tuck him into a niche.

But it was lucky for us that there in the crowded world where Tío Manuel lived that year he had acquired such a dramatic description. The same Tío Manuel with all ten fingers might have taken us all afternoon instead of just half an hour to find. And another thought I didn't share with my mother: that circuitous route to his room - up and down and up again, along tortuous crooked hallways, turning left when we wanted to go right - followed the same path described by Tío Manuel's handkerchiefs from the time they left his hands to make their way to mine, a veritable procession along each coil of our family chain, each link

adding memories and creases to his original gift.

Brooding on this in my office that Monday, I wondered if the rhythm I had divined within my mother's family - that seductive, reckless spiraling around an action, a place, a thought, seldom touching it directly - was not also the rhythm of all Puerto Rico.

Tfo Manuel's room was painted a livid carnation pink. It was more a closet, or a cell, made of buckling cardboard walls dulled in places by large continents of yellow-brown humidity stains and by smaller, off-shore islands of blue-green fungus and squashed bugs. It smelled of fried onions and Brylcream hair pomade. Yet the effect, possibly because of the color of the walls, was incongruously cheerful.

Tfo Manuel, like Ña Lola, lived on a home-made wooden cot. This one was covered with brown paper bags slit lengthwise, again along the bottom, then placed side by side. Next to the cot was a short doorway with a curtain across its lower half. Over the top I could see two people from the waist up. A fat molasses-colored man in a sleeveless undershirt combed his hair with carefully careless wrist-flicks in front of a jagged sliver of mirror on the wall. Beside him an almost purple-black woman with what looked like yellow leaves of hair pressed tightly around her head as if to form a swimming cap stood smoking

and fanning herself with a folded newspaper in slow disdainful arches. Her back was turned to the man with the eloquence of a slap. She wore only a strapless white bra. As the man combed his hair fresh waves of Brylcream invaded Tfo Manuel's room. Both people's skin glistened as if dipped in oil. They were as close to us and as far away from us as if projected on a movie screen: each and every detail of their intimate lives touched ours for a moment but had nothing to do with ours.

My mother and I must have been announced by some of the other children of the house who had attached themselves to our parade running on ahead of our guide, for Tfo Manuel received us with his head turned emphatically to the wall.

"Don't come talk of hospitals, ay..." His words greeted us, sharp and swift as arrows in flight. "I don't go to any hospital!"

He was lying on his back, his arms tensed at either side: a shrivelled stump of an old man with a caved-in chest, wearing nothing but blue-and-white striped pyjama pants several sizes too large. Under the electric bulb swaying gently overhead his skin was the color and texture of those yellow rubber gloves North American housewives use to wash dishes; large spidery freckles seemed to crawl all over his hairless skull and down his hairless arms. At his slightest movement the paper-bags beneath him rustled and crinkled like dry sea-grape leaves in the ocean wind.

Pressed against the partition wall opposite the cot

stood a tall, gaunt black woman with the bushiest, softest-looking gray hair I had ever seen. It was as inviting as a fuzzy powder puff. My finger-tips ached with wanting to dive into it. She wore a shapeless sack dress the exact cheerful carnation pink as the room so that at first sight she had seemed just a disembodied black face, two black threads of arms and two black threads of legs set adrift on the surface of the wall. Wordlessly she nodded her elegant powder-puff head to my mother. By then the newspaper wrapper had turned completely orange and almost transparent with grease. The woman disappeared with it behind the half-curtained doorway and came back dragging a wooden chair with a woven straw seat for my mother. (In the film, the fat molasses man was now kissing the woman with the yellow leaves of hair, his carelessly careful fingers digging into her cheeks, distorting her opened eyes into menacing slits.) With a grim hostess-like anxiety, Tio Manuel's friend patted the paper bags at the foot of the cot for me to sit there, then began to flap our guides away with her hands, the skeletal fingers dangling flimsily from the palms as if made of stiff wispy rags ready to drop off any second.

I looked away from her hands. They had reminded me of a disembodied puppy's head and paw dangling rag-like over the side of a box. My skin began to burn as if scoured. I became uncomfortably aware that if it had been my father there instead of my mother, he'd have asked the names

and ages of all the children who'd accompanied us to the room and given each a dime before dismissing them himself. What made me so uncomfortable was not knowing if my mother's regal and marble distance from them was a result of her personality, therefore modifiable by me, or due to her being a woman, therefore trapping me into a tight box future of the same: of never being allowed my father's easy familiarity with them except, like my mother, in the unsurprising world of the home. And I recognized I was again blundering around that invisible frontier whose boundaries could not be learned by words alone. And the not-knowing was a sudden sadness without wings.

When our guides finally left, after much laughing and stamping of feet, the Negra Martina went back to blend in with the wall opposite the cot. She had not spoken one word. The cot was the only piece of furniture in the room. I wondered where she slept. I imagined her thin wasted body flattening further, dissolving into the buckling cardboard partition every night, becoming as two-dimensional as a picture torn off a magazine and scotch-taped to the wall, and then stepping out every morning back into the third dimension to borrow chairs and accept gifts of dripping food that came in stained, transparent newspapers. I wondered if she was Tio Manuel's daughter, or his life-long mistress, or merely some kind neighbor who had taken to nursing him between two other jobs and would be left behind along with

the cot and the paper bags when he moved on to his next room.

"Me, to die in a hospital, I don't go. Ay..." Tío Manuel shot his word arrows again into the stale air once my mother and I were settled but he still wouldn't look at us. His knobby toes wiggled indignantly. Cackle, rustle went the bags.

"I brought you some fresh mallorcas, Tío Manuel. From La Mallorquina. Your favorites." My mother extracted a white paper bag from her large purse. The paper bag was adorned with sinuous, baroque red letters across the center, each vowel a dainty exquisite cobweb of carmine threads. My mother had never brought Tío Manuel a present before. Her face had a glow I associated with those evenings after she had won a tough, protracted court-case. An overpoweringly specific bakery smell rose out of the bag. I hadn't known one could actually smell white powdered sugar through a paper bag, or those incredibly delicate but crispy crusts that cover the half-bread, half-cake buttery and heavenly squishy mallorcas from La Mallorquina.

Tío Manuel seemed as surprised as I. His body folded with a jerk to a sitting position like a dried twig suddenly snapped by a footfall. His legs swung agilely over the side of the cot. His four-fingered hand assaulted the fancy paper bag while beneath him the sheet of slit brown bags rustled and crinkled up a storm. Silently, solemnly he devoured the four toasted mallorcas. His lips and chin glistened —

with melted butter and the tip of his nose became glugged with wet knobs of powdered sugar. He held the mallorcas awkwardly between his thumb and middle fingers. I couldn't stop staring at the grotesque yet somehow undefiled space between the fingers.

Near the end, he tried to share a piece of mallorca with the Negra Martina but when he looked around, she wasn't there and again I imagined her melting stage by stage into the wall. "Qué carajo, -ay..." Tío Manuel swore joyfully and ate the whole piece. Then he sucked all his fingers one by one and burped contentedly as he stared at the crumpled white bag on the floor.

My mother's smug, "Bueno," was an uninvited guest gate-crashing the devout silence. "We'll come again soon. I'm happy to find you so hungry." She began to pull on her gloves. "That's always a good sign. Ay mijo, if at least you lived a little closer and didn't move around so much... we could all bring you mallorcas and buñuelos and flanes whenever you wanted..." Here my mother's voice trailed away, as delicate and tempting as the receding smell of the mallorcas.

That did it. Tío Manuel's nostrils flared. His usually mild brown eyes ringed with blue blazed. Those distant planets shrouded in their private skies were two bright hot stars now ready to burn neighboring galaxies.

"I know you! You bring mallorcas in your hands but hospitals in your brain, ay!" he spat out in a hoarse bellow.

His body had petrified again. The caved-in chest appeared to deflate even further. His tight yellow skin, as taut as the leather stretched over a drum, seemed to reverberate with subterranean vibrations of fury. "Go. Go! You all left me to die once already in another country, ay. Anden. Leave me again, ay... I order you. GO!"

His body collapsed back on the cot. His head twisted again to the wall. A freckled arm shot up. Its hand squeezed into a trembling fist and pointed at the doorless doorway to the gallery. And from the fist I saw unfold, larger than life - like the magnified sounds in the entrance archway - I saw unfold the ghost of Tfo Manuel's missing index finger. It was haloed by a tired silvery light which also trembled with anger, this swollen accusing finger mangled by I knew not what in a strange land I only knew by name. Out of his fist it unfolded, brighter than ever before, to exile us out of his life.

Us! For the first time during a visit Tfo Manuel's manner had lumped me together with my mother. I felt confused, then betrayed. Even not knowing what had separated me from my mother in his mind, I had somehow depended on that something - perhaps in more ways than I had realized. Up till then his deferential treatment of me had been like an unknwn password between us kept in readiness for an emergency. Now as my mother with her straight unvanquished back towed me out of the room, I looked back at Tfo Manuel. I waited for him to somehow still honor that password. I saw

his legs suddenly bend and contract into his body as if his stomach had been kicked. But his head remained turned to the wall. Even the film above the doorway curtain had been suspended. The actors had disappeared. In the pink doorless room only two things moved. Overhead, the lightbulb orbited on its long black cord with the measured inevitability of a pendulum, and one torn brown paper bag kicked out of place by the contraction wafted slowly oh so slowly to the warped linoleum floor.

On the way home my mother stopped to investigate the house crowned by the pink and red flags of laundry she had studied from the third floor gallery of Tío Manuel's, the house Na Lola had told her was for sale - the house which we finally bought and are living in now. As we came out, I almost walked into a man driving by on a bicycle with a cage full of cackling hens roped over its back tire. He veered sharply away from me and slid dangerously over a rain puddle leaving a shower of white feathers descending gently oh so gently over the alley.

By the time we got to the car I could barely see through my swollen eyelids.

But of course the power to banish is not reversible. Short of their own death or madness, exiles cannot exile their exilers in return. That was the last time I was taken to visit Tío Manuel. From his cheerful carnation-colored

room he was moved to a war veteran's clinic in Hato Rey near the Three Undaunted Virgins' house. There he died two years later, exactly one month before my debut at the Casino de Puerto Rico.

I never learned how they did it. Perhaps the promise of all the fresh, toasted mallorcas he could eat finally unmanned him. Or perhaps the many lawyers in both my parents' families at long last discovered a legal path to the clinic which didn't need Tío Manuel's consent. It was neither expected nor encouraged that I visit him there in his final room surrounded by all those old dying men. I imagined their minds would be like empty unmoored rowboats slowly drifting out to sea. Delirious voices would call out to long-dead faces, mummified arms would reach out from mounds of wilted sheets to imaginary hands. I was told Tío Manuel was constantly sedated, that he seldom recognized his visitors. So they - reasonable, sane and busy people that they were - visited him less and less. Probably taking him mallorcas was forbidden by the clinic anyway.

But even from there the handkerchiefs continued to arrive faithfully once a year through the family chain to taunt me with their perfect beauty and perfect uselessness. Was there forgiveness in that gesture? A warning of some sort? A subtle ironic revenge? A heroic disdain? And who was buying them for him? The pain of not knowing seemed like an extension of that wingless sadness which had settled on my shoulders during our last visit to him. And in order to

dispel it, I invented.

Supposing one day back in 1952 a relatively healthy and unbroken Tío Manuel had been limping along with both hands in his pockets down Avenida Muñoz Rivera, around Parada 20. His fingertips would be flicking against nickels and quarters and the key to his new hotel room - making them spin round and round with that jaunty sporadic belief in fate which strikes us all and sends rosary beads twirling and numbered lottery balls spinning inside round wire cages. He was newly returned to his island. Some of his family had begun speaking to him. The sun, the warm air, the familiar buildings smiled greeting at him and in response he spun the coins of fate: this was his year.

