

Jocay

a novel

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Abstract

Jocay, a novel

Ernesto Yale

Jocay is a South American novel written in English by a South American. The very articulation in English of a fiction that stems from the Spanish-speaking world is in itself a form of fiction, one of the many interacting in the novel. The unnamed first-person narrator grows up in the field of interaction of what is considered official reality with the fictive forces of superstition, religion, politics, dreaming and delusion. Since birth, life has placed him in different borderlands. He, a Mestizo adopted by impoverished former landowners, inhabits the borderland that separates his origins from his present reality, as the people who have adopted him live in a borderland between their former, privileged situation and their present.

He learns that Catholic priests have written a false history of his homeland, in which the natives appear as savages in need of religious indoctrination and colonization. But his godmother tells him that a defrocked priest has found evidence of an old civilization that contradicts the fictive official history. The narrator learns that superstition, a powerful traditional fiction, influences the thinking of uneducated people, who refuse to accept the authority of medicine –which, to some extent, is a fiction itself. Affected by the lack of a clear definition of reality, the narrator inhabits a world in which the real coexists with the supernatural and the fantastic.

He lives on the seashore, near a cliff with caves at its foot. Old natives believe there are forking paths in the caves, which lead to different versions of one's life. He experiences in this place a fictive correction of his reality: he encounters his birth parents, who apologize for having given him away. All along the novel the inward and subjective first-person narrator expresses his feelings and observations from his own, emotional point of view. This includes a series of paranormal experiences –like that of the cliff caves— in which he finds himself on the boundary between daydreaming and hallucination, while a hidden observer in his mind realizes that what is going on is not

real. This means that he does not hallucinate, but experiences paranormal states triggered by sadness, frustration, fear of social contempt, loneliness and other powerful feelings.

The fictions that affect the narrator are manifestations of the forces that interact in his post-colonial society. The doctrines of the ruling class and the Catholic church fight against the radical stances of the dissident defrocked priest and the narrator's godmother, an impoverished former landowner who works as a public school teacher, and thinks that all children, regardless of their race and economic condition, have the right to education. When the narrator finishes high school he discovers how the leftist militant students oppose the Establishment. He finds himself, in the 1960s, in a political borderland between those faithful to the Establishment, and those who fight for a socialist political system.

In 1963-1964 the narrator works as a volunteer interpreter on board the hospital ship HOPE (Health Opportunity for People Everywhere). His interpretive work on the ship, where he lives in the borderland between the English and Spanish-speaking worlds, confirms to him that language is much more than words. Since early childhood, his girlfriend has been a mute girl, whose gestures he has learned to interpret. He has also had to decipher what a boy who suffered from Down syndrome and lived at his home, tried to tell him. Such interactions improved his communication skills. But his fascination with language does not come from his human relations alone. Since early childhood he has learned to understand his beloved dog's barking and movements, and the voice of nature articulated by the ebb and flow, the sea breeze and the heat of the sand.

When his experience on board the HOPE finishes, the narrator travels to the University of Arkansas, where he studies with a scholarship for a year. He then studies during another year at the University of Quito, Ecuador, and believes that he has obtained a scholarship to study in a socialist country. Upon his arrival in Prague he learns that his scholarship is a fiction, and finds himself at the point of deportation. He gets short-term visas while trying to get a scholarship. In his precarious situation his mind becomes a field in which present political realities and fictions interact with those affecting him since early childhood, until he turns over a new leaf.

N.B. *Jocay*, "the home of the fish," is the Amerindian name of Manta, Ecuador.

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Chapter 1

At my stop I got off the bus and headed for home looking over my shoulder. My eyes searched for the slightest movement, my ears were pricked up, the warm air felt strange on my skin, my legs were ready to sprint away if the encounter of last Wednesday's evening were to repeat itself. I squinted and observed the minutest details of the desolate street. The opposite sidewalk appeared blurred to me. Someone stole from behind an almond tree...No, it was the shadow of a forking branch of an almond tree swaying in the light wind; yet a feeling that I was not alone made me shudder. A small yet strong hand pulled at my shoulder from behind. I jumped round and saw a smile on the face of a girl who was a few years older than I, with glossy dark straight hair, golden-brown skin. I recognized her at once, in spite of the five years that had passed since we saw each other for the last time. She was mute but her gestures were more eloquent than words. Her mouth could not speak but I could read every twitch of her lips. I decoded the blinking of her eyes by the movement of her long eyelashes. I became mute when I was with her. We understood each other better without my words. She nodded in the direction of the sea with a roguish glance. I imitated her gesture to signal *yes*, and followed her. The present time disappeared behind the dark curtain of her hair waving in the breeze. Vivid memories of childhood filled my mind.

I was seventeen years old at that moment. The many years that have gone by since then have taught me that different memories are but different kinds of fiction. I know that the present story, my recollection, is fiction itself. It seems to me that, at seventeen, my senses had kept most of their freshness. The briny breeze filled my nostrils, my memories of childhood still smelled of the sea. They floated in my mind as bottled messages float on the waves, until they wash ashore to tell their broken, fragmentary stories of discoveries and conquests. My mind kept putting together the irregular pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of the things I remembered, of the others I believed had happened, and of the many that people had told me about my childhood.

At seventeen I was finishing high school. My documents prove that part. At school, I had learned the formal history of my land and my people, but what I saw around me did not always agree with what my teachers told me. As it did with my own personal history, my mind kept putting together the irregular pieces of knowledge I received at

school, as well as beyond its walls, about the history of my land and my people. But that seventeen-year-old, who used to be me, has remained in the past. I have become a stranger to him. He does not seem to be willing to tell me all that he knows about our shared childhood.

Of what happened after my seventeenth year I have kept a clearer record, I believe. But I will try to retrieve my earliest memories, the earliest fiction of my life, and to translate it into English in my own mind. Stories written in Spanish and then translated into English by those who did not write them are deformed by interpretation. My own problems with translation —since early in life— have predisposed me in this sense. I will take measures to put in order what might have never existed. Antonio Machado's apostrophe to a wanderer keeps resounding in my mind:

“Wanderer, your footsteps are
the road, and nothing more,
wanderer, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.
By walking one makes the road,
and upon glancing behind
one sees the path
one will never tread again.
Wanderer, there is no road —
Only wakes upon the sea.”

There is no road — / Only wakes upon the sea. The past has no substance or meaning. What difference does it make? I am willing to put my wakes in order now that I am starting to sail through old age. I wish those interested in Ecuador and Latin America would accompany me in my journey.

I was a young child, *Cuatro*, Four, was my closest companion, my dog whose large black, brown, white and yellow spots resembled the colors of all human races. Cuatro was a genuine mongrel. His origins were as hard to ascertain as those of most humans in Ecuador. He knew he was beautiful, and strutted like a peacock wearing his four-colored coat. Cuatro protected and understood me. I walked and played with him on the deserted beach between the sea and the hill, where our house braved the southern wind. The wind had carved on the hill a steep sand ridge where everything flew: seabirds, clothes and kites, the light frames of wood I covered with four-colored paper, Cuatro's colors. My

kite flew in the wind at the end of a string. Cuatro barked at it and jumped high and fell, showing how frustrating it was not to have wings. He would then whoosh down the sand ridge like a four-colored flag, through the dry sand and the wet, to the very edge of the sea.

Our beach was on the northwestern coast of South America. Manta, our town, was just south of the equator line. When I was a little child, the stars of our tropical sky climbed down at night and let me touch them. But they did not burn my fingers: our stars were made of a frozen, blue fire. Though Manta is in a rather dry area, during the rainy season a large puddle formed itself sometimes on the sandy soil in front of our house. Cuatro and I hurried to wade in it before the soil absorbed it in a few hours. We had the ocean every day, but this puddle was a rare gift of nature. To me, Cuatro's barking and movements replaced the words he could not say. The ebb and flow, the sea breeze and the heat of the sand told me how to get my bearings:

"Watch out!" Cuatro barked out. "A fierce dog is coming."

"Hurry up!" the flow urged me on. "I'm going to close the narrow passage."

"If you stand on me much longer," the white sand warned me, "I'll have to burn your bare feet."

A short distance from home a point of land reached out into the sea, a deserted sheltered cove hid itself on the other side. From time to time Cuatro and I found a little girl, our mute friend, in the cove. All but invisible, she sat in the shadows of the cliff and watched the sea, or bathed in the large holes in the black rocks that the flow filled to the brim. She could hear, could not speak, but her joyful smile was the image of happiness itself. Her curling upper lip showed sarcasm and scorn, and anger radiated like a heat wave from her whole being. Her glossy dark straight hair and golden-brown skin took a velvety hue in the slanted sunbeams that pierced the clouds at dusk. Cuatro and I became mute when we were with Flor. She and Cuatro were the same age, three years older than I.

In the 1940s, when Flor and I were born, many years had passed since our colony had become independent. We were told that our society was democratic, but the social ranks established during the Spanish colony had not changed much. The descendants from the colonists, most of them of Andalusian origins, and the richer mestizos, had their

residences on a hill by the sea, the *Barrio Córdoba*, named after the Andalusian capital. These people owned the riches of our port. I lived among them as an adopted child. My birth parents, who had never lived together, were part of the general population of natives, poor whites and mestizos who made their home at the foot of the hill.