Outside the forbidding wrought iron gates of the Iglesia del Sagrado Corazón he stopped to watch the usual noisy knot of beggars and vendors which perhaps more than pews and altars and chalices spelled religion at that moment for Tío Manuel. Behind the spiked iron bars the church seemed far away and deserted, distanced from the scene by its fresh coat of pale gray paint and dazzling white trim. A blind man with white crescent eyes was ringing a silver bell with the concentrated devotion of an altar boy at his first mass. Tío Manuel remembered him from long ago. He was sandwiched between one piraguero and one platanutres vendor and still sold the same kind of gilded religious stamps Tío Manuel used to admire as a child. They were embossed with rapt and upturned haloed faces glittering with humble joy.

The stamps were arranged on a tray on his lap in haphazard piles and rows. Their eccentric groupings projected an odd elusive significance, as of an endless game of solitaire played with secret rules. Tfo Manuel dropped a dime on the corner of the tray, began to move away then limped back to drop another dime: this was his year.

Next, I imagined him pausing in front of a man selling cigars and hand-embroidered handkerchiefs. The cigars were stuck like leafless stumps of branches waiting to root in a tin cup between the vendor's bare feet. The handkerchiefs were displayed in a home-made glass-covered wooden box suspended from his neck by a leather strap which, judging from the series of little holes symmetrically punched along one end, must have once served as a belt. Each linen handkerchief was folded into a triangle then pinned to the bottom of the box. Their designs were as inaccessible and tantalizing to Tfo Manuel as the demure gestures of convent girls. He could barely discern the inscrutable eye of a cat, the baroque base of a pagoda, the fiery teasing tip of a peacock's fanned tail. Tfo Manuel reached out with one hand as if to unfold a handkerchief and struck four fingertips against the glass top. He noticed then the rectangular paper dangling from the box, scotch-taped by three curling yellowed strips. On it the number of handkerchiefs was handprinted in black gothic letters; opposite them the price was announced in bright red numerals. But the line that jumped out was the final one.

With an instinctive flair for advertising, the printer had inverted the colors and doubled the length. One dozen handkerchiefs were offered in triumphant red for nine \$dollars\$ and fifteen cents\$, the entire number spelled out in dignified black. Made heady by the welcoming sun and the warm air and the lucky coins spinning in his pocket, Tfo Manuel bought one dozen handkerchiefs on the spot. He had no idea who they'd be for. The withheld fragments of the cat, pagoda and peacock intrigued him. An urge to release all the folded, flattened creatures in the linen worlds overcame him. Besides: it was his year. Had they been more attractively displayed, Tfo Manuel might just as easily have bought one dozen cigars and smoked them all himself.

This fiction had the virtue of stripping Tfo Manuel's gifts of yearly deliberation and personal significance. It freed me temporarily from that guilt which seemed as much part of the handkerchiefs as their exquisitely involuted seashells and leaping, swaggering clowns. Yet this fiction, augmented rather than dispelled the sadness of never really knowing what was behind the gesture. Did the handkerchiefs, even if accidentally acquired, eventually transmute into so many white flags waved in the face of my family? Were they an unconscious compensation for a grand-daughter abandoned in another country? Or a gentle, old-fashioned reminder of my beautiful and useless femininity and therefore a challenge to my parents shocking modern methods of bringing me up? And, overtaken by the fiction, whatever had

become of the two missing handkerchiefs? Sometimes after those lunchtime rituals I wished I'd never started analyzing his gift. I felt that somewhere along the way I'd lost contact with the simple, child's pain and joy with which it had all begun. And which I suspected were somehow closer in essence to Tío Manuel's own reasons for sending the handkerchiefs than any kind of understanding I'd since achieved. It was as if, in reaching out to unfold the gesture of those handkerchiefs in the hope of seeing Tío Manuel's embroidered footprints on them more clearly, I'd also struck my fingers on an invisible glass barrier.

Once Tío Manuel entered the clinic in Hato Rey the handkerchiefs arrived even later after my Saint's Day than before, but each time my mother recited as religiously as ever the names and identifying phrases of each family member who had formed the chain between him and me. "Tía Lula - the one who kisses all the men when she gets drunk. Titi Amparo - the one who tried to smuggle the parrot out of Mexico between her legs..." Each phrase unforgettable for its teasing glimpse into an untold story. And as before, the chain always began and ended with Milagritos.

I watched the porous triangles gradually materialize from the whorled depths of the varnished desk top as the meteorite of Tío Manuel slowly sank back into its desert wastes. Past and present interlocked then began to travel away from one another once again. The ritual was over.

Outside the window I could barely discern a cotton-candy cloud through the trails of old raindrops scarring the dusty pane. The cloud was slashed into fragments by the parallel iron bars. The bars that were in my office, but nowhere near the cloud.

And I wondered if even Tfo Manuel could have described Milagritos. More than simply the smell of her almost-kisses or the tidy repetitive world of her mourning prints.

Or if outcasts are also outcast from each other.

FOUR

Rosarito's Refuge

That was my last ritual with Tío Manuel.

Perhaps the most important thing I discovered from it was that the time my mother and I spent travelling to and from him was always disproportionately longer than the time we actually spent with him: Somehow he had become a destination, a point of return rather than a person. My mother and I went just so far into his world, touched a base then hurried back. I saw that, ironically, in my efforts to reach Tío Manuel again after his death I had inadvertently duplicated this same process: The time I spent travelling to and from my memory of him was as full of complex and surprising little detours as the footpaths behind his rooms; as littered with over-ripe long-festering flashes of moments and disjointed new images as the back alleys and hallways had been littered with rotting papaya rinds and swollen-bellied children. I understood that chasing after my memory of Tío Manuel had been merely another, more subtle exercise in avoiding him. Perhaps my mother's white-gloved hand still led the way. Don't look! And I always landed back

in my office as dizzy, disoriented and displaced as from that first visit to Tfo Manuel when I was six. A sort of jet-lag psychosis between past and present.

That day after the ritual, the symptoms were worse than usual. Listening to the majestic howling of the wind-voice accompanied by the impertinent clatter of tin, I longed for the ghost - if only to throw a soggy triangle of sandwich at it. I was somehow convinced it was the ghost's responsibility to help me out of this in-between-two-worlds state Tfo Manuel's second coming had plunged me into. Nothing was quite right, yet I could not recover the innocence and easy confidence of my life before the ghost's appearance. My breaths were short shallow waves that broke into sharp fragments against my rib cage. My hand, clumsy and unfamiliar, picked up objects and let them clatter to the desk as if testing that the old law of gravity still applied: a cheap ballpoint pen all chewed out of shape, discarded staples bent like miniature fish-hooks, a lump of bubblegum-pink eraser. The top of my desk was an unfathomable geography. Wavy underwater lights swam like iridescent eels over everything. Blurred patches of air ate up my vision. The patches made me think of those opaque ovals condensed on cold window panes when one breathes on them. I wondered momentarily if Tfo Manuel's ghost or some of its copies were breathing too close to the invisible frontier between our worlds, peering into mine like mischievous children with their noses pressed against

the glass. I resisted an impulse to stick out my tongue at them. Soon I could only make out the amputated top half of my kingfisher blue coffee mug, a haphazard cluster of pencils resembling a spiky Chinese character for something urgent and confused like sickness or war, and a deep black hole in the general shape of a telephone. A stack of beige files rippled around the edges like a cardboard box spied at the bottom of a pond.

I felt my eyes abandoning me bit by bit.

— Luckily my first afternoon patient was late. I had finally wrapped the sandwich back in its creased veil of wax paper and returned it to the bottom desk drawer, untasted. Its disappearing and reappearing tricks in and out of the varnished desk top had somehow placed it in a different category from the merely edible and I felt, idiotically but firmly, that it would be unlucky, or impolite or something to actually ingest it. I ordered my fingertips to stop drumming on the pale cream cover of the tardy patient's file on my desk and caught my teeth tearing out the insides of my lower lip instead. I flung out my hand and grabbed the coffee-cup handle as if that chipped half-moon of blue china alone in the whole world could stabilize me by transferring a measure of its own solidity back into my body. I wondered if I now wore that same sheepish, startled expression of someone in the act of waking up characteristic of Tfo

Manuel. Perhaps he too had been pursued by a ghost and been in the permanent grip of a time-lag psychosis. I watched an iridescent eel devour the top half of my coffee mug. In an attempt to escape I swiveled my chair around and came face to face with the coffin of air created by the half-open door. The empty space still vibrated with that urgent, oppressive quality I had associated with the ghost's recent visit. Now the urgency struck me as that of a mute idiot child searching for a word. Hello? Good-bye? Help? This would never do. I swiveled back, took a deep breath and tried to review in my mind what I'd read about the new patient.

Carlos Beique Rivera was a twenty-eight year-old unemployed car mechanic recommended by an army neurologist for a full battery of projective tests upon discharge from a training base in Atlanta two years ago. After two years of stormy civilian life highlighted by a series of attacks, Don Quixote style, with fists and stones against one particular palm tree growing on the front lawn of the house belonging to his sister-in-law (a World-War II widow), the patient's wife (a beautician from Barrio Obrero with three children from a previous marriage), had decided to follow the army doctor's advice.

With more confidence, but with fingers still wrapped around the now invisible half-moon of blue china, I opened the file to the initial interviewing social worker's report signed by a Sra. Blanquita Aponte Rivera whom I hadn't met

yet. She must be that niece of Dr. Pérez Aponte whom Medina had been talking about after the staff meeting that morning, I thought. - the one who had found the scorpion in a desk drawer on her first day here and fainted dead away, then kept a patient's stool sample locked in her hot office over a long week-end and wondered why the lab girls went into belly-clutching hysterics four days later when she took it in to be analysed. I smiled when I remembered my own initiation. She was one of us now. Trial by laughter. All at once I could visualize her so clearly. A little cartoon figure: confident hand offering a brass-colored sample box while, legs akimbo, her body crumpled in a half-swoon to the floor. And at that precise moment I felt a searing split in perspective. Once, watching a movie, I thought I saw the shadow of the director's arm falling over an actor's face. Now, I had the same shocking sense of blundering out of an illusion and back into myself. In some accidental way I had stumbled into the very moment when a hidden mechanism shrank and paralyzed a person for ever. A person I'd never even met. I knew from that moment on I'd always think of her like this - undignified legs akimbo, hand naively offering her embarrassing cargo - no matter how much I might grow to admire her. And it frightened me because even catching it like this in the act I couldn't dismantle the mechanism and invalidate the caricature. For years I had smugly joked about my parent's juridical system of identifying phrases

while secretly incubating the disease. This humiliating discovery almost sobered me.

Slowly I unwrapped my fingers from the handle of the coffee mug and next moment found them tap-dancing over the already betrayed Blanquita Aponte Rivera's signature. I began to review the report. The page was alarmingly white. Disjointed words flew up and seemed to careen off my eyeballs: Caucasian, Barranquitas, adaptation, distribution, mashed potatoes, lieutenant. Mashed potatoes? I tried to find those two words again. But the typed letters seemed now to sink into the marshmallow whiteness, sucked into the world of the page like small wild animals sucked into quicksand. I wondered if this time the symptoms wouldn't pass, if I'd be stuck for the rest of my life in this segmented geography full of iridescent eels, hanging on to china half-moons as to life-preservers. But before the horror of such a future could touch me, my mind bounded off and began to worry about how those words "mashed potatoes" got into the social worker's report. Another "allergy" fellow-sufferer? I was surprised I didn't remember from the previous reading. I decided the words must have been the result of some letter transposition. I'd look it up later. When this whimsical sea of distorted lights finally ebbed. As it always had in the past as soon as someone walked into my office and turned the tide back to my normal world of glassy green walls and barred windows, of dark blue

orderly guards with wooden clubs, of arrested electric clocks behind round protective masks. Protecting what? Even time is manacled here, I thought. No wonder ghosts traipse in and out unhampered.

I opened and closed the central desk drawer repeatedly to watch the colorful cylinders of pens and pencils roll against each other. The insides of my lips burned ragged from biting. I wished my patient would hurry. And then, I had to laugh. Here was my return to "normalcy" dependent on the arrival of a "mental" patient! Fingers stiff with urgency, I phoned the records office where appointments are made. So sorry, said a flustered nasal voice I didn't recognize. Too busy to call. Annette on holiday and with Marilú having her baby two weeks early...Yes. Appointment cancelled by wife. Seems patient had a run-in with a tree or something. Broke wrist and two fingers. Next Tuesday at three ok? I hung up and turned to the dust-blurred window. The cotton-candy cloud had been replaced by a crouching storm cloud with one gray malignant tumor rising like a camel's hump from its back. An iron bar segmented the cloud into twin sections in my eye. Nothing violated its integrity in the sky.

I felt oddly let down. On an impulse I pressed the light switch behind my desk and watched my office sink into a murky isolated gloom, as if I had just broken the last thread of connection between it and the rest of the hospital.

The slime-colored underside of the walls' horizons conquered the room. I closed my eyes against the disturbed darkened waters and eddying shadows in my aquarium and leaned as far back as I could in my reclining chair. It squeaked the usual three times and threatened to disgorge me twice before we renegotiated our compromise between gravity and suspension. I began to float. There was an odd sweet-sour taste in my mouth and a oddly sweet pain in my chest, as if I'd just received a postcard with no return address from a long-lost lover. Different parts of me were dragged apart by different currents. There was a madly buzzing sound trapped in my ears: giant planks of wood were being sawn in far-off corners of my brain. In my new bedroom in our house in Old San Juan I was extricating the limp corpse of an embroidered handkerchief out of a white beaded evening bag. The handkerchief lay inert in the palm of my hand, as light as a missed heart-beat. Two of its pagodas were bruised with heliotrope eyeshadow; the cherry trees reeked of l'Air du Temps and rum and coke; one footpath was made impenetrable by steaks of magenta lipstick. I felt the sudden painful certainty of having betrayed a friend but wasn't sure just who or how. I only knew that the one time I had finally found use for one of Tio Manuel's handkerchiefs had been more distressing than the handkerchiefs' collective ten-year's uselessness. I'd grabbed this last one of his handkerchiefs on impulse from the farthest reaches of

my sock drawer when I flew back to my room to fetch a forgotten lace stole on the night of my debut one month after his death. Perhaps I was trying to defy the awareness that for any other uncle's death my debut would have been postponed. I couldn't remember if the handkerchief had been washed and returned to the sock drawer afterwards or if, unable to face its desecration, I had crumpled and discarded it like a used Kleenex. My mind could not penetrate beyond the moment of its discovery next day. Meanwhile the sawing sounds had died away and giant metal stakes were being hammered into great coffin-like boxes bobbing up and down on an opalescent lagoon studded with island-crumbs. I floated on.

Gradually, I became aware of an altercation down the hallway. At first I couldn't be sure it was not drifting by on one of the currents inside my head. Scuffles. Confused voices. Short, emphatic words with the clout of blunt instruments. Running footsteps seemed to approach from all directions at once, converge in a restless knot in front of Medina's office, then recede. A metal door clanged shut, reverberated. Another. Further away. Footsteps rang in the courtyard outside my window. Unseen pursuers, loudly vocal, gave chase to an unseen silent offender.

"She went this way!"

"I lost her!"

"Vilar! They saw her at B!"

"Alert the gate guards!"

Then the voices and footsteps of the pursuers grew dim and were gradually absorbed by the distant maze of corridors and passageways.

Eyes closed, I dreamt, woke, dozed off again. It was an in-between time: both an expiation and a preparation. After I stopped fighting the contradictory currents, the sensation of floating apart was no longer frightening. But as in those crisp, reborn mornings after an allergy attack I knew I would only be partially released by the sweet-sour double ritual of pursuing then running away from Tio Manuel. I was well aware of the substitutional nature of the defense, appreciative of its cathartic symbolism, amused by the insistence of its mechanism which, like the secret ticking wheels of a clock exposed to its maker - those little wheels once given life by him and now with a life of their own - are totally understood by him yet totally independent of him. But I was also annoyed by the ultimate uselessness of the ritual: who was I kidding? What imaginary bars was I wrenching and devouring like that old man with the flabby pink lips and the lobotomy scar in Pavilion D?

Images: Ghosts defying time and place. In some bizarre, surrealistic way the floating apart was like travelling through that blue house in search of Tio Manuel.

When I next opened my eyes the tide of wavy lights and whirlpool shadows had ebbed. My normal office stood revealed in its place: unlit but sharper, its walls more indomitably glossy green and brown than ever. On my desk I saw the two halves of my coffee mug reunited once again.

I didn't turn the ceiling light back on. This was my time to enjoy the regained balance. The imposed harmony. I bent to the midget metal filing cabinet abandoned by my unknown predecessor behind the desk and began to file away the morning patients: Cúevas Echevarría, Hernández Cintrón... In a solitary confinement cell in the basement of Pavilion D a patient clanged a metal spoon against the bars with a gay, contemptuous rhythm. The whispering, whirling hurricane-voice had died away. Through the coffin space of my half-open door I could hear Medina barking on the phone. "...I know your results seem to disprove her theory...but why won't you just raise those three boys' IQ by fifteen points? What's fifteen points among friends?...Do you want to ruin her thesis? Make her start all over again? And her poor mother... Good old Medina to the rescue, forever on his twisted knight-errant's course. Even his arrogant attempts to barter with truth seemed welcome at that moment. Pérez Irizarri... I began to hum.

Then so slowly, as slowly perhaps as a chick before it is

born becomes aware of the shell around it, I became aware of an encompassing soft dark warmth, I sensed rather than saw its shadow quietly uncurl and cascade in folds to engulf me. Then watched it elongate itself over the open drawer, dimming the beige light of the patients' files. Unmoving, with the tender precision of a lover or an assassin, the shadow waited. Behind me, the nearness also waited: shrouded and stealthy, breathing hard and whistly. It emanated a familiar sweet-sour smell. I was momentarily suspended, pinioned between their two waitings. And in this blank I was somehow not surprised when two hot-wet iron hands dug into the base of my neck and began to squeeze.

I can still remember how each finger dug with a different pressure which continually changed, arhythmically. Some fingers burrowed in painful jabs with insistent, biting nails tearing into my skin. Others gave light, awkward taps which without warning turned into bores drilling tunnels through my bones then transformed back into playful taps. Sometimes the fingertips felt cold instead of hot. But what was so strange, so really awesome, was my total lack of fear. I was only surprised by my own lack of surprise. I knew I should be screaming, fighting back. But I remained perfectly still. I was stunned yet oddly comforted by the warmth enshrouding me, by the familiar-smelling nearness playing its grotesque, silent music on my body. I tried to turn around to face the invisible nearness.

Slowly, I swiveled my chair until it jammed against the metal filing cabinet. But the presence turned in perfect step with me: I couldn't escape it and I couldn't confront it. The iron fingers continued to bruise and caress my neck coming so close to my aorta I couldn't swallow at all and sometimes couldn't breathe. The air in the room turned white then maroon then silver. Time and pain seemed as useless to mourn as tiny drops sprayed off an incoming wave.

Next, I became aware of vinagery breaths, of hot snorting puffs between the finger pressures on my neck. One wheezing burp escaped: expressive, ugly. Then a tongue began to lick my cheek, my eyebrows, my neck - long slobbering licks exactly like a large dog's. The warmth grunted. Haltingly, the grunts turned into little hums suspended in the air like soap bubbles. And all the time I hung on to one fact: I was amazingly unafraid. The iron fingers strangled and jabbed, the nails scraped, burnt, tore, the tongue licked my closed eyelids until spittle dribbled down the outside of my left eye. But something in the familiar smell reassured me. It was the complex smell of rancid grease, of simple animal wants and layers of unwashed body fluids - sweat and urine and blood - mixed with the sweet-acrid smells of sweaty hair, toothless gums and shrivelled spongy fruits in oven-hot stalls. It was the smell of Tfo Manuel's rooms. The smell seemed trapped even in the globes of humming pulsating in the air. Little by

little, the separate notes linked together in a chain and I recognized the song being kneaded into or out of my skin: "A la nanita nana, nanita nana, nanita é-a..." There was a pause. Something was finished. The fingers were still. The tongue was still. I sensed the secret orchestration of mute things shift and flex as it prepared for the next movement.

Abruptly, tufts of dark brown hair began to sprout down into my vision. Some individual hairs curved so close to my eyes they seemed scratched by tiny spiraling rainbows. The tufts were matted and jaggedly cut and shone dully in the dirty window light. Drifting dust-motes danced over and between them. Bit by bit the tufts descended in front of my eyes like the rays of a sunrise in reverse: a dark sun waking up the wrong side of the horizon. The pale rim of a disk began sliding down just a few inches from my face. I recognized the curve of a forehead. Next, two upside-down eyebrows appeared. They were all blurred and distorted by a network of small crisscrossing scars. They quickly slipped down out of sight and two black moons took their place. The moons floated on pudgy cushions which were really the upper lids. Twin black circles stared at me unblinkingly. The unusual perspective of upside-downness lent the pupils an otherworldly air of gravity and significance even while they remained as blank and unquestioning as the eyes of a sleepy child just tucked in for the night. When the eyelids finally blinked, they rose with the stuffily dignified air of an

owl's. All around the eyes the skin was raked by more crisscrossing scars, coarser these, puckering the skin alongside the nose and at the outer corner of the left eye. Then without warning, the face flip-flopped and bobbed right-side-up in front of me. It was the face of an adolescent girl but everywhere so blurred by those tiny ragged scars it had the unfinished look of a stone sculpture in progress, chipped, undefined and slightly mutilated: a face usually kept shrouded under a rag and exposed only to the artist's as yet uncritical and forgiving eye. In contrast she had a doll's perfect cupid mouth. The dark pointy petals of matted hair rose from her scalp as if yanked up then petrified by fear. Her eyes sparkled with solemn mischief.

Thus we finally faced one another. Soon her knees began to bend and she melted soft and warm into my lap. Her hands braced the arms of my swivel chair for support. The extra weight of her body made the chair rock and lurch crazily out of balance. But the girl never stopped humming or looking into my face, as if she were used to sudden earthquakes erupting under her. The chair resigned itself to its new burden and stopped rocking. The girl continued her shiny stare into my face, unblinking and unreacting: a child observing a new nameless landscape unfolding outside a car window, accepting details then letting them go, not getting snagged on fallen trees and tipped-over wheelbarrows, allowing the landscape simply to be mile after mile and

losing herself in it. I felt my face had a real horizon, distance, speed. Even the rock weight of her body on my thighs felt like a freedom. Soon her eyelids began to flutter, closed. Her arms dropped limply against my chest and her head fell on my shoulder. She was quiet. Perhaps she slept. Her breathing was noisy. The loose pink uniform slipped down over one shoulder. Before I knew it I had reached out and touched the revealed purple-blue mass of interlocking bruises. Her skin was as smooth and tight as a peeled mushroom. Outside the window the storm-cloud tumor burst and began to throw large pellets of rain against the glass.

Ten minutes later they came to get her. With clubs and straight jackets and injections.

The Director himself came to see me after they had taken the girl away. He pointed to the scratches on my throat and budding bruises down my arms and suggested I take the rest of the afternoon off and be sure to give his regards to Tía Concepción and tell her Cachita had a teat infection after her last litter but is now doing fine. I remembered his sketch on the back of the advertisement for a 3-D movie on my first day and said no thanks and I was sure my mother didn't want a puppy she had four cats but of course I'd ask her anyway and could I please have that girl's file instead.

"The best is to forget this. Take all day tomorrow. Get your fiancé to take you to the beach. As if nothing had happened."

I changed the subject to the coming international dog show in Arecibo, got the girl's name from the cafeteria gossip and slipped her file out between two of my own patients' files.

Her name is María Rosario Isabel Torres Sequëira. Her diagnosis is chronic schizophrenia with violent criminal tendencies. Her IQ is 67 with erratic internal scores fluctuating as much as 32 points either way. She is epileptic. The scars that blur her face have been self-inflicted in the depressed aftermath of the uncontrollable rages that have invaded her periodically since the age of four. She is now sixteen.