Manta's native name is *Jocay*, "the home of the fish" –but the new rulers since the 1530s preferred the name of the horned devilfish, the giant manta ray, to *Jocay*. And, as the new name was not a translation of the former, the foreign culture attempted to supplant the native without preserving its symbols. The conquistador Pedro de Alvarado wrote that a native temple towered over the end of *Jocay*'s central avenue. Stone monuments of male and female divinities in the nude stood alongside the avenue. The Spanish priests, representatives of the Inquisition, demolished them. The foreign culture destroyed the memorials of the native one in order to supplant it. But the name *Jocay* and the native culture survived in the collective memory. The official statement that the new culture superseded the old one is a fiction.

The demolished monuments evoked the sculptures of the Valdivia culture, which thrived near the modern-day town of Valdivia, Ecuador between 3500 BC and 1800 BC. It was "officially" discovered in 1956 by the Ecuadorian archaeologist Emilio Estrada, but people from this area had always known about it. Based on comparison of the Valdivian pottery with the ancient Jōmon culture of the island of Kyūshū, Japan, Estrada, along with Betty Meggers, a U.S. archaeologist, suggested that a relationship between the people of Ecuador and the people of Japan existed in ancient times. Polished, dark red and gray pottery is characteristic of the Valdivian culture. The trademark Valdivia piece is the "Venus" of Valdivia, the goddess who presided over the rituals of fertility.

The conquistadors emerged from the horizon where the red sun sank every evening. By the 1940s, coffee, cacao beans, *tagua*, also known as vegetable ivory, balsa and other woods, cotton, kapok or silk cotton, castor beans, tuna fish, sardines, straw hats, dolls and decorative boxes sailed beyond that same horizon. Coarse boxes, as massive as large boulders, brought industrial products. Ships brought cattle, anchored in deep water, and threw the animals overboard through gates in their bulwarks. Attendants on rowboats escorted the cattle, which swam for dear life. As soon as the herd set hoof on dry land, merchants assessed them for market value. I witnessed this as a child. I

overheard some old people saying that Africans were brought and treated in the same way during the colonial period. They must have thought I could not understand what they were saying. Our teachers never told us about this. I learned more about our homeland and about my own origins in this way than from the edited versions that the teachers and other adults offered me.

For centuries, the Spanish had tried to build a copy of their homeland in the dry climate of our coastal strip, some forty kilometers wide, which borders the rain forest. The carob, fig, orange and lemon trees, acacias, roses, jasmine, dogs, cats, horses, donkeys, cattle, goats and poultry imported from Spain created a certain Mediterranean ambience.

Angélica, my adoptive mother, *Mamá*, and María, my godmother, whom I called *Ñaña*, a child's term for sister, were impoverished former landowners. Their only property was their house. When they were younger their families decided that the men they wanted to marry were not eligible husbands for them. They remained unmarried, kept their lovers, but did not live with them.

María was in her late thirties. She was somewhat round, though not fat. Her hair was an elegant mix of black and gray tufts. It could be said that her character resembled her hair, it was an elegant mix of friendliness and charm with a radical political stance. She was one of those public school teachers who thought that all children, regardless of their race and economic condition, had the right to education. Her political attitude made her a dissident from her class.

Angélica was in her forties. Although she had more gray hair than María, hers was all but invisible on her dark blond head. Unlike María, she did not present a radical political stance, but behaved according to a traditional Spanish code of nobility. She considered it her responsibility to help the underprivileged, but she also exerted the authority inherent in her class. She worked as a dressmaker, and made men's shirts for a store. I sat on a table attached to her sewing machine and talked with her while she worked. From time to time she asked me to thread the needle for her:

"I'm beginning to be farsighted," she would say.

A jasmine, all green leaves, white flowers and fragrance, climbed around and overhung the gallery at the top of the stairs of our wooden house. Mamá and Ñaña sat under the jasmine after sunset to converse with friends and enjoy its scent. When the night was dark and I found myself on the street, two houses away from our home, I could not make out anyone sitting in the gallery, but the sea breeze wafted to me their voices enveloped in jasmine.

Mamá and Ñaña were working women, but they had a cook and maid called Ramona.

“We’ve taught Ramona to read and write good Spanish,” Mamá once claimed with pride while conversing with a cousin of hers in the gallery. Her cousin, a short, frail man in his fifties—who had been a landowner, had lost his land, and had become a successful exporter of coffee—leapt up in indignation:

“You’re not afraid she could read your letters and personal documents, and become disobedient?” His sharp dark gaze seemed to sting Mamá’s eyes, which remained serene.

“Come on!” she cried out while getting to her feet, “the better she’s educated, the more she’ll be satisfied and friendly. What personal documents? We’re poor.” But, although Mamá and Ñaña did not have money, they remained members of the ruling class in the postcolonial society. Mamá did not need to adopt me in law. She dictated a birth certificate for me at the registry. Years after this event, Señor Morán, the registrar, a short, stout, cheerful and confident mestizo, told me the story:

“Señorita Angélica came into my office in the dignified elegance of her modest white linen: ‘Señor Morán, I want you to write a birth certificate for my son,’ she commanded. I was still bowing to her when I heard her order. The words ‘my son’ made me start. I gasped and cleared my throat: ‘I beg your pardon, Señorita Angélica?’ I managed to ask. I must’ve looked pretty awkward, but I’d never seen her pregnant. ‘Delighted to learn that you have a son, Señorita. When was he born?’ ‘On May 31.’ ‘Four months ago. I’ll have to justify the late registration.’ ‘I trust your competence, Señor Morán.’ I had to assume responsibility for the irregular registration. ‘No problem, Señorita,’ I reassured her, and asked for the father’s name. ‘Unknown,’ she replied, showing me two fingers stuck together, and added: ‘I’m both parents. Not a word of this

to anyone.’ ‘Never doubt my loyalty, Señorita. I owe my post to your father, God rest Don Pedro’s soul.’”

The document was false, but Mamá’s love for me, her compassion and her willingness to protect me, were genuine. She thought that some ladies, neighbors of ours, would reject me for having native blood. She taught me to assert myself and avoid conflict at the same time:

“Now, listen with care,” she told me one day, “if one of the ladies in the neighborhood makes a remark about your complexion, you’ll recite the following lines to her:

‘Milady, I am dark a little bit,
and am so happy with my complexion,
for the prettiest roses and carnations,
are a little bit dark, and exquisite.’

Now, let’s repeat these lines together until you can recite them without hesitation.”

The ladies did not make remarks, but I recited these lines to them anyway. I had not worked so hard for nothing. One of them told me I had a talent for poetry. Her compliment rewarded me for my efforts.

When Nana became my godmother she accepted to share with Mamá a responsibility for my upbringing. Although she was busy at school, she would come home running when I fell sick. As soon as I heard the rapid tap-tap-tap of her low heels on the hardwood, when she rushed to see how I was doing, I felt better before she even called my name.

From time to time Mamá told Ramona, the maid, to take me to the foot of the hill to see a man. They said he was my father. The thickset balding man, stern-faced and immobile, waited for me on a black rock that the breaking waves sprayed. He did not hug me, or touch me, or call me his son, but his hoarse voice just pronounced the same dull “hello” every time we met. We then looked at each other in silence. A painful emptiness separated us. Time stretched between us, I felt that it was tearing up, until he spoke at last:

“We’ll see each other again some other day.” And he dismissed me.

“Bye-bye,” I replied with relief. But I was disappointed, too. I wanted to run off as fast as I could, but already looked forward to our next meeting. I did not know what to do.

A familiar hand then patted me on the back. It was Ramona. We returned home.

“Are you hungry?” she said.

She said “hungry” in the tone of “sad.” I knew what she meant. She was going to give me food to make me feel better. Half-native, half-Spanish, Ramona, the daughter of a “gentleman” and his servant, was in her twenties. Her body and her mind were as solid as the ancient oven enthroned in her kitchen, in which she baked a tuna fish when we got home. The oven was a square wooden box, about six feet by six feet and three feet high, which stood on legs a foot high. It was full of earth in which several bulging, wide-mouthed, earthenware vessels were embedded up to the rim. The surface of the earth filling was hardened with wet firewood-ash. Ramona cooked, roasted and baked in them. She served the tuna fish with roasted plantains and a salad. The only dressing we knew was made of oil, salt, vinegar and lemon juice. There were no soft drinks, alcoholic beverages, or refrigerator, for that matter. As in a water clock, drinking water dripped, drop by drop, from small holes at the bottom of a two-feet wide, porous-stone vessel with sloping sides that stood in a wooden frame, into a large, bulging earthenware pot.

Chapter 2

One morning Mamá and I were tending the roses, sweet peppers, hibiscus, cucumbers and the rest of our garden. The rainy season, that in Manta was mild, was drawing to an end. The light greens around us were becoming darker, the reds and yellows remained intense. A mixed scent of green leaves and drying earth filled the air. A hen laid an egg and cackled with excitement and pride. Hummingbirds hummed, bees buzzed.

Everything was in the usual way until a beetle started making a loud, rapid tapping sound that stood out against the pleasant sounds, and scared me. According to an old woman, our neighbor's cook, that sound was an evil omen. I was once with her when we heard that tapping. She found the beetle and crushed it "in order to beat fate." Now that I knew the beetle I looked for it, but could not find it. All of a sudden, Mamá announced to me:

"You're going to the nuns' school on Monday for the first time." Her face appeared strange. I could not tell if she was happy or sad, but I felt sad. I looked at the pepper plants and wondered how they felt when people gave them a tug and uprooted them. Many questions came to my mind, but all I could say was one word:

"Why?"