"Rosarito was born during a hurricane. All the noise and wind of that night got trapped inside her head," her mother's explanation is quoted in the receiving social worker's initial report. In it her mother is defined as a Caucasian 38 year-old farmer's wife from Camuy with a third-grade education. Before being interned at the Hospital Público Central two and a half years ago, Rosarito had been the defendant in three juvenile court cases accused with criminal violence against two other children and one nun.

In the first instance Rosarito was nine. She clubbed a girl from a neighboring farm, one Celesté María Asunción de

Acevedo, aged ten, who had come to the Torres farm to return a hammer. Rosarito clubbed her with the same hammer until the girl was unconscious. Large quantities of blood had spurting out of María Celeste's ears and she had sustained a permanent hearing impairment. In the second instance Rosarito was twelve. She had chased then attacked a Spanish nun, one Sor María de Cristo Rey, aged 34, organist, nurse and occupational therapist at the Santa Teresita home for wayward girls in Río Piedras where Rosarito was confined at the time. Rosarito had finally torn a galvanized metal clothes-line pole out of the ground in the back yard and beaten the nun repeatedly with it. Rosarito inflicted great damage to the Sister's head where thirty-one stitches were needed to close two wounds, broke both the Sister's ankles, three ribs and one shoulder bone, and used one large existing knee cyst to explode, necessitating a subsequent operation. Sor María de Cristo Rey was hospitalized for eight weeks at the Hospital Auxilio Mutuo and declined or was unable to provide reasons for the attack. For an account of the third incident when Rosarito was thirteen and had mortally attacked one Jesús Orlando Martín Santiago Sequeira, aged nine, her first cousin on her mother's side, the social worker in charge of the case, Sra. Estela Nora Santiago de Rivera, paraphrased Rosarito's father:

"It was Christmas eve. My wife's parents and her five brothers and their wives and children had rented three carros públicos to bring them up from Camuy to our farm. We

killed three pigs and one goat. We tied Rosarito to her metal bed in the kitchen. We often had to do that. Just in case. We bought the bed after the nuns wouldn't take her back. Dito, my wife's youngest brother's oldest son, was eating on the kitchen steps with some cousins. Rosarito was making funny noises and singing away like she always does. We're used to it. But Dito tried to make her stop. He'd already got a demon of a temper - like all the Sequeira brothers. They're famous for it in all Camuy." In the report Rosarito's father was described as a 37 year-old red-haired blue-eyed campesino from Jayuya. He had a fourth-grade education and was of unusually short stature. Reading the last few sentences I imagined him bursting into a boastful male grin lit with the vicarious glory of being related to the infamous ill-tempered Sequeira brothers. He'd probably had to control himself at this point, with some tactful help from the social worker, to keep from giving various choice examples of his brother-in-laws' exploits.

"Dito called her all kinds of names. Most Sacred Virgin could that boy swear! Threatened her proper like a true little man. He screamed over and over she couldn't scare him. He kicked her bed. We told him to stop it. She hates to be looked at. Goes on nice and quiet for a while until anybody stares at her, then watch out! Finally, he threw a plate of spaghetti and pork at her. The plate broke against the kitchen wall. Rosarito managed to reach a piece and cut her ropes. No one saw her. We were singing aguinaldos by the

camp-fire. Those Sequeiras sure love to sing when they drink. My wife was a little tipsy and dancing with our oldest boy. No one noticed Rosarito was loose. Until the screams started. But she's so strong. Always was. Tried to give me a kiss once and just about choked me. We couldn't pull her off Dito in time. She stuck the chip of broken plate into his arms and all over his chest and legs, then squeezed him with her hands and bit him in the neck. They were both soaked with blood. Clothes and hair stuck to their bodies. Two older nephews ran into town to get the police. Three policemen carried Dito on a stretcher the mile from my farm to the police car at the bottom of the cliff where the road starts. He was dead when they got him to the clinic. The doctor said he might have been saved if the police hadn't moved him. But the police said no doctor from the clinic would come up to our place. Dito. My wife's youngest brother's oldest son. A Sequeira. You can imagine. His father almost killed me." And here again I could sense the proud pause, see the unbuttoning of a shirt to reveal a long jagged knife wound for the social worker's admiration, hear the unquoted, "Mire aqui, missi. Look here!"

"It's hopeless with her, missi," the father was finally reported as saying. "Worse than an animal she is. Sometimes she's quiet, quiet for her, if no one looks at her. But if she notices anyone looking, even accident-like, off she goes into a storm. Like that hurricane on the night she was born. That's what did it. I don't care what you people say.

That hurricane got trapped inside her head and never came out. You've got to take her before she kills us all, missi. Five grown men ~~can't~~ hold her. She is that strong. Crazy strong." And again the proud pause while the diminutive father invited contemplation as to how he had caused to give birth to such a mass of uncontainable, ungovernable power.

A synopsis of the court trial where Rosarito was found not criminally responsible for the death of her cousin followed. During two months an investigative committee rotated the ultimate blame for the death between the doctors at the clinic and the policemen. Predictably, all charges were dropped.

I closed Rosarito's file and looked out the window. It was almost impenetrable with filth except where a few rivulets of rain had just washed a network of pathways clean. I had remembered Rosarito. That first day I came to work: a young girl in courtyard D, petals of dark hair around a blurred, blind face uplifted to the sun, an exposed shoulder mappd with bruises. Then aroused by my stare, she had blazed the air between us with her fury. Rosarito. Grotesque sunflower turned mad bull to protect her right to be invisible. And it had worked. For over one year I must have passed by her a few times a day and never seen her again.

Perhaps in that hope of invisibility she had been systematically destroying her face since the age of four.

Tfo Manuel's ghost came back only once after I met Rosarito. I waited over a month, patiently weaving strings of memories into the sounds and smells of his rooms, preparing for one meaningful encounter when I might glean, seduce or challenge from the specter the reason for its haunting. Afternoons when work was over, I spent some time with Rosarito. After two weeks in isolation, she was allowed out into the courtyard of Pavilion D again. The three orderly-guards did not talk much among themselves but kept to different parts of the courtyard, leaning watchfully against the walls.

Rosarito didn't recognize me. The first time they let her out her blurred face was bloated with medication and too much sleep. Red pillow-marks crisscrossed down one cheek. An older woman patient sidled up to her crab-wise and suddenly made a lunge to touch Rosarito's cheek with her open hand. Rosarito slapped the woman's arm back with a resounding crack. The woman sucked her gums in a satisfied manner and nodded with a large toothless grin to herself. Strangely enough the meeting had the effect of a welcome. The guards relaxed a little. Other women began to chatter at her from a distance. Rosarito raised her eyes and squinted dazedly around her. When her eyes turned to where I stood by the door to her ward they slid over me as if I were a familiar crack in the wall. She continued to look around her, lifting

her feet slowly in place until she made one full circle. Then, as if the circle marked the end of a mathematically precise ritual, she dropped to a squatting position, curled into a little ball with her head tucked between her ankles, and began to rock back and forth along the soles of her feet.

This time her song was too muffled to be recognizable. The cement wall behind me turned from prickly to painful against the palms of my hands and I noticed I was rubbing them up and down to the rhythm of her rocking. I closed my eyes and wished Rosarito back into a pink blur. But her bruises, her rocking and that dark spiky head like the head of a wet kitten stayed tattooed to the inside of my eyelids.

The second time I went to visit her in the courtyard she looked straight at me for a second, gazed casually away, contemplated the sky for about a minute, then hurled her eyes back at me with unnerving, cunning speed. I didn't dare look away and I didn't dare smile. I had practiced the moment at home but I still wasn't ready for it when it came. I had tried to imitate that open, accepting look she had studied me with in the darkened office, hoping to be able to offer it back to her as an admission pass into her world. But her eyes had travelled galaxies since then and I recognized nothing in them of our moment of intimacy. She flicked her eyes indifferently away from me and went to stand with her fingers wrapped around an iron bar of the

fence. With one big toe she scrabbled in the red dust like a chicken. I called her name twice but she didn't turn. An orderly guard opened the metal door back to her ward for me, shaking his head all the time. I wondered if he were shaking it as Rosarito or at me.

The third time, I had her brought to my office by an orderly-guard and asked him to wait outside the closed door. I was armed with a large pad of drawing paper, thick children's crayons, and coloring pencils. The neon light overhead glared in all its garish glory. Rosarito blinked a few times and shuffled over to stand below the window with her back to me. I didn't say a word and began to draw. At first I doodled the little boats and flower garlands I always do when I'm on the phone. But her immobility under the window compelled me. I started to sketch her wet-kitten hair, then her wide bruised shoulders, then the creases and folds of her pink uniform sagging unevenly down over her calves. Twenty minutes later when the orderly guard knocked on my door, I'd finished the shadings on her skin and had started sketching the barred window above her head. Before she left I showed her the drawing and pointed to the pencil figure with my finger.

"You. Rosarito."

She grabbed the pad roughly, wrinkling the edges, and passed one index finger over the figure a few times.

"No," she finally decided. "Rosarito," she growled thumping her chest with a triumphant fist. But she still

held on to the pad. I slid an orange-colored pencil under her right thumb. Her other fingers adjusted to it clumsily. She made a few hesitant lines sideways; then a few furious dots that slit through the paper. The waiting guard made as if to take the pencil away. I shook my head at him. Rosarito stuck the point of the pencil into one of the holes and started to tear the paper. The guard began to scold her. I put my finger to my lips. Rosarito flung the pad down and put her finger to her lips.

"Rosarito," she whispered jabbing her lower lip.

"Inés Marisa," I whispered back, touching my own.

She trampled over the pad on her way out of the office. When she was gone, I studied her torn and mutilated portrait. The orange streaks and dots scarring it seemed exuberantly carefree, additions rather than subtractions. I felt unaccountably happy.

To think that all these months I'd been seeing a ghost which perhaps wasn't there and not seeing Rosarito who was.

But Tío Manuel's ghost must have been telepathic. No sooner had Rosarito sat on the chair next to mine a few visits later and grabbed her favorite purple crayon, than Tío Manuel casually rippled out of my file cabinet.

There was a sly, amused twist to the lips. Something about the smile irritated me. It reminded me of my mother's "I told you so's." Yet my heart squeezed and thumped in the

best romantic tradition. I had a wild longing to walk up to the ghost and pass my fingers gently over the unshaven stubble on its cheeks. "Hola," I wanted to say. Just that. "Hello." And perhaps a friendly, "Pull up your pants." No questions for once. In my relief at seeing the ghost again after a whole month and my confusion at not knowing how to respond to it in Rosarito's presence, I ignored it. I chose a red crayon and drew an arrow pointing at Rosarito.

Our opening game was always the same: to draw one figure each by turns until we agreed the picture was finished.

Rosarito jabbed a purple zig-zag above the arrow. Then I chose a yellow crayon and drew a circle with two wide-open eyes. Rosarito grabbed the yellow crayon from my fingers and drew something that looked like wild spiky hair around the circle until I realized it was a sun.

Next time I raised my eyes, Tío Manuel's ghost ~~was~~ gone. I never saw it again. As I looked around the office, Rosarito snuck in a turn and scribbled fierce, green spirals over everything. Suddenly, she flung the green crayon at the corner where Tío Manuel's ghost had just been standing.

"You, Inés Marisa," she challenged, pointing to the green spiral whirling through the seeing sun.

"No. Me, Inés Marisa," I growled, thumping my chest with a fist. Then unable to stop I thumped on the purple zig-zag and again on the red arrow. "And me. And me."

It was the first time I heard Rosarito laugh. She took the drawing with her to show the nurses in her ward. After

she was gone I bent over to pick up the green crayon in front of the file cabinet and put it away with the others. Only the space created by the open door remained of Rosarito's visit.

My office had never felt so empty.

FIVE

A Courtyard in Old San Juan

I have adopted Rosarito.

Two of my mother's law partners, trying to dissuade me every inch of the way, finally drew up and witnessed the papers: three stiff cream-colored sheets with such perfect typing they could have been printed. I suppose all psychologists at some period of their lives fall in love with madness,—just as all musicians become the lovers of silence. Perhaps it is an illusion of freedom inherent in those two states: madness and silence. But my adoption of Rosarito is neither as romantic nor as abstract as that. I have adopted Rosarito because nobody else wants her.

The Casa Santa Teresita for delinquent girls in Río Piedras, to which she was referred after her first court case, refuses readmission on the grounds that they are not equipped to deal with either her epilepsy or her insanity. In fact, Sor María de Cristo Rey, who now has a permanent limp from her knee operation, became hysterical and was bed-ridden for two days at the possibility of Rosarito's return.

The Instituto del Perpetuo Socorro for retarded children in Caguas have again returned our petition. They claim they have no facilities for delinquents and point out that in view of the erratic scatter within her IQ test, she is probably only pseudo-retarded. Besides, she will soon be too old for them. For the past two and a half years Sra. Santiago de Rivera has been reviewing Rosarito's case with the aim of unloading her somewhere else. But Rosarito's behavior falls under too many categories. As in the case of Tío Manuel, there is no shelf with her name underneath. Her parents, after leaving her temporarily in our emergency out-patient ward for one week of testing, never came back. They were reminded repeatedly, first by letter, then by telegram. Finally, a local policeman, perhaps one of the same three who had carried the wounded Dito down the cliff, found the Santiago's farm abandoned. After selling Rosarito's iron bed - their most expensive possession - it was rumored by the neighbors that the Santiagos had fled to New York. Our own Hospital Público Central maintains it is geared solely for adults and cannot assume responsibility for Rosarito until she turns twenty-one. They have no specialized staff for adolescents. Meanwhile I am afraid they will over-sedate her into a permanent basket case.

So I have adopted Rosarito. It was not difficult. No one else wanted her.

Conning my parents into accepting her - in the guest

bedroom on our roof garden surrounded by a fenced-in courtyard - wasn't as difficult as I'd feared. I had done my homework well. In Tío Felipín's study, sandwiched between slim books on orchid growing and fat books on agrarian tax laws, I found the four black leather-bound volumes containing my father's family tree and history. Two of the volumes are dedicated to tracing my father's maternal and paternal ancestors back four hundred years through southern Spain and northern Italy. (In the Rome of the 1850's much was made of one Napoleone Augustus di Sotto, world-famous counter tenor renowned for his piercing falsetto and, from his marriage-less issue-less state, I suspected eunuch as well.) One other volume is dedicated to the adventures of immigrating off-shoots to Crete, Tunisia, Venezuela, Santo Domingo and in one intriguing case which was not followed up, to Ceylon. The remaining volume is bound in cheap imitation leather. It is dedicated to the family trees and condensed histories of all the in-laws. There I found forty-one pages on the Blanco de Sotos, the Apontes and the Molina Olivares. Not a word about my great-grandfather's illegitimate clan. Tío Manuel's name had been written in the tree but no mention was made of him in the accompanying text, which even included Tía Concepción's two blue-ribbon winning champion chihuahuas: Carlos IV and Infanta.

But I did acquire two powerful weapons out of the forty-one pages: In 1939 a great-niece of my Molina

grandfather (my maternal grandmother's husband, brother-in-law to Tío Manuel and The Three Undaunted Virgins) had married a penniless but politically powerful Torres Herreras from Salinas whose uncle had been town mayor from 1930 to 1942 and was locally known as El Cacique. A little research unearthed two Torres families from neighboring towns who had been awarded six-acre parcelas in Jayuya to turn into individual farms by the Populares government in 1947. I argued these Torres might be related to the missing red-haired Geranio Torres Gandía from Jayuya, Rosarito's father. And if that wasn't enough (and of course it wasn't, at first) I had also managed to dig up one Olivares nephew, a dentist, second cousin to my mother, married to a Laura Sequeira, a professor of architecture originally from Cuba. Rosarito's mother was a Sequeira. With all the island-hopping our ancestors did in the Caribbean during the last one hundred years, even a link between the well-educated Cuban Sequeiras and the almost illiterate fiery-tempered Camuy Sequeiras was not inconceivable. Besides, as my parents were well aware (though neither of them would be caught admitting it in so many words), in the social life of Puerto Rico it is not the reality that matters but the illusion, just as it is not necessary to be moral, merely not to seem immoral. Therefore, the importance lay not in Rosarito actually being related to us, but in there being enough links of names and places that could

be presented as evidence of kinship to the rest of the world. Transforming this tenuous possibility into palatable fact was my parents' job: And I must say they rose superbly to the challenge.

To hear my mother tell it Rosarito is a recently orphaned relative with "problems." "You know, one of the Torres Herreras from Salinas. Pablito - the one who had to dye his hair since he was seventeen then lost it all at twenty-three - was mayor of Salinas in the 30's. Bueno. His nephew married my niece Rosaura - you remember, the one who fell from a tree to a stone fence when she was nine and -- scarred her back so badly she can't wear evening gowns..." While in my father's scheme of things Rosarito has metamorphosed into one of the Sequeiras from Cuba, a local branch which came over before Lauritas's (the dentist's wife), a temporary family visitor, a bit "unstable," we're doing all we can for her etc. Through some social sleight of hand my parents managed to make these disparate descriptions support rather than contradict each other. In this way Rosarito was awarded a double bind to us which offsets the dubiousness of the claim. Besides, no one carefully inspects obscure family off-shoots; the clarity of the relationship seems to dwindle with the bank balance. Not that my parents were actually lying. Luckily they were both born with, or have developed along the way, the lawyer's happy gift for believing in their own re-interpretation of facts as presented to a jury. Hearing my mother's careless references

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to the Torres Herreras cousins in Jayuya, seeing my father's confident orchestral wave of the hand as he grants Rosarito kinship with the illustrious Sequeiras from Cuba, I witnessed how history is re-written every day. How whole branches of a family tree can be created with one gesture just as whole branches can be chopped off.

Actually, I have only recently begun to understand the hidden mechanics of how I won my case against my parents. About three months ago, as my father was exploring obscure family branches for ammunition to destroy the links I had proposed between us and Rosarito, my mother suddenly broke into a spontaneous recital of her illegitimate family's births, deaths and marriages. Perhaps it was the almost liquid, chapel-like privacy of the gradually darkening living room. My mother had been completely silent up to then. We had all witnessed each other's bodies slowly fading into deep blue shadows as the struggle between my father and I stretched past sunset, his words almost literally propelling Rosarito out of our living room and mine towing her back in.

The dying light entered through the three balcony-skirted doors and puddled on the black and white marble tiles on the floor. In the kitchen across the courtyard Tata Nina was cooking something with a heavy dose of vanilla extract and the cloying bitter-sweet smell gradually became the smell of our talk, the smell of Rosarito's silent presence waiting in the wings for the password which would

be her cue.

Suddenly my mother began to speak. One hand fluttered to massage her forehead as if to relieve a pain there. Her alexandrite ring flashed tiny violet and green fires. She spoke in an alone-voice, blurred and ghostly, like the sound of one's own voice inside one's mind. She spoke of Milagritos, of Milagritos' twin sister, of the gardener in the gray floppy felt hat who had come to our old house in Condado when I was thirteen to spread white pellets around the roots of my father's rose bushes, and of many other relatives I had never seen in my life. Even the name denied to me then, of the baby who had cried half a morning on our porch and died six months later - that name I had not asked for fear of breaking something as delicate and irreplaceable as my mother's rainbow-glazed crystal bowl - came tumbling out: Evaristo José. To think that all these years my mother had carried inside her, unshared, the detailed account of all their lives! It was like watching a map slowly appearing on a previously blank page, a map drawn in invisible ink which only betrays itself when treated with certain chemicals. In this case: the liquid darkness filling the living-room, so much like a confessional's, and some threat floating in that blue evening air which I couldn't as yet identify.

As she spoke, my mother rocked herself gently back and forth on the straight-backed chair. I was so stunned by the mixture of shame and loyalty, of interest and avoidance

which had secretly cemented those lives to hers and which she had never by word or deed betrayed to me, that most of the time I forgot to listen to the words themselves. No one got up to turn on the lights. An alley lamp duplicated itself and winked icily off my mother's glasses. Her hand continued massaging back and forth across her forehead. Every part of her anatomy seemed to absorb back her own words until their meaning was erased and only the pain that would not be rubbed off became the focus of her soliloquy. Something in the irascible determination of her hand dragging across her skin reminded me of the times she had tried to rub wrinkles off her linen skirts with the side of her thumbnail during our conversations after the visits to Tío Manuel. At the end of her recital my mother said simply, "Yes, adopt Rosarito." Still rubbing her forehead she abandoned the room. By then my father and I could barely discern each other's shapes in the vanilla-scented dark.

But incredibly, at odd moments in the next few weeks, bits and pieces of my mother's ungrasped soliloquy returned on their own to me. They were like parts of an antique cargo sunk in mid-ocean and slowly nudged to shore: the tarnished coin of a marriage, the slim amphora of a birth, the headless figurine of a death. Suddenly, an archeological treasure would float out of forgetfulness and lodge on the sands of my daily life. It seems Milagríto's twin sister, Consuelito, had gone off to live in unwedded bliss with a Santiago Sequeira plumber from Hato Tejas. Consuelito had

been totally bald and had pink and black mottled gums and had recently died of bone cancer leaving two fat spoiled middle-aged sons who'd never worked a day in their lives sobbing into the laps of their triple-X jeans. And one of the gardener's sisters - a seamstress named Carmen who had helped handsaw the 7,095 genuine peacock feathers on the train of the recently-crowned queen of the Casino de Puerto Rico - had married a Torres Flores independentista agitator (in jail now) born in a little village near Camuy but brought up, on and off, in New York City. Ironically, the queen was a third cousin of mine on my father's side.

What should have been obvious to me from the beginning was that my mother's decision to support my mythical claim of Rosarito's legitimate kinship to us was dictated by her fear of my researches unearthing irrefutable evidence that Rosarito really was related to us through the branch of Milagritos. Glass walls would then shatter as if pierced by a single high note. Obviously I was too old now to be pacified by speeding dying puppies to hospitals; way past warning scourings with hot vinegar and starch. How then to protect that changeling soul of hers: half militant humanist, half unrepentent snob? Why by accepting a fraudulent legitimate relative before it curdled into a legitimate illegitimate one. The case was closed. Sentence had been passed: I had been willed those lavish, unstinting blueprints of her own ghosts. Her life did not meet those same standards she imposed even on her clothes. It was not

"reversible," could not be turned inside-out for the inspection of all Puerto Rico. And perhaps a small portion of herself derived a perverse satisfaction out of convicting me to her same life-long penance.

For having finally dared ask for a name.

Thus endowed with social passport and suitable pedigree Rosarito came a month-and-a-half ago to live with us in our renovated house in Old San Juan. For the first few days she explored all the rooms by herself. They had been carefully drenched in semi-darkness. That Saturday morning before I drove to the hospital for her, I went around the house tilting the mahogany shutters on all doors and windows so that only thin cracks of light could be seen between them. I switched off all overhead lights in dark corners. Only the elaborately carved ceiling fans with their wide blades rotating slowly gave life to the rooms. The fans made me think of huge upside-down amapola flowers, their golden tassled cords undulating like gigantic pistils in the lazy breeze. On the two previous evenings, my mother had scoured the house for priceless objects. Five cardboard boxes housing her collection of antique glass bowls were locked inside her walk-in bedroom closet. Innumerable wooden santos, centuries old, now stood with appropriate martyred expressions between the insolent curves of my mother's rhinestone-studded satin slippers and her muddy country

sandals: those faded, handleless San Juan Bautistas with silver amulets hanging from their stumps, those Virgenes de la Guadalupe encased in somber oval drapes except for the surprise of their shell-pink fissured faces.