"One goes to school to learn to read and write," she said with the same expression—a mix of joy and sadness.

"But I can read and write," I protested.

"I know you can, and that will make it easier for you to learn new things at school."

"Why don't I go to Ñaña's school?" I begged in despair.

"She would be delighted to take you to her school, but she teaches at a public school, and people of our social rank have always gone to religious schools."

"What's a social rank?"

"I'll explain that to you at the proper time."

On Monday morning Mamá and Ñaña brought me to the *Stella Maris*. I dug my heels in the door frames, made myself stiff, refused to be pulled into the school.

“Stop doing that, please, please,” Mamá and Ñaña begged, and kept pulling until they dragged me into a classroom. A sturdy, middle-aged nun clad in black from headdress to shoes allotted me a seat:

“You must remain seated at this desk. You cannot leave it to talk to other children.” She said, as though reciting a litany.

The stern, black-clad Sister Caridad looked and sounded like an avatar of authority. But as I felt so lonesome, I kept leaving my desk to talk to other children. One morning she praised the calligraphy of a girl who sat to my left. “Why can’t I write like that?” I wondered, “I guess her pen knows how to write so well.”

“Could you lend your pen to me?” I asked the girl, full of hope. But her pen refused to write beautiful calligraphy for me. Dejected, I was returning the pen to its owner when a hand tugged my ear upward and led me to my desk without releasing its hold. While I walked on tiptoe with my eyes looking down to lessen the pain, all I could see was the nun’s habit, the tissue, black as a funeral curtain, that grazed my legs. The nun kept tugging at my ear, but I did not tell Mamá. I feared the nun would lock me up in the closet under the stairs, as she had locked other children. They said there was a skeleton in the closet, suspended from a rack like a hanged criminal. Mamá wondered why my ear was swollen:

“Has someone twisted your ear?” she asked. She seemed to be sure that she knew the reason.

“No.” I said, trying to look as puzzled as she did.

“So why is it more swollen than yesterday? Has something happened to you at school?”

“No.”

She did not believe me and sent Felipe, a twelve-year-old, to spy. When Felipe told her that Sister Caridad kept tugging at my ear, Mamá came to the school. By accident or by design she entered my class just as the nun was doing it. Mamá’s reaction could seem melodramatic, but was unavoidable under the circumstances.

“Stop, Alicia!” She shouted at Sister Caridad.

“Angélica, my cousin!” sister Caridad uttered in astonishment.

“As a child you tortured your servants, and you haven’t changed. When you took your solemn vows to become a nun, and had to choose a religious name, you chose the name Caridad, but you did not become charitable, you’ve remained a tormentor. Repent.”

Sister Caridad never touched my ear again.

Felipe was one of the children of a poor woman who died of tuberculosis when they were little, before I was born. The story of her death was told to me by different adults in different ways. The less educated among them told me things that confused me so that I ended but not knowing at all what had happened, and I had to ask Ñaña to explain it to me.

“You don’t understand them because people who are not educated mix what the doctor explains to them with their own beliefs, based on fear and ignorance. They believe in charms, omens and things of that kind.”

“Like the old woman who told me that the tapping of the blue beetle was an evil omen?”

“Yes, that’s a good example. They believe in those things and refuse the authority of medicine. They think that those who have died drain the life of other members of their family in some mysterious ways, and things like that.”

“They say there was a beautiful little girl here who was called Inés, and that her dead mother took her away with her. Is that true?”

“That’s what I’m talking about –ignorant beliefs. Let me explain that to you. Inés was Felipe’s sister. Angélica, your Mamá, was Inés’ godmother. She told me that it was her sacred duty to help the dying woman and her children, and she told me what the woman had said to her when she learned that she had just a few months to live.”

“What?”

“‘Please, take care of your goddaughter, Felipe and Alonso,’ the woman begged Angélica. ‘Alonso makes it most difficult for me to accept death,’ she said with deep sorrow, ‘He cannot understand what’s going on, or anything else.’ ‘Perhaps he does,’ Angélica said to her. ‘How can we know? He can’t speak,’ the woman replied. ‘And how about your husband?’ Angélica asked her. ‘He’s depressed because of my illness, unable to work, but he’s a good man, he’ll come for the children as soon as he recovers.’ She

said, and continued: 'As I have told you before, he has been a good farmer, and also a mechanic, driver of trucks, and pilot of boats that carry people and products. But when he tries to work now all he does is cry, and they have to replace him. He says he'll never be able to repay your kindness if you take care of our children until he can work again.'"

"And then she died?"

"When she died, a few month later, Inés became the daughter Angélica had always wanted to have. Inés was slender and delicate. The death of her mother had left her scarred by sorrow. She did not show much desire for food, yet she appeared healthy. But, a few months after her mother's death, she started to lose weight, to sweat in her sleep, and to complain about always being tired. Everyone said it was because she was mourning her mother's death, but the old woman who told you about the blue beetle said it was the mother who was causing Inés' death."

"How?"

"She said that Inés' mother was draining her life so she came to join her. When she said so, Angélica, in anger, ordered her to keep her mouth shut, and asked the family doctor to tell her frankly what Inés' condition was. 'My diagnosis is, she has tuberculosis of the lungs,' the doctor told Angélica. 'And unfortunately, there's no way to cure her. All I can do is prescribe palliatives.' Inés' chest pain worsened by the day. She started spitting pus and blood. Within a year she was no more."

When I was old enough to understand the importance of what Naña had explained to me, Inés' story had already become a tale the household recounted with sorrow and she, just a name on a tomb, at which we laid chrysanthemums some Sunday afternoons. As an adult, I came to believe that Mamá had adopted me after Inés' death in order to fill the emptiness this last left in her heart, as though I had come from the Great Beyond to replace the dead girl.

Alonso could not leave his room by himself, he could not master the art of walking. He could not speak, but he shrieked with pleasure every time he saw me. He was mute like Flor, but he was unable to make the signs and gestures through which she told me what her mouth could not. Yet he also, in his own way, taught me that language is much more than mere words. I came to know what he meant when he screeched, or sighed, or smiled, or drew his brows together in certain ways. His gestures were more

eloquent than spoken language. What I learned from his and from Flor's ways of communication created in me a fascination with language.

Yet, and even though we all loved Alonso, he was separated from all the rest of us "normal" people. I asked Ramona:

"Why does Alonso sleep alone in that room under the landing of the stairs and not upstairs with his brothers?"

"Because he's not like his brothers."

"Uh-huh, and why does he catch the chickens that come up to his room and keep them there?"

"Because he knows that the hens lay eggs, which he eats raw."

"He likes eating raw eggs?"

"He's not like everybody else."

When I asked Naña why Alonso was not like everybody else she said:

"Alonso suffers from something called 'Down syndrome.' Don't ask me to explain that to you, I don't understand it well myself. Besides, the doctor says that Alonso, as other people suffering from Down syndrome, was born with a heart defect."

"That's why he listens to sounds in his chest when he comes here?"

"Yes."

One day, when he was thirteen, Alonso had a heart attack and died before the doctor arrived. A man brought one of those rough white coffins with a wooden cross upon them, reserved for poor children. Ramona and Felipe laid Alonso down in the coffin. We all helped to place the coffin on the dining room table, and lit around it some of the candles we kept for power outages. The next day we loaded the coffin upon the back of a rickety pickup, sat around it and accompanied Alonso to a cemetery that was still under construction. The barren, windy land on a cliff by the sea was bereft of grass, trees or flower beds. A few crosses that looked new and lonely were painted with white enamel which sparkled in the sun. The wind whistling past them made them whine. The sun whipped the bare brown earth. The earth absorbed the punishment and remained silent and brown.

When Felipe finished cleaning Alonso's room it looked so empty that I wondered if Alonso had ever been there. After his departure chickens kept coming into his room but

did not stay long. They darted out cackling as though someone shooed them away. I wondered then –and ask myself even now— if Alonso had become a child *duende*, one of those mischievous but charming sprites of the old Spanish stories that I learned as a child. A few years went by. Like Inés', Alonso's story became a tale that the household recounted with sorrow. Some Sunday afternoons we laid chrysanthemums on both tombs.

One day their father came to talk to Mamá:

“Well, all I've left in this world is Felipe, and he's already able to work as a farmer,” he said with a mix of resignation and pride.

“Do you mean you're taking him with you?”

“I'll never be able to repay your kindness.”

“Where are you taking him?”

“I've rented a small banana plantation.”

“Is it expensive?”

“Cheap, it's just a corner of the rain forest, mosquitoes attack you as soon as the sun disappears below the horizon, but it'll blossom together with my boy, you'll see,” he said in a hopeful, unsure tone. “Would you like to come for a ride on a boat I pilot for a banana company?”

It was not my first sea-ride. From time to time adults took me by rowboat to admire the white Italian ocean liners which anchored at sea for lack of a deep-water wharf. But the boat Felipe's father piloted was a bus of sorts, with a bench for passengers all around the hull, and a space for baggage and small cargo in the middle. The boat's roof stood on posts. There were no walls to keep one from seeing and breathing at one's ease. I felt as if I were standing at the open door of our house, with nothing to stop me from going for a walk.

I knew that Felipe was leaving, and that made me sad. But the difference between going away with one's father, and returning to Our Father in Heaven was not quite clear to me. Inés and Alonso were in Heaven, but Felipe was going to disappear just as they did. At that age I inhabited a world in which the real coexisted with the supernatural and the fantastic. Nothing kept me from escaping from my sadness, as I did, by going for a walk on the sea around the anchored ships. I felt as if I were dreaming, even though I knew I was awake. I admired a white ocean liner that looked like a castle made of

hardened white horses, of those that galloped on the white-crested waves. I was looking at the liner from the outside when, all of a sudden, I found myself inside, in a ballroom where people danced as though floating in midair. I had been told that balls took place at night, and we were in the middle of the day, so it was hard to believe that this was real. I turned to a thickset, stern-faced, balding officer and asked him what time it was. "It's six thirty-five in the evening," his hoarse voice said while he looked at his watch. "You can stay for dinner as my guest." "No, thank you, it's too late." I said. "I must run back to our boat."

I found myself again at the place where I had been before my walk on the sea. The boat was being moored to the shallow-water pier, and it was still early in the afternoon. When Mamá and I returned home, present reality was not yet quite clear to me. I looked for Inés, Alonso and Felipe, but could not find them. Little by little I accepted that Inés and Alonso were gone to what the adults called Our Father in Heaven, and Felipe was gone to a plantation with his father. Emptiness came to fill my whole world. I felt chest pain. I spat, thought of Inés' tuberculosis and her death, and wished there was pus and blood in my saliva.

I also felt chest pain at school every time it was mentioned in public that I was a fatherless child. Toward the end of my first year Sister Caridad opened a folder, and said she was going to check with us the names of our parents before the year-end meeting of the teaching nuns with them. "That's it," I thought, "she's going to say I don't have a father." My name was one of the last on the list. As she got closer and closer to it, time ran faster and faster, and many things happened at the same time. I had the clear impression that some children were laughing at me, others were looking down on me with contempt, still others were sad and looked at me with sympathy. When she got to my name Sister Caridad seemed to have become a frightening marble statue. I looked at her papers, closed my eyes and made a wish:

"You wicked papers that make my father disappear, make these children and the marble nun disappear too." I kept my eyes closed but I kept seeing in my mind the nun's marble eyes. When I opened my eyes Sister Caridad had finished the list. Nobody was laughing or looking at me. Everything was as usual...

One morning during my second grade Sister Caridad gave us an assignment:

“Write about your father, you know, what you do with him. Is he nice to you? Do you love your father?”

“I cannot write about my dad, I do not have one,” I wrote without lying. I did not live with my father, and my birth certificate said my father was unknown. “I see kids on the beach with their dads. They play and bathe while all I have is Cuatro. Mamá and Ñaña are busy. The kids with their dads look big and important. Nobody notices me.” Sister Caridad picked up my paper and read it in silence. Tears ran down her face. “She can cry!” I thought with surprise, and joy.

Sister Caridad was not my only teacher. Ñaña kept explaining important things to me. One day I told her:

“I heard the word ‘freedom’ on the radio. What does it mean?”

“The song canaries that people keep in cages are not free,” she said, “whereas the pelicans that fish near the beach enjoy freedom. Now you give me an example of freedom,” she said with a smile of encouragement.

“The seashore!” I exclaimed. It was the only answer that came to my mind after hearing of the pelicans. Freedom meant roaming the seashore where colors, light and shadows were in constant change. Every time they changed I found myself in a different place, and yet it was always the same place. I saw blue, turquoise, green or gray seas, white or dark-gray sands, yellow or white sand ridges, yellow or reddish-brown cliffs, but there was always a single sea, sand, sand ridge and cliff.

That cliff was at the point of land that reached out into the sea, and hid the deserted sheltered cove where Cuatro and I sometimes found our mute friend Flor. Nature had carved the cliff so that it resembled the wrinkled face of an old native sage. The arches at the foot of the cliff guarded gateways to caves. Felipe once told me:

“You know what an old native told me about the cliff caves? Well, it wasn’t exactly like this, but this is what I understood: ‘There are forking paths in the caves that lead to places where one sees one’s life in different ways, as the light keeps changing the sea, the sand, the sand ridge and the cliff. Fresh water drips from the ceiling in the dark caves, carves hollows in the stony ground and rests in them.’ Water drips in the caves like it does from the porous stone vessel with sloping sides that stands in the kitchen.”

One warm, overcast afternoon, the entrances to the caves looked like tunnels into the clouds. I went in to drink water. My hands scooped it from a hollow in the ground. As soon as I drank my third draft something invisible pulled me along one of many forking paths that started at the hollow. I tried to resist it, but I felt powerless, as if I were dreaming or sleepwalking, although I was awake. The path led into the dark depths of the caves. The flashing reflections of some glowing rocks high on the black walls resembled in color the dim light filtering through the stained-glass windowpanes of our school chapel. Incense and sulfur burned beneath a multicolored, shapeless whirling mass. A voice kept repeating: "This is the mass that contains God, the Devil, all saints and demons..." The smoke and fragrance of incense mixed themselves with the blue flames and stifling odor of sulfur.

My feet slid on the slithery rock along a descending passage, until I reached an outlet. When I found myself on the beach again, and could breathe in the breeze, I felt relieved. The outlet was a hole in the black rock where my father used to wait for me. The thickset balding man was sitting on the rock. He saw me and cried "My son!"—and rushed to hug me. We laughed and said how much we loved each other. My birth mother came running from behind the black rock and embraced me with tenderness. They fell to their knees and begged me to forgive them for having given me away. I forgave them, and told them not to worry about me, that I was happy with Mamá and Ñaña, and that the only person who made me suffer was a nun. "A nun?" they wondered. "According to what we learned in history, nuns and priests existed until the twenty-second century, hundreds of years ago." I then realized that the path that had carried me through the cave had brought me to a different version of my life, as Felipe had said to me it would. My father and mother in that version disappeared as soon as I understood what had happened. I ran home and told Ramona the whole story.

"Are you hungry?" she said.

Chapter 3

If you came from the beach, climbed the sand ridge and got into our street, our house was the third one on your right. The second one was the home of Ñaña's sister, Carolina, and Diego, her husband. His first wife was dead. Carolina, much younger than he, was his second wife. They did not have children. Señora Isabel, Ñaña's and Carolina's mother, lived with them in their old wooden house. She was my substitute grandmother. My mute friend Flor was her little companion.

Large yellow wicker baskets with sloping sides, containing ferns, hung from a beam along their garden gallery. The ferns' branches were several feet long. They wound around the baskets, and made them look like heads crowned with green snakes. When new ferns were brought from the rain forest, sometimes green or yellow vipers set the snake-like ferns in colorful movement, until the glistening blade of a neighbor's vigorous machete slashed their heads off. A few lazy wooden steps dropped from the gallery to the garden, a large arrangement of roses of all sorts. Small flower pots full of color and fragrance hung from the carob tree in the midst of the garden. Thick shrubs covered with large red shell roses dwarfed small bushes spangled with tiny white sweet bride's roses. Hummingbirds stuck their slender bills into the roses' bosom, and fed on nectar day after day.

Atop the one-story house, overhanging the garden, there was a single, secluded room. Diego, Carolina's husband, called it the Olympus.

"No one dares go up to Olympus in the daytime, let alone at night," the old cook once said. It was she who told me that the tapping sound of the blue beetle was an evil omen. Like Ramona, she was the daughter of a "gentleman" and his native servant. "Don Diego is the only one who goes there. He keeps Native skeletons in vases shaped like a woman's breasts," she said running her hands around her own breasts to show the form. "He stole them from their tombs. He says the Earth is our mother and one returns to her when one dies. That's why the vases are like breasts. The place is haunted, I've heard ghosts wailing. Ugh!"

This story aroused my curiosity and fear. I wanted to see by myself what Diego kept in Olympus, but I was afraid of wailing ghosts. Ñaña showed no emotion when I told her what the woman had said:

“Ghost wailing is pure imagination, another ignorant belief like the blue beetle’s evil omen. Diego collects pieces from the Valdivia culture which existed in this region thousands of years ago. Their polished, dark-red or gray pottery show they were fishermen, farmers and potters who worshiped a goddess of fertility.”

“What happened to them?”

“No one knows. The first Spanish priests destroyed whatever remnants they could find, and argued that only savages had inhabited this land. They needed this argument to justify the domination of the natives. Since the natives, according to them, were primitive savages, the priests had the right to preach, teach, convert them into Christianity and make them accept colonization. Diego uses Valdivian relics as evidence that brilliant civilizations existed here before the Spanish conquest.”

Ñaña’s explanation made me understand what Diego was doing in Olympus, but I remained afraid of ghosts. I lived with my fear for months until I plucked up courage, climbed the stairs, and pushed open the unlocked door. There was no one around that afternoon, only fear could stop me. The squeak of the rusted hinges took my breath away. I thought of turning back, but now I was already nine years old, a big boy, and I was no coward. I took a step into the twilight made by a curtain drawn over the only window. A ghostly sound made my hair stand on end. I jumped toward the door, but something pulled me back and rent my shirt. I looked back in panic, saw no one behind me, and noticed the hook on the wall that had held me back. I understood what had happened, but hurried out of the room just in case.