Rosarito was wearing a new home-made red flowered dress of satiny cotton with a full, ruffled skirt. Tata Nina, who of course knew the whole story, had unexpectedly dumped it with majestic insouciance from an old paper bag unto the foot of my unmade bed early that morning. The dress had two other companions: one with white and green candy stripes and three-quarter length sleeves, and another plain brown with a contoured yellow plastic belt. Two pairs of new rubber thongs bounced on top of the dresses. One was blue and large, one red and small. Without giving me a chance to finish yawning, Tata Nina stomped pointedly out of my room, her silence an emphatic comment on my lack of feminine insight. At the hospital I let Rosarito choose between the three dresses. Her ward was a long, suffocating room with twenty rusty metal beds in half of which pink-clad shapes writhed unceasingly or lay unnaturally still. One tiny opaque barred window high on a wall and a brown horizon below a smoky-ochre sky linked the ward to my office. That and the clamor from the solitary confinement cells, more intense here, rising like a steam of sound from under our feet. With the first burst of girlish curiosity I had ever seen in her, Rosarito grabbed the red flowered dress by the shoulders and crushed it to her body. She peered down

apprehensively at it, perhaps in unconscious parody of her mother or a sister years ago in the farm house. Then, with a firm instinct for color and a brave disregard for size, Rosarito waved away the larger blue thongs I offered her and squeezed into the red. The tips of her muddy toes curled over the front of the rubber soles and her heels, cushioned with ribbed callosity, trailed on the floor a good inch behind the back rims. Studying her feet as if they were two dissociated creatures romping under her, Rosarito shuffled a few times around her metal bed, wiggling her toes and readjusting her walk to the flapping soles. Then she stood still, regarded me with her empty black moon eyes and tilted her perfect cupid mouth into a slow intense smile of wonder. I remembered she had never worn anything but uniforms since the age of nine. I blessed Tata Nina's inspiration.

"This is where I live," I said as we unfolded out of the rust-colored bug an hour later. "You can stay with us for a while if you want." Rosarito blinked as if I'd spoken in a foreign language and I was glad no one else had heard my prepared speech.

Inside the darkened house we found Tata Nina changing the beds, marching from room to room with a cumulus cloud of soiled linen hiding her face. My mother was in her bedroom lying all dressed on the white bedspread, an ornate mass of interconnecting spider-webs Tía Encarnación crocheted for her as a wedding present. I'd never seen my mother lie down in the middle of the day before. She was leafing with

aggressive intensity through the latest anthropological book on Puerto Rico by a visiting American professor. It is the kind of book which usually never strays far from the coffee-table in the living room. On its shiny black and white cover a delighted coal-skinned boy with three school books under one arm was taking such an enthusiastic leap over a rain puddle he must have smacked right into the photographer the very next second. My mother snapped the pages quickly under the luminous circle of a small hanging lamp. Her ankles were primly crossed, her shoes on. Two of her Siamese cats mounted a tense, graceful guard on either side of her as she directed furtive looks at the door of her closet.

We discovered my father last, stooped over his bamboo-shaded workbench at the rear of the courtyard. He was rearranging pebbles around his unglazed bonsai pots with the exhausted concentration of someone transplanting boulders in a five-acre park. A ragged ribbon of water trickled out of the mouth of a stone lion's head encrusted in the brick courtyard wall. It splattered dark rhythmic drops around my father's feet. Rosarito poked one finger into the lion's square mouth. She squealed with delight. The mouth was generously carpeted with green lichen. My father's hunched body swayed possessively over his dwarf trees: one magenta frangipani was just beginning to open its first tiny bud, a lime tree bore three fruits the size of puny raisins all huddled together as if for protection on a sagging lower branch. The tense arch of his back threw waves of

threatening blame in my direction. I could almost hear him thinking, "If that girl dares even look at one of my -" But ignoring him, Rosarito turned to the washtub under the lion's head. It was an old silver-flecked metal tub we'd discovered upside down in the middle of the kitchen floor with a dead rat inside when the last of the nineteen families who'd lived in our house was finally evicted. My father had painted the tub the same lichen-green of the lion's mouth and covered its bottom with a three-inch layer of those surf-smoothed amber and blue and green glass fragments one finds on the beaches of Condado now instead of shells - the glass from the broken bottles left at night by teenage gangs, courting policemen and atómicos. I reached into the tub and took out three glass stones, one of each color, and gave them to Rosarito. They winked wetly in her hand.

Neither Tata Nina, my father nor my mother had spoken or looked once at Rosarito. That was my plan. To let her discover them as she had discovered me, in the solitary penumbra of hibernating or wounded animals, in a vulnerable aloneness she could identify with and reach out to. I wanted her to be the adopter instead of the adopted.

And it worked.

Gradually, we began to talk and look at her. Rosarito accepted our words and eyes as she accepted Tata Nina's dresses and the three colored stones from the washtub.

Though not from strangers. Not yet. Most mornings she spent in the courtyard making looped, flowing patterns on the brick floor with the glass pebbles she fished out of the tub. When she finished one pattern she scattered it with the tip of her thong. Or, when Tata Nina did the laundry, Rosarito liked to stand under the one clothes line which was just the right height to graze the top of her forehead. There, surrounded by billowing sheets and towels she rocked back and forth on the soles of her thongs. Eyes closed, head flung back, she hummed a lullaby, repeating her blind love affair with the sun. I liked to watch her when she did that, swaying shoulder to shoulder with lacy apricot slips and flapping grayaberas as if sharing some mystical folk-dance which took its rhythm from the wind and whose directions only she and the laundry could hear. I was no longer afraid, as I was the first few weeks, that she would suddenly open her eyes, begin to paw the ground and lunge at me. The water dripping from the laundry puddled on the bricks and she stood or swayed for hours on the wet floor, rubbing the top of her head against the clothes line like an ecstatic cat. Each part of her was in communion with a different element: her feet were rooted to the ground but surrounded by water; her body swung through the air, her face reflected sun-fires. As complete as a lotus flower. And as I watched her I thought perhaps there is a space of perfection within each of our handicaps. A center of peace within each of our hurricanes. Just as inside each shard of broken bottle

there is a jewel of glass.

Afternoons after work I spent with her on the roof, or when it rained, in her room. I began teaching her the alphabet. I read out loud. Her favorites were stories about the Borinquen Indians who lived on this island a long time ago. We drew, jumped rope, listened to music, experimented with gestures in front of a mirror. We didn't go for walks yet. Sometimes children waved from other rooftops far away and she either studied them intently through the mesh of the cyclone fence, faintly puzzled, or ignored them. My fear was of mockery. But mockery floats like clouds of germs in our air. It is part of our climate, like the sun. She could never hope to avoid it in any condition, mad or sane. Nor I. At night she still went to sleep humming, curled up on my lap like that first time. My legs got cramps under her weight. But her fingers didn't scratch and dig any more. Her hugs were still fierce but not violent. Her fingers were rough and clumsy but not painful. She no longer licked like an animal, though kisses were still beyond her. She favored rubbing her cheek against another's cheek, or scraping her forehead on another's. Sunday night two weeks ago, I caught my mother replacing an antique ruby-swirl fruit bowl on the top shelf of a book case in the living room. Out of reach. Almost out of sight. But there. A vote of confidence. Sunday afternoon last week, Pedrito's mother marched into our courtyard, uninvited, a fuming Tata Nina at her heels. Quintal, Doña Rosario's chauffeur, waited intuned and

impassive by the entrance to the archway.

I had never been able to reconcile Doña Rosario with Pedrito. Where he was tall and graceful as a cat, she was squat and had all the grace of a battalion of armed men. Where he was blond she was dark. Her black coarse hair grew low over her forehead and stretched so fiercely over her balding skull back into a bun I always longed to rip the insect-like black metal pins out of her hair, if only to relieve the constriction on my own scalp. Where Pedrito's eyes were blue and clear with space enough in them for the whole sky, hers were two little black caves full of shadows and strange animal rustlings. She had been over forty-five when Pedrito, her youngest, was born. All her children had been nursed and reared by their incomparable nanny Severina whom they loved as if she had been their real mother. For the first twelve years of his life Pedrito's only contact with Doña Rosario was when paraded in front of her with his brothers and sisters every night to ask for her blessings. Personality apart, however, the genetic travesty alone was staggering. Into our courtyard she now stomped in her nuns' shoes and black silk Victorian uniform. It was ankle length and had long narrow sleeves. The bodice was bound by a row of round little black dull buttons, a perfect match for her eyes, from her waist up to her chin. There, a white lace collar was fastened by a straight gold pin with eight huge yellow diamonds in a military row, one for each child. I often thought she must have designed that pin herself. She is the only woman I've ever met who can make wearing

diamonds as glamorous as packing a machine gun. I've always assumed Pedrito's tactful engagement ring was an unconscious compliment to me.

"Mija, I come to meet this adoptive daughter of yours. Your director already told me all about her. Where are you hiding her?" She thumped the brick floor of our courtyard twice with her cane for emphasis, every inch the grand old lady of Puerto Rican politics. Great-grand daughter of the distinguished Demetrio Hernández Cintrón, Field Marshall and Deputy to the Court of Spain who had battled heroically against the troops of Napoleon, then barely escaped the guillotine and was finally banished to Puerto Rico for his conspiracy against King Ferdinand VII; grand-daughter of the celebrated Dr. Enrique Cintrón Pérez, poet, educator, patriot, best remembered for his inflammatory speeches against black slavery in Puerto Rico - exiled young to Venezuela, he was granted amnesty only to be soon imprisoned for his revolutionary activities in the Grito de Lares; grand-niece of Pedro Manuel Aponte Rivera (after whom Pedrito was named), the great hero of the Wars of Independence; daughter of the legendary Dr. José Julio Cintrón Cadilla, industrialist, poet, educator, painter, after whom countless theaters, avenues and hospitals are named, many years Secretary of the Treasury, Commissioner of the Interior, and President of the Executive Branch until he retired at the age of ninety-two to better concentrate on his literary pursuits. Doña Rosario thumped her cane twice more. All these august personages seemed to thump our

courtyard floor with her.

The noise made Rosarito peer down through the roof-fence. She was wearing a pink dress, and for a moment, the combination of fence and dress reminded me of the first time I'd seen her at the hospital. Now she curled her fingers around the mesh of the Cyclone fence and began to shake it, producing a dull clanging sound, like a bell with laryngitis. Doña Rosario crossed the courtyard and mounted the metal spiral stairs up to the roof. Her footsteps rang sharp and heavy against the splashing sounds of the lion's head fountain. I stood as if paralyzed watching Doña Rosario climb. It was only as she stopped for breath before unlatching the gate at the top of the stairs that I ran across the courtyard and bounded up the stairs after her. I was in time to watch Doña Rosario take three steps towards Rosarito, cane whipping sharply at her side. Rosarito stared at her, back pressed against the fence, making it dip. Then she did something I had never seen her do. She squatted on the floor; soon a puddle appeared around her feet. She never wavered in her black stare at Doña Rosario. Doña Rosario hissed as she drew in her breath. Wordlessly, she thumped her cane twice more and whirled around.

"Gracias, mija," she nodded in my direction without looking at me, "that's all I needed to know. You'll be hearing from Pedrito." Her little cave eyes were full of strange, pouncing shadows. She turned and marched down the stairs without once looking at them. This feat reminded me

of my mother's blind navigations through the puddled footpaths to Tio Manuel's rooms.

Pedrito didn't call until Wednesday afternoon. We met that evening at the Bar Primitivo three blocks from home. He was already there when I arrived, an empty daiquiri glass in front of him. He was swaying gently in the farthest swing at the end of the bar, ankles circling, long legs planted firmly on the ground. When he saw me he raised a tentative finger. As with the ghost's four-fingered hand on my office door the day I met Rosarito, I could not tell if the gesture was a greeting or farewell. He kissed me on the mouth, caressed me gently behind the ear with his index finger then burst into a brilliant smile.