On the garden steps I ran into Flor. Her glossy dark straight hair and golden-brown skin took a velvety hue in the slanted sunbeams that passed through the ferns, and reddened the white bride’s rose nested in her hair. As she smiled at me I read the blinking of her eyes and all the signs and small gestures that told me what her mouth could not. It was clear to me she was saying: “You should’ve known that Olympus is haunted.” Perhaps I could understand her so well because we were in the same situation: neither of

us lived with our birth parents. She led me by the hand behind the steps and under the house.

The ground floor was in fact three feet above the ground. In the cool twilight I saw the squared-off tree trunks that rose from the foundations, the legs of the house. There was no enclosure around this space. I could see the stairs of our house, the street with the drinking-water fountain, part of the sand ridge and the cliffs. We could see many things, no one could see us. We could hear steps and voices above us, no one could hear us. We were all-powerful. She sat on the ground. Her hand signaled to me to sit down facing her. She took my hand and made me stroke her smooth thighs, leading me closer and closer to where her legs forked. My body became a ball of light, and when she put my fingers into her downy cavity my light made her glow all over.

After this experience I felt stronger, bolder. One afternoon I plucked up courage, climbed the stairs and pushed the unlocked entrance to Olympus. The rusted hinges squeaked but I kept going. A long, sharp-pointed steel cross was nailed to the dark wall, above the vases shaped like a woman's breasts. The curtained window filtered the daylight and gave a black shine to the rapier and to an ebony crucifix that hung above a large desk. On the desk, a human skull sat on a black book with the golden inscription *Santa Biblia*. Photographs and ceramic figurines were scattered among a jumble of papers. Flor smiled at me from one of the pictures. I copied the titles of some papers and brought them to Ñaña.

With difficulty she read aloud my handwriting. A stern expression appeared on her face, as if she were teaching her class:

"Hmm," she nodded like someone recognizing what is shown to her. "'Liberation Theology.' It shows that Diego used to be a priest."

"Diego?"

"He was a young priest when they defrocked him because he fought for the rights of the natives. He calls his hidden room 'Olympus' to show his rejection of Christianity, but he quotes the Bible. He eats meat when the Church forbids it to show his rejection of its authority. At the proper time I'll explain to you what 'Olympus' and 'Liberation Theology' mean. During the presidency of Alfaro, his political mentor, Diego was the governor of our province. After Alfaro's assassination Diego was tortured."

“I saw Flor in Olympus.”

“What was she doing there?”

“Not her, her picture.”

“She’s Diego’s secret grandchild. His son from his first marriage had her by a servant in *Cojimies*. Diego dreams that one day she’ll become able to speak, and to lead the natives’ fight for equal rights. To him, she’s a reincarnation of a Valdivian goddess.”

“Flor is a Valdivian goddess?”

“No, reincarnation means that a goddess’ soul lives in Flor’s body.”

“That’s another belief, like the blue beetle’s evil omen?”

“Well, educated people also have beliefs. Anyway, Flor lives here, but her mother is still in *Cojimies*.”

“In the hacienda where you teach during vacations.”

“Yes.”

Señora Isabel had lost her estate, but she kept in a trunk fragments, ruins, vestiges of the wealth she had once possessed. Her little treasure consisted of French perfumes, silk garments, peacock-feather fans and ceramic figurines. After Ñaña’s explanation I understood that her mother’s figurines were pieces of the same collection from the Valdivia culture that Diego kept in Olympus. But Ñaña called “goddess of fertility” the figurine that Señora Isabel called “Venus.” Sometimes it seemed to me that Ñaña and Diego did not speak the same language as Señora Isabel.

Since I was a small child she had let me see and touch her figurines. The day I turned five years old, during my first year at the nuns’ school, she had given me a present, not one of those figurines, but a small porcelain baby that lay on a chest of drawers:

“This is the Child Jesus offering his open arms to you,” she had said in a tone of prayer. “May he always guard you.”

When I was ten years old Señora Isabel was approaching the end of her life. When she stopped coming out of her room, Ñaña said to me:

“My mother suffers from terminal cancer. She’s going to leave for the Great Beyond like Inés and Alonso did before her. She has asked Carolina and me to bring her to her old house, the only thing that’s left of her estate.”

“And the rest?”

“Our late father’s creditors divided the land among them. The abandoned house is her only property.”

Her children brought Señora Isabel with her trunk, Flor and me to her house. Pressed down by the weight of several people climbing at the same time, the wooden stairs squeaked a sinister welcome. A scent of withered chrysanthemums wafted into my nostrils. I looked around me but saw no flowers, nothing but gray walls...

“See? That’s Olympus,” Ñaña said to me pointing at the images depicted on the ceiling of the living-room of the ruinous manor. “The home of the gods in the Greek pantheon has become decaying, foul-smelling plaster. Part of it has already fallen to the floor, and the rest threatens to fall on our heads at any moment. Watch it.”

Pigeons had taken up residence in the house and flew through the doors and the large holes in the crumbling walls. In the garden, the native weeds had crowded out the rosebushes imported from Spain. Rank grass grew taller than my height. Its green blades cut like rapiers, its scent filled the air. Wild bees, wasps, tapping beetles and mosquitoes maintained an ominous buzz.

I saw an abandoned storehouse and wondered whether it was empty, or if there was anything left in it. As I walked around it, I tried to open one, two, three doors, but they were locked. I was losing hope of finding a way in when I noticed, behind the building, a small door standing ajar. Inside, a dim light filtered through the mosquito nets of two narrow windows. The dry cocoa beans that lay on the ground still gave off a faint fragrance, the incense of the old storehouse. Hundreds of bats hung from the ceiling. A shadow upon a wall resembled a human form. I approached to see what made it and the shadow became Flor. She smiled at me as she kept combing a rag doll. On seeing her in this dark, fragrant, hidden place, I felt as though some mysterious and pleasant vibrations were bringing every molecule of her being into mine, or as though her body and mine were vibrating in a warm unison, like two musical instruments. Her calm smile and golden-brown skin radiated in the dim light. Her glossy, dark, straight hair smelled of

sweet coconut oil. While playing with her doll, her body kept waving as though dancing to the rhythm of a song playing in her mind. With an instinctive movement I embraced her. She smiled and kept waving. A turning ring of light encircled us, as though it was true that a goddess' soul lived in Flor's body.

The adults cleaned up two of the bedrooms, and set up a comfortable bed for Señora Isabel. She spoke to people no one could see, and laughed as though reliving moments of past splendor. At the crack of a radiant dawn she turned to Ñaña:

"Charon is coming," she told her, "make me up and dress me up in full dress. I'm going to receive him in a dignified way."

A few hours later Señora Isabel left with her visitor. Bright sunshine drove away sadness and darkness. Carolina sent Flor and me to announce the departure to the neighbors, former workers of the estate, who had been waiting for the end.

"I'm sad and happy," an old woman said when she got the news, "sad because I loved Señora Isabel, happy because she was our last mistress."

Ñaña told me what her mother had said before dying, and explained to me the myth of Charon, the boatman who ferried the souls of the dead in his bark across a river to the home of the dead beneath the earth. Before returning to Manta I searched for Flor, but could not find her. I checked every shadow in the abandoned storehouse, but none resembled her. She had vanished and taken her shadow with her. We went back home without her. Emptiness returned to fill my world. I thought of Inés' tuberculosis and death, and wondered in horror if Flor had left with Señora Isabel to join Inés and Alonso at the home of the dead beneath the earth.

Chapter 4

As with Señora Isabel's, the loss of their land had impoverished Mamá and Ñaña. But Mamá's cousin, Josefina, owned a hacienda in *Cojimíes*, where she lived with her husband and children. During vacations, the *hacendados* hired Ñaña to tutor their children who studied in town during the school year, and also to teach their *peones*, plantation laborers, to read and write. When the school year finished, I traveled with Ñaña to Cojimíes. The vacation period fell during the rainy season. Roads were impassable. Although it was only about a hundred kilometers north of Manta, one had to reach the hacienda by boat, or by small planes which landed on the wide beach.

Green growth covered the hacienda—in the main, a coconut plantation—to the very beachfront. Boys on oxen or mules, with wicker baskets on either side, pricked and lifted the dry coconuts from the ground with steel-pointed sticks. They brought them before the main dwelling of the hacienda, where the *peones'* machetes danced, their blades glistening in the sun, and stripped the coconuts of their husks. The *peones* cut the thick, white coconut meat in small pieces, and sun-dried it in low, wide wagons on rails, which slid under a low roof at the end of the day or during rainy weather. They loaded the *copra*, dry coconut meat, into jute sacks, and shipped it for the extraction of coconut oil.

The laborers had supper at a kitchen reserved for them, which was also their classroom. They welcomed Ñaña with a wholehearted *Buenas noches Señorita María!* The intense light of two Coleman lanterns heightened the roughened faces of the *peones*, whose age varied between fourteen and sixty. These tough guys showed no shame of their ignorance, but only a keen desire to learn how to read and write, something I had known how to do since I was five years old. I sat in the shadows they cast on the walls, and wondered why their freedom from pretense seemed strange to me. Most of them were native, a few were black, all of them had a percentage of "white" blood, but their shadows were all the same color, as dark as their situation in the post-colonial society.