"Pues, it's over. Took about twenty-four hours straight of reasoning with her. And about the same on the phone. All my brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts got into the act of course. But I swung it. My mother has finally accepted Rosarito!" His eyes had the look of a puppy who'd just jumped through his first hoop of fire: a combination of pride and of eagerness for praise along with a residue of fear. "She realized it was a charitable civic action. You are inexperienced in these matters, impulsive and very big-hearted. You overstepped your boundaries a little is all." He raised a finger to the bartender and pointed to us both. "It was touch and go there for a moment. You know my mother is not used to resistance of any kind. I don't have to remind you how she fought our engagement at first." I

didn't come from a political dynasty; there was not a single Rolls Royce in my immediate family: I worked for a salary in a public hospital; we only had one live-in maid; my father's mother's hair was suspiciously kinky, even if she did have blue eyes... Unlike my mother, Doña Rosario was not offended by her own prejudices and needed no euphemisms.

The bartender set a frozen daiquiri in front of each. I took a sip of mine. Somehow Pedrito's words didn't sink completely in. Or perhaps the accumulated energy of all the defenses I'd been rehearsing for two sleepless nights simply took over. "Rosarito has never done that before. What she did to your mother. Your mother hasn't really met her yet. Rosarito can be quite sweet and - well, stimulating when not frightened."

Pedrito laughed. He seemed extremely festive, almost feverishly so. In that he was very much like my own mother. Victory over others made him glow. "Don't you dare quote me on this, but knowing my mother, the girl's response does not surprise me. Actually, there's a poetic fitness to it."

I lifted my glass to my lips and was surprised to find it empty. Pedrito signalled the waiter again. "Of course it will take a lot of time and attention," I insisted. "But her progress in a few months has been exceptional. Even Dr. San Eduardo at the Público reversed his prognosis of her. It's so - exciting, fulfilling - to share Rosarito's journey. For the first time since I left grad school I'm really starting to believe I can do - something. Oh, just wait until you

meet her."

Pedrito's victory glow had faded. He was staring at the top of the bar counter and playing with a green swizzle-stick someone had left behind. "There's only one thing I don't understand. Why didn't you tell me? You should have discussed it with me before signing those papers. I hope at least you agree with that." Only the last sentence betrayed the anger and resentment of his last two days. My knees began to shake with delayed shock. I had come so close to losing him. He seemed so magnificent hunched over the swizzle-stick in sorrow, more magnificent than in victory. I had to stop swinging. Acute attacks of love always hit me in the stomach. The wave of nausea passed, but Pedrito's swinging threatened to set it off again. I waited until the ropes of our swings were parallel and joined his rope to mine inside my fist. He stopped rotating his ankles and looked straight at me. "Why?"

"It was something I had to decide for myself. Something between me and my ghost."

"Your what?"

I laughed. "A figure of speech." This was not the time.

"I don't understand."

"My family abandoned an uncle of mine. Later we became - close. In an odd way I can't explain. Rosarito reminded me of him. And yes. I agree. I should have discussed this with you. I'm stunned that I didn't, now I think of it. I must have been terrified you'd say no. And then, I was waiting

for her to be ready to meet strangers. True, I discussed it with my parents. But then, you see, Tío Manuel was my mother's ghost too."

Pedrito reached over my fist holding together the ropes of our two swings and also wrapped his hand around them. Slowly, we began to swing in perfect rhythm with each other.

"I've never seen my mother so livid. She insisted you either give up 'this creature' or we break our engagement. If I didn't she'd make sure I never held political office again. She has the power, and malice, to do it too. Her blood pressure rose so high we had to call Dr. Entín. But finally she accepted my plan. She even had Lydia call Doctor Miranda and make all arrangements for Rosarito at the clinic. They can't do anything for a few months at least. But by the time we're married they've promised her a place. Guaranteed. Perhaps even her own room, later, if she can handle it."

"Her own room? I don't understand..."

"At Miranda's private clinic. It's all set. Under her original name, of course. It'll all be paid automatically through a trust fund set up for life. It's very clean there. She'll have everything she needs. The staff is better qualified than at the Público." Pedrito laughed and squeezed my shoulder. He was getting that victory glow again.

"Present company excepted, of course. You know, you really are wonderful. I can't tell you how proud I am of what you"

have done. It was a beautiful gesture. I know you can't afford to finance her for life, so you did the next best thing. There was no reason to adopt her of course, but I admire the impulse. Luckily, there's no need for that now. We are taking over. But, as I told my mother and Lydia, it shows you really have what it takes. All the women in my family head a few charities. Part of our heritage. Lulu organizes the fund-raising dinners for the plane that throws snow on the slum kids at Christmas. Teresa is life-time treasurer for the March of Dimes. No matter what they said, I knew you'd fit in well after we married. And this just proves it. I convinced my mother you hadn't told us about Rosarito out of modesty. She understands now you were just a bit...over-enthusiastic."

"Rosarito at Miranda's? I worked a summer there. The only difference between it and the Público is that they paint the wards more often and prescribe more expensive pills. One psychiatrist there even told me he had chosen psychiatry because it had the easiest residency requirements. Another boasted she told all her patients they were going to get better but she knew damn well they wouldn't so what was the use of trying. They also thought I was 'over-enthusiastic' there. When one of my patients started to talk - for the first time in twenty years - they slapped him in solitary without telling me. Apparently he crossed angry words with another patient. What kind of recompense for improvement is that? Better a quiet moron than an active

patient showing signs of recovery. That's their motto. They wouldn't let me work with that patient again. That's why I quit after three months."

Pedrito was looking at me like he had seen a ghost himself. I caught a glimpse of staring faces reflected on the mirror behind the bar and realized I had been shouting. We had both released each other's swing's ropes. I swung back so hard I whammed my shoulder blades against the wall. On the way back my feet banged into the base of the bar. I slowed down by dragging the tips of my toes on the floor. I looked down and my hair fell over my forehead and shoulders, acting like blinders. I could only see Pedrito's legs: slim aristocratic beige suede loafers rocking gently below an elegant fall of beige linen. "I didn't adopt Rosarito to lock her back in a hospital," I told the shoes. "It's really very generous of your family to offer. Please tell them that. But another abandonment and institutionalization could be the end of all hope for her right now. She might need hospitalization once in a while. But I didn't... I don't..."

The beige shoes were very still. I stopped swinging.

"She won't be a problem to you. I promise you that. Tata Nina and I will look after her. Tata Nina insists on coming with me when we're married. She's grown so fond of Rosarito."

"That's an idea. We could say she's really Tata Nina's relative. If you had consulted me before signing those silly papers, we could have worked it out that way. We still might

be able to. How many people know?"

"Everyone at the hospital. My family. The lawyers. Neighbors. My parents already told everybody we're distantly related."

"I still don't understand. You gave her your name. Why? What good is that to the creature?" Pedrito didn't hear his slip. "All it did was destroy us! And because of a ghost you say!" I'd never seen Pedrito really angry before. Fat drops of perspiration crowded on his nose. I looked into his eyes and didn't recognize them. I looked back down at his shoes.

"We could keep her in a room in a separate part of the garden. Most people who come needn't see her. She's getting quite gentle, more predictable. After a while, when she's not so frightened..."

"But if something frightens her - what? She'll be pissing all over our guest's legs? And what frightens her, can you control that? A leaf falling? A coquí jumping? All our servants are going to have to learn karate and psychology? And how will our children introduce her to their friends? This is my crazy sister," he drawled in a furious imitation of a child's lisp, "please don't look at her or she will stab you with a broken plate!"

Pedrito got up. Sat down again. "Coño. I really don't understand you. And here I thought you'd be so pleased. I go through hell with all my family just because you go and pick up some idiot criminal on some whim and you just sit there

telling me how sweet she really is!" Pedrito grabbed me by both shoulders and began to shake me. Suddenly the bartender was standing in front of us. Pedrito picked up his empty daiquiri glass and flung it into the mirror. One face cracked. Mine. Pedrito walked out.

He called me Thursday afternoon to apologize. I had to understand. To keep the girl around would be not only impractical but in bad taste. Too holier-than-thou. People would resent it. Even if she behaved. They'd say we were showing off. Rosarito would feel out of place. I had to think of her too. Charity should be done with more style. Besides, Lydia was taking this as a direct insult. She institutionalized her own idiot first-born in the States. Only the family knows about this. How would it look for us to pick one out of the gutter now? Besides, it might be socially suicidal. To say nothing of politically. Even if his mother relented. Which she wouldn't. I got snotty and said Rosarito could surely squeeze a few votes out of the slums for him.

I called him Friday to apologize. He thought we should take some time to think this through. Not see each other for a while. Get our priorities straight. I understood, didn't I, it was the only possible thing. He would cancel the reservation for the banquet hall at La Concha if I'd call Monsignor and explained about the postponement. Lydia had already cancelled the wedding date at the Cathedral. We'd wait and see. "If you would just meet her, Pedrito. Get to

know her a little. How can you make a decision without at least that? If it really doesn't work with her I promise we'll put her in a private clinic. If she shows just the slightest sign of being dangerous, or if she becomes unmanageable. I promise you that. Just give her a chance. That's all I ask. Just come be with her for a while." I heard him take a deep breath. "No." Another breath. "At least. Not yet. I'll call you."

An hour later his oldest sister Lydia called to cancel a long-standing invitation to spend a week with Pedrito at her country estate near Parguera. That night I sent him back his ring. He didn't acknowledge receipt. I am afraid Doña Rosario has been calling my parents. She could do a lot of damage to their legal practices. To say nothing of their social life. Last night at dinner, my father suggested it would be better for Rosarito if she and I moved to an apartment near the hospital in case she had to be rushed there in an emergency. Handier for her outpatient treatment too. They'll want to entertain as usual at Christmas and if "the creature" isn't even toilet-trained... Yes, it must have been Doña Rosario. I wonder if their sharing the same name has forced her to build higher barricades than usual at the sacred frontier.

On the other hand, my most tactful colleagues at the hospital kindly assure me that bringing Rosarito home is a beautiful but useless gesture. They of course were not fooled by the "suddenly discovered cousin" story. My less

tactful - more paranoid - colleagues assure me it is a superficial, transparent, childish gesture accomplishing nothing. I can't handle the stress of working at the hospital and this is my way of displacing my misplaced guilt: by attempting to heap it on the staff. But oh no they're too smart for me (I'll soon see), they will not be contaminated by my guilt and if I insist on continuing with this basically selfish (admit it) project I cannot count on their bailing me out when I get into financial, emotional, social difficulties as I surely will though of course they fervently hope and pray I won't. But strangely enough, the biggest surprise came from Medina. He stopped me in the hallway a week ago, detaching himself from a group of doctors and psychologists in casual consultation, and said loudly and formally, "I hear you are to be congratulated on a most humane endeavor. May I wish you all the luck, comrade. And if you should require my help, do not hesitate to ask." His voice held no trace of pomposity or sarcasm. Even his slight bow had a schoolboy simplicity about it. Two days ago I received a call revoking the invitation to read my paper, "Suicidal Trends As Seen In the Rorschach Test," at a conference in Ponce because of a suspiciously sudden "scheduling difficulty." They all wash their hands of me. I have broken the commandment handed to me in my initiation ceremony at the hospital, a cross between a revelation and a mandate: Thou shalt not look.

I deserve what I get.

And perhaps I agree. Sometimes adopting Rosarito seems to me the sanest, simplest act in the world: as clean and clear as a drop of rain on a blade of grass on those bright reborn mornings after an allergy attack. Other times, it seems as tortuous and crazy a gesture as the maze of back alleys and puddled foot-paths which led to Tfo Manuel's many rooms. All I know is that this is a conscious, deliberate act which has been uncoiling within me since childhood. Maybe the potential for exile has a specific aura, a characteristic smell which is recognizable in its early stages only by other exiles. And that's the incurable, fatal disease Tfo Manuel recognized in me. Exile is our secret password. And Rosarito's too. Perhaps it was that kinship Tfo Manuel celebrated yearly with the gesture of the handkerchiefs. The same thing Rosarito perceived when she sought refuge in my office and surprised me huddled in the dark: a fellow fugitive.

So to those who claim I am acting out rescue fantasies - playing a dangerous delusive game of super-therapist, eager to flaunt my skills where others have failed - to those who remind me that experiments with live-in patients are self-indulgent and old-fashioned, at best, I can only say that it is not the psychologist in me who has adopted Rosarito. I cherish no messianic visions of transforming her into a well-adjusted podiatrist with five children living in a pseudo-Spanish split-level home in Santa Maria who will take up portrait painting and jewelry making as hobbies on

alternate Wednesday afternoons. The most I'd hoped for was to make her realize she did not have to be invisible to survive. And I think we've begun to accomplish that. I have great faith in our first meeting: against all odds she adopted me. I can't judge the extent or form of her schizophrenia yet. Anyway I'm not taking on her case. Along with looking for an apartment, I have been shopping around for a good adolescent diagnostician and therapist. I only know that in her flight from the orderly-guards she chose to come into my office and play silent music on my body. And that it was Tio Manuel who opened the door for her. I trust that. Actually I think I'm rather lucky. I know my problems are in a way just beginning. And yet. I feel as light-hearted and alive as one whose problems have just ended. I have once again entered a world of exile and touched a base, but this time I am in no hurry to run away. Rosarito is a person and not a place.

Most days I am convinced Pedrito will never call again. And I'm not doing a very good job of living with that. Yet, if we did marry and he were separated from his family because of me, I'm not sure I could live with that either. And then once in a while, I suspect he will call. And after he meets Rosarito, things could be different. After all, Pedrito comes from a long line of exiles himself.

His own ghosts must be good for something.

Here in Puerto Rico a perfect stranger (a stranger to you, but he knew a cousin of your father's in the the seventh grade) can suddenly accost you in a drug store two months after your wedding, rub your stomach and ask, "Y qué, are you pregnant already?" Yet I could not ask my own mother, "Y qué, what did Tío Manuel do?" Or, to be precise, I could ask more subtle variations of the question, and did. I simply didn't get any answer except an ambiguous, "Ay... you already know how Papito was," (my great-grandfather), or an evasive, "Hand me that yellow mantilla. Now what did I do with the rosary..." or, once, an enigmatic, "Lovers from afar..." which utterly shocked me as the continuation of that saying contains an unladylike word I assumed then (quite wrongly as it turned out) my mother would not be caught even thinking. But as often happens - as if there existed some ambitious lesser deity trying to scramble his way up the heavenly bureaucracy by showing off his efficiency at choreographing this kind of stunt - I finally found what I wanted when I was no longer looking for it.

The arrangements for the adoption of Rosarito had taken my mind somewhat off Tío Manuel's ghost. I still looked around with expectation at any startling movement. I still experienced the air around me as somehow richer and more generous than before: a fragile ocean with invisible waves which might at any moment deliver at one's feet some

unexpected seashell or shipwrecked skeleton from another time. But I no longer lived for that moment alone. For five days I had carried the unsigned adoption papers jammed between a waterproof rubber flashlight and an empty folded pizza carton in the glove compartment of my bug without daring to even read them. I took sick leave from the hospital and drove aimlessly all day and a good part of the night along unfamiliar new highways aimed at the central mountain range. These highways started out straight as arrows then suddenly folded into sharp curves as if squashed into accordion pleats by striking an impenetrable barrier. My thoughts felt just like that. Other times I drove round and around suburban streets tightly lined with bright candy-colored box-houses huddling inside a second skin of protective iron grills. Or went bouncing through the pot holes of old unpaved country roads transformed into bright red tunnels by the flowering Flamboyán branches linked overhead and by a thick carpet of fallen petals churned into miniature hurricanes by the wheels of my passing.

I told myself I was thinking. But really, I drove in that half-crazed, pseudo-mystical state people reach when their minds have failed. When the accumulation of their knowledge, hopes and prejudices is not enough to give them a glimpse of what's on the other side of tomorrow. I think I would have willingly accepted the omens divined in the entrails of a gored goat had anyone offered to read them to me. Like a primitive tribesman scanning the skies for help

in scheduling the next human sacrifice, I was waiting for a sign. Finally, after lunch on the fifth day, I ran out of gas three blocks away from The Undaunted Virgins' house in Hato Rey. Four little boys ferociously swinging raw chestnuts at the ends of foot-long strings for playing gallito and two men each waving a cold-beaded can of India beer in one hand pushed my bug the three blocks.

Once there, a yapping chorus of invisible affronted chihuahuas accompanied me from the garden gate to the porch gate. Ringing the doorbell would have been superfluous. Tía Concepción was already fumbling with the padlock key while three squiggly brown bundles, their toe-nails clicking out feverish Morse on the tiles, wiggled between her fuzzy magenta slippers. Three other pop-eyed hairy lumps trembled pathetically in the crook of one arm. An old unspent revulsion invaded me. I caught a glimpse of a far-off memory: an upturned eye revealing a yellow hemisphere netted with little red pathways going nowhere, a black phosphorescent buzzing mass grazing on a limp unfolded tongue. And all these melodramatic pop-eyes in front of me, begging for a mercy they seemed to enjoy pretending would be brutally withheld - like neurotic spinsters playing with the thrill of imagined rape at every turn. The effort of not kicking one of their rumps left me limp.

A long, confusing, pointless visit followed. We rocked on the porch. I remembered my father's aversion to rocking

chairs and wondered if it had been inspired by Tía Concepción. She flung her large weight petulantly against the flimsy straw scroll-work of her white rocking chair each time like a wilful little girl warned not to rock too far and deliberately trying to find out exactly how far is too far. The fuzzy magenta slippers made a single clap when she landed. The sound invariably sent the chihuahuas scattering in a new orgy of fear. I ate polvorones made by Milagritos. They had dark green sparkles pushed into their centers. I ate with a gluttony I hoped would compensate for my lack of conversation. Tía Concepción and I drank iced coffee from tall glasses with crowns of gold leaves around the rims. My fingers were sticky with crumbs. For every word Tía Concepción spoke to me, she directed ten to the chihuahuas. Even this ratio they resented and tried their best to drown the few words aimed my way. Titi Felicia and Tía Encarnación were having their siestas. I thought they must be deaf, than we'd so far suspected. The rococo grill enclosing the porch was gorged with orange and red plastic flower pots chained to the inside of each loop. After a while, the pots began to look like the bodies of tropical birds trying to escape from an aviary. The long sprays of leaves trailing out, darkening the porch and deadening traffic sounds, were the birds' wings and tails. During a lull in the yapping I heard Milagritos phoning a garage from inside the house. Soon a young man in greasy gray overalls stood calling in front of the garden gate. "Ey, misst!" Tía Concepción walked

me down the winding garden path bordered with a riot of variegated vergüenzas along both sides: wine, peach, gold. I counted an escort of eleven chihuauas on trembling matchstick legs crashing through the bushes. I paid the man for the gasoline and bent to kiss Tía Concepción good-bye. I found her staring after the reatreating figure of the garageman crossing the deserted residential street with the empty can of gasoline in one hand.

"Walks just like Manolín at that age." I had no idea who she was talking about. (From the earth, a comēt's approach is thunderingly silent: if one turns away too soon one may miss it forever.) I turned and inserted the key in the car door but Tía Concepción plucked my sleeve. "One foot always lagging behind like it didn't want to go with the rest of him." I followed her eyes and studied the man on the opposite sidewalk. He couldn't be said to limp. But he took one long, jaunty step with his right foot then seemed to tow his left leg and coax it into a small, half-hearted step - as if that leg wanted to sneak off on its own some other place. "Don't know what he ever saw in that Mexican Indian woman. Half at least. From a circus family. Trapeze artists indeed! Hadn't worked for years. Peasants. Illiterate. Imagine! Her father had to sign an X on the marriage certificate." I thought Tía Concepción must be sharing some casual gossip about the garage man we watched but her voice - tight and muffled, coiled around itself as though afraid

to let go - didn't match. The dogs panted and cowered behind the garden gate but were quiet for once, pacified by the signs of my imminent departure.

"The men. Ay, the men!" Tía Concepción wagged her head in knowledgeable despair as if, though manless all her life, she had managed to experience first-hand behind her barrier of wrought iron curlécues with its chained pots and trailing vines all the iniquities and ingritudes of that sex and not merely the trysts and jealousies of her miniature champion studs. She probably assumed there was no difference. The garageman was nearing the corner with his empty can. Inexplicably, I felt a chill and turned expectantly to Tía Concepción. (Sometimes a comet - that answer to a mystery which orbits invisibly for years around family conversations - announces its arrival by a shiver of alertness.) "Hadn't even finished studying law in Madrid. Trip was supposed to take his mind off another trashy woman he'd gotten involved with there. Knowing him, a gypsy. The Mexican wasn't even pregnant. Not that they could have insisted. Papito offered to pay to annul the marriage. Ay! That Manolín. Stormed out of the house calling Papito names you wouldn't believe and disappeared with that woman. I remember noticing how well he walked that time. As if both feet were in agreement for once. That was in 1893. Twenty-five years later, on his deathbed, Papito made us promise on the salvation of his soul and ours that we'd never speak to or about Manolín again. Even among ourselves.

Ever. Even answer his letters. Each one of us had to hold Papito's gold medal of San Gerardo in turn. After we swore, Papito made us kiss the medal and then he'd kiss it. We kept the vow perfectly for almost forty years. After Manolín came back it was just - habit. Or perhaps caution. I'm not proud of that. Those handkerchiefs he used to send you. We'd keep them a long time. Open the box. Touch them. Just to feel close to him." Then as if seventy years had just been bridged, "Manolín used to waltz with me at grown-up parties when I was little. He was fourteen years older than I. He'd leave whichever of his girl friends with angry eyes snapping behind a fan and come pick me up and whirl me around. My feet never touched the floor. It was the closest I ever came to flying. Lucky your mother was too young to talk so she couldn't promise." Saved by a technicality! I wondered if that was the genesis of my mother's devotion to law. "Ay! Why didn't he just live with her. Like Papito and all his women. Marry somebody else. Why did he try to make her one of us?"

The garageman had long turned the corner but Tía Concepción's eyes continued fixed on the spot of his disappearance as if something of him, perhaps the most important part, lingered there. And at that moment Tía Concepción seemed more crippled than Tío Manuel's own hand with the missing finger. And for the first time in my life I stopped feeling sorry for Tío Manuel. Perhaps, after all, only he of all my relatives had remained whole and free.

Driving back home on Avenida Muñoz Rivera it dawned on me that exile, though not reversible, is after all a two-way process. Like two halves of one chain link, the crescent left behind is as severed as the one cast aside: In the dance of life Tía Concepción never came so close to flying again. Now, caught behind the long red light at the intersection with Avenida Baldorioty de Castro, next to the old caminero's stone house, I freed the adoption papers from between the flashlight and the folded pizza carton in my glove compartment. I brushed a few pizza crumbs off and with an aggressive whimsical flourish which would have made Medina proud, I signed my name right then and there.

And if this seems a beautiful but useless gesture to Rosarito, so be it. What are gestures after all but imperfect translations of another person's private world, so many of them like elaborate but apparently useless handkerchiefs passed from hand to hand along an endless chain to haunt us through perpetuity with the possibilities of their meaning. And in that one sense we are all in a constant state of exile.

But as I drove off on the green light after signing the adoption papers, I heard an eery and distant peel of laughter. A gleeful chortling, rich and amused. The more I listened, the harder it was to determine which direction it was coming from. Sometimes it sounded directly overhead, the next second as if deep within me. It was just like that cosmic chuckle I sometimes heard in my office. There I had

explained it as a byproduct of tiredness and the confusion of sounds from the solitary confinement cells.

I looked around the inside of the bug. No rippling translucent hand. No Tfo Manuel outside on either sidewalk. And yet I suddenly did not feel so alone with my decision to adopt Rosarito anymore. I had been right after all: my life after the ghost would never be the same. As I wiggled, defended, coerced my bug through the afternoon rush hour traffic the memory of this chuckle seemed to extend far beyond the congested ribbon on the road, far beyond the confines of my own and Rosarito's life. It was as if somewhere there existed a secret society of exiles which kept an eye out for each member. A brotherhood Tfo Manuel could finally belong to. A place where even time could not build walls.

A home with no rooms.