"Their masters have been making their women pregnant during the last three centuries," Ñaña told me when nobody was listening. "That's why they're part-white."

The class finished one hour before the curfew. The first time I heard about the curfew I went to the gallery behind the kitchen reserved for the peones to see how the bell was rung. This symbol of order, made of bronze, was silent at that moment, as silent as the dead darkness that surrounded the house. In the subdued light, the bell resembled the head of a hanged man. It hung from a crossbeam that looked like the bar across the upright post of a cross. A dim light that filtered through the mosquito net of a kitchen window yellowed the bronze and heightened the eerie effect. A shadow glided out through an open door and startled me. I turned around and ran into Flor. "Diego's son had her by a servant in Cojimies," Ñaña had said. I deduced that Flor must have rejoined her mother after Señora Isabel's death. She smiled at me and kept going toward the bell. While ringing it she seemed to merge into it. The vibrations of the bell brought every molecule of Flor's being into each of my own, and made me vibrate with her in unison. A warm magnetic force pulled me toward her. Our bodies met and waved together with the grace of the palm trees that filled the hacienda. A revolving light that smelled of coconut oil descended upon us.

When the ring of light vanished, Flor went down the stairs and opened the cages where the watchdogs were kept. The shrill grating of rusted hinges ripped the night. Ferocious barking filled the space. Flor had let out the watchdogs, who ran away in search of anyone who had not respected the curfew. They could rip a man to pieces, but they did not attack their mistress, the one who fed them and treated their injuries. I discovered at that moment that Flor was the mistress of the watchdogs, and I knew that, at this hacienda, the master or mistress of the watchdogs and the crabs was always the same worker. The worker fattened the big fierce blue crabs in cages near those of the watchdogs. The crabs' cages were about six by three by two feet. They were made of three-inch wide bamboo laths, nailed to a wooden framework. Spaces between the laths ensured good ventilation. The crabs' bodies were about six inches wide, their longer claw, a foot long. Flor, the mistress of the crabs, had to fatten and watch over them because they were a prized delicacy.

That night I had uneasy dreams in which Flor became smaller, darker, smaller, merged into the darkness, and I lost her for the second time. When I awoke in the morning I was relieved to realize that I had just been dreaming. Yet I needed Flor's

company and rushed to look for her at her workplace. But instead of finding her near the cages of the dogs and crabs, I witnessed a scene that made me shudder. Some dogs were crushing crabs between their powerful jaws. Other crabs' pincers were cutting through dogs' toes, ears, tongues, tails and genitals. How could this be possible? I wondered if I was seeing something that was not actually present. Yet, if this was real, someone must have opened the cages in Flor's absence. I made to run for help, but my legs did not move, and I could not avert my glance from the carnage.

Little by little, the crabs' armors became soldiers' armors. The crabs became the conquistadors Pedro de Alvarado, Francisco Pizarro and their companions. The dogs transformed themselves into native people, some of them lay dead. A small but firm hand pulled my shoulder from behind, I turned around. Flor was looking at me as if I were crazy. I turned back to the battle, but all I saw now was dogs and crabs in their locked cages...A voice coming from behind me, above my head, said my name. Señora Josefina, the lady of the hacienda, was calling me.

"Are you all right?" asked the woman on horseback, her shotgun-strap slung across her shoulder. Her calm tone carried a nuance of cruelty in keeping with her looks. While I struggled to recover my composure, her image became sharper, slender as her palm trees, her chin kept up, her eyes looking down, her spurs at the ready. I felt as though I had been asleep since I went to bed last night, and I was just awakening now.

"Of course I'm...all right," I said without conviction.

"Come, you'll ride behind my saddle," Josefina ordered, "beware of the shotgun." The sea wind bent the palm trees toward the east. Josefina's long chestnut-gray hair, a perfumed fire, streamed in the same direction and enveloped my face from time to time. A baby monkey jumped on a palm tree before our eyes. Josefina's Browning aimed at it. The accurate shot pierced the monkey and hit the coconuts behind it. The shotgun, stinking of death, returned to its resting place. The monkey's death-rattle kept resounding in my ears. We went round the whole plantation. At dusk Josefina let me go and I ran to the beach.

I turned around a point of land that reached out into the water and found a deserted sheltered cove. A shadow that resembled a human silhouette appeared on a light rock. I approached to see whose shadow it was and ran into Flor. She smiled at me as she

kept walking toward the sea, as though her feet slid on the thin layer of water that returned to it after a wave had broken and vanished. She was naked, and her hair and her whole body took a velvety hue in the slanted sunbeams passing through the clouds. She turned round and nodded toward the sea. I nodded *yes*, undressed and ran past her. She caught up with me and signaled to stop. She picked up a greenish stone, pointed at it and at the small of my back. This meant, I understood, that I had a green spot called the “Asian spot” or the “green tail,” *rabo verde* –native blood— on the small of my back without my knowing. She showed me hers, made the “equal” sign with her fingers, and hugged me. The red sun sank behind the horizon and cooled the brine. I lost Flor for the second time when Ñaña and I returned to Manta.

Chapter 5

My reason knew that Flor had remained in Cojimíes, but my feelings looked for her in Carolina's garden, and were disappointed not to find her there. In the cool twilight beneath the ground floor I saw the squared-off tree trunks that rose from the foundations, the legs of the house. Flor was not among them. I went to the deserted sheltered cove that hid itself on the other side of the point of land that reached out into the sea. Cuatro barked at the shadows of the cliffs where she used to sit and watch the sea. He barked at the large holes in the black rocks the flow filled to the brim, where she used to bathe. All places were as empty as Alonso's room after his death. Shadows resembling human silhouettes appeared on light rocks, but when I approached to see what made them I ran into emptiness.

Within a few months Mamá broke a sad piece of news to me:

"We've sold the house and are moving to Guayaquil," she said in a faltering voice. Stunned by the news, I managed to ask:

"Why?"

"María has found a teaching position in the city, where there are so many opportunities and interesting things." Her words puzzled me. They reminded me of the prayers the priest said in Latin at mass. His words moved with difficulty through the hazy incense. When they reached my ears I recognized them, but I could not understand them.

Within a few weeks they transplanted me from the white sand to the black asphalt. While sailors moored the steamer, I could not stop admiring what I could see of Guayaquil.

"This town looks like a modern city combined with an old river-port." Ñaña said to me. "Mule-drawn carts transport freight among motor trucks and cars. See those longshoremen shouldering clusters of green bananas? They're going to load them into that freighter."

The mighty Guayas was reddish-brown with alluvium. The current carried purple hyacinths in bloom, floating gardens that headed for the ocean. Dockers carried upon their shoulders glossy jute sacks filled with cacao or coffee beans. A wiry brown man, in shorts and barefoot, turned cacao beans with his feet and sun-dried them. Porters

loaded our belongings on a cart drawn by two mules. The mules, the cart and its driver were all the same color as the cacao beans. The perfume of cacao, mixed with the scent of mule dung and human sweat, produced a strange, rousing smell.

“We’re going to my sister’s home, let’s walk by the cart,” Mamá said. “It’s just a few blocks from the riverside.”

Looking over my shoulder, I shuffled along. I observed the minutest details of the street. Cuatro kept close to me, his tail between his legs. We could see no sand, no ridge, no beach, no sea. We shared the same fear and walked as close to each other as my right eye was to my left. The first thing I saw when we arrived at my aunt’s were the wrought-iron lattices bulging from the windows like full sails. Luisa, Mamá’s older sister, a wiry woman with a sharp face, greeted us. A few tufts, as dark as the thin rims of her round glasses, remained in her shiny steel-gray chignon. Her siblings had respected her since childhood as an authority figure, and she ran the household as such.

It was the month of June. School had started in May, as usual, on the coast of Ecuador. I had to catch up. I was finishing elementary school. One Wednesday afternoon, at the beginning of August, Mamá told me as soon as I came back from school:

“You’re going with Luisa to see your father tonight, not a word of this to anyone.”

“Why?”

“I’ll explain that to you at the proper time.”

I went with my aunt to the dining room of a modest hotel. My father sat in a chair as black as that rock sprayed by the breaking waves back in Manta. He did not hug me, or touch me, or call me his son; in his hoarse voice he uttered the same dull “hello” as he did every time we met in Manta. As always, we looked at each other in painful silence. He asked me if I was hungry. I answered “No.” I recalled that Ramona, our maid in Manta, used to ask me if I was hungry, pronouncing this word in the tone of “sad,” and that she would give me food to make me feel better. Now I was sad, but I did not want to eat. Time stretched between my father and I. I felt that it was tearing up, until he spoke at last:

“We’re not going to see each other any more,” he said in a tone as sad as his countenance. He dismissed me without any explanation. I would have liked to ask him

why we were not going to see each other any more, but I had never asked him any questions.

“Bye-bye,” I replied with relief. But I was disappointed. I did not know what to do. I wanted to run off as fast as I could. I wanted to tell him that I looked forward to our next meeting. A familiar hand patted me on the back. Aunt Luisa and I left the hotel.

“I think he’s a ‘comrade,’ and is going to hide himself to shake his pursuers,” aunt Luisa said on our way home, while a glistening tear glided down her cheek. This was the last time I saw my father.

But how could I know this was the last time? I did not know that, as I did not know if I would one day return from the black asphalt of Guayaquil to the white sand of Manta. I knew I was sad. I knew nothing was clear to me. I knew I felt humiliated at the Brethren’s school. Some students looked down on me because I came from a small town. I noticed the same attitude in some of the Brethren. One of them told Mamá, in my presence:

“Your child has certain difficulties with mathematics. The academic level of the Manta school must have been lower than ours.”

“But the school he attended in Manta was of the same congregation as yours.” She said, as though asking “Have you neglected your Manta school?”

“Really? In that case it might be the child’s capacities for mathematics that are not the best, madam.”

The brother gave me a new reason to feel worse than the others. Besides coming from a small town, I was not good at mathematics. I was jumpy all the time. The sound of construction machines working near the school startled me. A few days before the ninth of October, Guayaquil’s Independence Day, I heard a distant uproar and rat-a-tat, sharp rapping sounds, while I was in class. Brother Enrique, our teacher, stopped the class and led us to the chapel. The parents started coming for their children.

“The uproar we’re hearing is a *bullá*, riot, which has broken out,” the brother explained to those who were left. “Those sharp rat-a-tat rapping sounds are deterrent volleys from automatic firearms shot by the police. We’ve been told that all schools have discontinued classes, and that the authorities have suspended all public transportation.

But calm down, someone will come for you without delay. Your parents will not abandon you.”

“My mother will not arrive on time, brother,” I said. “You called her to come for me, but she doesn’t have a car. She must be forcing her way through the riot to get here. I’m old enough to walk home, and have already done it many times.” I said. “May I leave?”

“The brother superior has forbidden to let the students go on their own.” He said.

“But now there’s only my friend, Eduardo, and me left, brother,” I said. “All the others are gone. Eduardo’s father might come on time, but no one will rescue me.” I said in fear. “The shots sound closer and closer. Are we going to get killed?”

“The rioters may want to do harm to us, yet the Lord will not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One,” brother Enrique replied, as though reciting a litany. “We must never lose hope. Let’s pray to the Virgin for help: *Bendita sea tu pureza / y eternamente lo sea, / pues todo un Dios se recrea / en tan graciosa belleza. / A ti celestial princesa, / Virgen sagrada María, / te ofrezco en este día / alma, vida y corazón. / Mírame con compasión, / no me dejes madre mía, / en mi última agonía / sé mi amparo y protección.*”

All of a sudden, a door creaked open to reveal a thickset, stern-faced, balding man who said in a hoarse, anxious voice:

“Eduardo, hurry up, let’s run to the car and get out of here before it’s too late!”

“Could we take my friend with us? He lives a few blocks from us.”

“Do you want to come with us?”

“Yes!” I said.

We rode through the riot. In front of the old university, nearing our home, we saw how a horse trampled a girl who screamed and brandished a flag. When I arrived home I found a broken banner on the floor by Ñaña’s bed. The dirty cloth soiled with blood bore the inscription: “Teachers for freedom of speech.” Ñaña was in bed, wrapped in silence. She would later explain to me:

“Together with other teachers I took part in the riot to demand freedom of speech, and we were beaten by the police.”

That night we blocked up the iron lattice windows with mattresses to protect ourselves from stray bullets. During that sleepless night we sometimes heard uproar followed by shots and silence. Handgun shots and volleys from automatic firearms kept tearing the night. When the morning came, the unbroken silence seemed dead and interminable. We unblocked the windows in the afternoon.

“Our windows are clear,” Ñaña said with regret, “our mouths remain gagged.” I then recalled her answer when I asked her in Manta what “freedom” meant: “The song canaries that people keep in cages are not free,” she had said. During and after the riot I overheard people speaking of *El Capitán*. I asked Ñaña who he was.

“He’s the populist leader who was commanding the demonstration that became a riot. He has led several disciplined mass marches with singing and rallying cries during the last three months, but this time he lost control of the demonstration.”

In later years I learned that José María Velasco Ibarra, five times elected president and four times overthrown by the army, was serving the only presidential term he could complete –1952-1956— when the riot took place. His determination to impose order explained the repression of the rioters.

Ñaña bought a small house in a new housing development built for public school teachers and other government workers. The houses were identical, the inhabitants dissimilar. Some had been used to better dwellings, others to worse. To some this was the most *Cholo*, native, neighborhood they had inhabited, to others, the most white. Some of them spoke a Spanish that pointed at past privileged status, others, a local dialect. Seen from this social security barrio, Manta’s Barrio Córdoba, where we lived until we came to Guayaquil, seemed to belong to an earlier century.

Cuatro did not come to the new house, he had died one night while I was asleep. The adults buried him in secret that very night, and told me the next morning that he had disappeared. Ten years were going to go by until Mamá told me that she thought he had died of a heart attack caused by deep depression.

“His eyes, his crying, his mortal agony, were human. He showed deep sadness to die far from his territory, in a foreign place where he had never got his bearings.” She

said. "At the last moment he showed the signs of a human, not a dog, who dies of a heart attack."

"Why did you lie to me?" I asked her.

"We intended to save you the suffering, and to save ourselves the pain of seeing you suffer."

"Were you unable to foresee that your lie was going to affect me in a more painful way than if you had told me the truth?"

"We just put off your suffering and our own."

When I was born Cuatro was three years old. When he arrived in Guayaquil he was an old, fourteen-year-old dog that approached the end of his life and could have died in peace but, due to his predicament, he died in extreme misery. When Mamá told me about Cuatro's death I remembered what Ñaña had told me about the myth of Charon, who ferried the souls of the dead in his bark across a river to the home of the dead beneath the earth. I imagined Cuatro barking in Charon's bark, and that picture made me feel less sad. To my elders the move to the city was hard, but tolerable. To me it was difficult, but I had the resources necessary to stay alive. To innocent old Cuatro the move was lethal. I have never had another dog after his death, and I wonder if I have had another friend as close as he was.

In Manta, I had been used to our deserted beach, where there were few young people around to talk and play. I was happy every time I could find them. Now that young people kept going back and forth by our house they did not mean much to me. There was no park in the area. We played small-ball soccer, ran or jumped on the street while watching for dangerous vehicles and the police. It was forbidden to play soccer on the street. The small ball was six inches across, wool-filled, heavy, and did not fly high. As it did not bounce much, it was easy to control it so we could play within a twenty-meter segment of the street, and it did not fall into the tiny gardens that grew before each of the houses.

Some youth formed *galladas* – "gangs of cocks" – took over the street as their own territory, and defended it against other gangs. I played with those who, like myself, refused to be part of any organized groups, and went each his own way as soon as the game was over. When I did not feel like playing I roamed the streets, a poor substitute for

the beach. It was better than nothing, but I still felt lonely. My only companions were Cuatro's ghost, and a memory of Flor. I could feel her presence as if she walked clinging to me.

I found tranquillity on the flat roof of our house, a concrete slab where I had built a racetrack with marbles as horses, using some of the balsa boards that insulated the roof from the sun. I could not understand why and how my crystal marbles disappeared, and tiny horses with jockeys riding them appeared instead, running down the boards. I did not know how this happened, but those horses and jockeys kept me company. When flocks of hundreds of green parakeets migrated, they passed above our house at low altitude at dusk. Clever birds that can learn by heart whole sentences, and are good climbers, they are awkward fliers. I lay on my back on the roof to watch and hear the shrill, higgledy-piggledy, green carpet they formed in the sky. My mind could not resist the temptation. It flew away with the parakeets and did not return to my crystal marbles and balsa boards until they were out of sight.

Our new house was a few years old when Ñaña fell ill. She needed an operation. Within weeks Mamá found herself in a similar predicament. I was afraid that if they died I would be left helpless, in destitution. I could fight anxiety during the day, but as soon as I went to bed I became defenseless. Neither asleep, nor awake, I had visions and feelings of extreme misery, and I panicked. My head whirled and the whole room spun at high speed. I clung to my bed until I woke up in a cold sweat and faced fear with my eyes wide open. When the movement stopped, I wondered why I was punished in such a cruel way without a reason.

I recalled the image of a woman that I had seen in an elementary school book. Her eyes were blindfolded. She carried a sword in her right hand, and scales with two matched pans hanging at the same level, in her left. The scales that Lady Justice held represented the impartiality with which justice ought to be served. One received rewards or penalties as deserved. But what had Inés or Alonso done to deserve suffering and dying young, as they did? Why could Flor not speak? Had she done something wrong before being born? Had I done something wrong before I was given away when I was four months old? I could not believe justice existed anymore. Searching for

understanding I became exhausted, slept for a few hours, and woke up tired and irritable in the morning.

But, in spite of my predicament, I did not stop going to school. I was in my tenth grade, and in my fifteenth year of life. In two years I would finish high school. One morning, as usual in this period, I went to school feeling tired, irritable and regretting that justice did not exist. History was the first course we had after our prayers. The teaching priest spoke about the evolution of the Spanish language in Ecuador and asked the class:

“Do you think the motherland made sufficient efforts to implant a proper use of her language in our country?”

“What motherland?” I asked defiant.

“Spain, of course,” he said.

“The Natives’ motherland is Ecuador, not Spain. They had their own language, that the Spaniards supplanted when they enslaved them. You should be ashamed to support that, you stooge!” I exclaimed indignant, and I could imagine how Diego, the husband of Carolina, Ñaña’s sister, had felt when he was defrocked. That was the last day I attended a religious school. I felt a desperate need to return to Manta, to our deserted beach, to the ebb and flow of the sea, to the wet sand and the dry, to the sand ridge and the cliffs, to the hill where I grew up. As my elders were ill I could not discuss my situation with them. I talked to aunt Luisa, Mamá’s sister, with whom we stayed when we moved from Manta to Guayaquil. I told her how I was feeling and, as on the day she accompanied me to see my father for the last time, a glistening tear glided down her cheek:

“The best thing you can do is pass some time in Manta,” she said. “Here, I can’t offer you much, but this will be enough for the trip.”

The amount of money she gave me was minimal, but I was used to live with the minimum. As soon as I got to Manta I ran to see the house where I grew up. While I scrutinized with my eyes full of tears the balcony which had been mine, a young man of my age, who was sitting on it, looked me up and down with suspicion. I realized then that almost five years had passed since the house was sold, and that I had left as a child and now I was a young man. I walked away feeling like an intruder. I looked for Carolina’s old wooden house, although I knew it was gone. The person who bought it after her

husband Diego's death had demolished it. I was in the vacant lot when I heard an old woman's voice call my name from a distance. I recognized the lady, a former neighbor of ours, who had told me as a young child that I had a talent for poetry when I recited to her the lines of verse that Mamá had taught me.

"Olympus is gone, eh Madam?" I said to her as she approached.

"Olympus, the old defrocked priest, the house, the garden, our time, everything is gone," she said in a tone of regret.

"Carolina is living in Guayaquil. She told me Diego's son took his father's possessions from Olympus when the house was sold. Did you see him do that?"

"He took what he liked and threw the rest to the garbage."

"What did he throw?"

"I recovered a pile of paper written in beautiful calligraphy." She said. "All neighbors were aware of the importance of Diego's political writings. Some of them condemned him for them, but I admired his generous engagement. I'm so glad I could save his manuscripts from destruction."

"Could I see them?"

"If you promise me to study Diego's work, and to use whatever you'll learn from them for the good of the people, I'll give them to you."

"I promise."

She gave me a bag full of manuscripts. Agitated, I went through the papers fast, until a title froze me with fascination: *The Valdivian Lovers. An Archaeological Poem*. I sat on the ground and recognized, stanza after stanza, what I had been experiencing with Flor. Basing myself on the literature I had studied in high school, I got the impression that Diego had tried to link the ancient fiction with the modern ones. He referred to a Valdivian poet whose poem had been transmitted orally along the centuries. A native sage had translated the poem for Diego, who had given it a final, highly structured written form. Certain sets of words repeated themselves in different orders, and seemed to form a system of secret writing based on a key. There was an allusion to our cliff caves, but I had no idea why they were in the poem. While wondering what message the poem could contain, I lost count of time. When I looked up to thank the woman she was gone.

My attention focused again on the vacant lot, and I could not believe that roses and hummingbirds had once thrived in it. It was evident that, after the house was demolished, wild weeds had grown in profusion until people had started parking their cars and crushing them. The air smelled of oil, but it was not rose oil. I got hold of my bagful of manuscripts, and ran away from the stench to the deserted beach. I knew I would return to *The Valdivian Lovers. An Archaeological Poem*, and I would study the manuscripts, as I had promised the old lady.

I walked along the beach with Cuatro's ghost, and a memory of Flor whom I could feel as if she walked clinging to me. Now that I found myself in those familiar surroundings, I remembered how much Cuatro had meant to me. I recalled that his barking sounded to me like words that I could understand. I remembered that the ebb and flow, the sea breeze, and the white sand helped me get my bearings:

"Watch out!" Cuatro barked out, "a fierce dog is coming."

"Hurry up!" the flow urged me on. "I'm going to close the narrow passage."

"If you stand on me much longer," the white sand warned me, "I'll have to burn your bare feet."

This return to childhood sparked the hope that pierced the tomb where I had felt buried. I returned to Guayaquil and, little by little, during two or three weeks, I climbed out of my dejection. I could appreciate a sunny day once more. My elders survived their illness. I discussed my situation with them. They agreed to transfer me from the refined and gloomy religious institution to a public school, where I could feel equal to all other students. I went from the high, illusory, social rank that my elders had tried to create for me by sending me to a private school, to the social rank that corresponded to our real economic situation.

Chapter 6

I was finishing high school in Guayaquil. One Wednesday evening I got on a bus to return home. As I sat down, the tapping sound of a blue beetle came to my ears and made its way to my memory: "When the blue beetle makes a sound like tap-tap-tap that's an evil omen," Diego's old cook had told me, "but if you crush the beetle nothing will happen." I looked for it, but I could not find it...A foreboding of something evil waiting for me at the end of the ride came over me. At my stop I got off the bus and headed for home looking over my shoulder. My eyes searched for the slightest movement, my ears were pricked up, the warm air felt strange on my cold skin, my legs were ready to sprint away. I squinted and observed the minutest details of the desolate street and the blurred opposite sidewalk. A human figure stole from behind an almond tree...No, it was the shadow of a branch that swayed in the light, warm wind; still, a feeling that I was not alone made me shudder. All of a sudden, a soft feminine voice came into my ears from behind:

"Young man, listen!"

I started, jumped round and saw a beautiful woman in her late thirties:

"I'm your mother, my little son," she said in an anxious tone, as though endeavoring to convince me. Her anxiety made me anxious. The notions of birth mother and adoptive mother became blurred. Mamá was in her fifties, yet this young, vigorous woman with glossy dark straight hair and golden-brown skin had just called me her son. Confusion made me freeze with amazement. Since early childhood I had been trying to put together what people told me about my birth mother, with what I overheard them saying about her. But the woman who was standing in front of me, the last irregular piece missing from the jigsaw puzzle of my origins, did not resemble the fiction I had taken for the truth. I rejected both the fictive and the real woman. Her presence dumbfounded me instead of making me happy. I remembered what I knew about Inés' death, and I felt the chest pain and exhaustion of her tuberculosis. Struck speechless, I was surprised to hear a harsh, grating voice that sounded false to my ears—a voice that could not be mine:

"I'm happy without you," the voice said. "Don't worry about me."

The woman's eyes expressed terror, her mouth grimaced as though screaming, but no sound was heard, her body turned round and ran away, her dark hair waving in the breeze.

"Wait, don't run away!" I yelled at the top of my voice, but this time no sound came from my mouth. The harsh, grating voice that sounded false to my ears had become an inner voice. It said that the woman and the man I knew as my birth parents could not be the real ones because they had abandoned me, and the woman had abandoned me for the second time just a moment ago. I was glad she had run away. I had suffered enough. In my imagination, I threw the jigsaw puzzle of my origins into the teaching nuns' skeleton-closet. I slammed the door shut, and forgot all about it. And so my jigsaw puzzle remained almost complete, missing the most important irregular piece –the identity of my birth mother.

Instead of going to school I roamed the streets for a whole week. On Wednesday I did go back to school and took the bus to return home in the evening. At my stop I got off the bus and headed for home looking over my shoulder. My eyes searched for the slightest movement, my ears were pricked up, the warm air felt strange on my skin, my legs were ready to sprint away if the encounter of last Wednesday's evening were to repeat itself. I squinted and observed the minutest details of the desolate street. The opposite sidewalk appeared blurred to me. Someone stole from behind an almond tree...No, it was the shadow of a forking branch of an almond tree swaying in the light wind; yet a feeling that I was not alone made me shudder. A small but strong hand pulled at my shoulder from behind. I jumped round and saw a smile on the face of a girl who was a few years older than I, with glossy dark straight hair, golden-brown skin. She was mute but her gestures were more eloquent than words. Her mouth could not speak, but I could read every twitch of her lips. I decoded the blinking of her eyes by the movement of her long eyelashes. I became mute when I was with her, and we understood each other better without my words. Although we were in Guayaquil, she nodded in the direction of the sea, the west, with a roguish glance. I knew that those gestures meant that she wanted to go back to Manta. So I imitated her gestures to signal *yes*, and followed her. Five years had passed since Ñaña and I left Cojimíes, and I saw Flor for the last time. She was now twenty, I

was seventeen, but the moment I recognized her I felt as familiar with her as if we had never been separated.

Chapter 7

Flor and I returned to the “home of the fish,” Jocay, Manta, our home. A few cars were parked in the vacant lot where Carolina’s house once stood. The arrival of passenger cars, in growing numbers, was recent in Manta. Motor trucks, which brought exports to the ships and carried away imports from them, had been the main means of transportation until then. Most of the truck beds were divided into a front area with three or four wide upholstered benches for passengers, and a back area for placing cargo. Such vehicles were called *mixtos*. They served as both buses and trucks.

It was late in the afternoon when we came into the vacant lot. The red slanted sunbeams reflected themselves on the empty cars’ headlights, making them look like bloody eyeballs focused on me to scare me away. I stopped. Flor walked past me and started pacing the area where the rose garden used to be. Her silent expressions and the way her eyes were focused told me that she was experiencing as real what for me were only memories. She was among flowers and birds, while I was surrounded by emptiness.

"The old roses are gone, the time has come for you to plant," a familiar old voice said behind us. I turned round. Yes, it was her, the lady who had given me a large bag full of Diego’s manuscripts when I came to Manta after leaving the religious school. She handed me a small bag. I thought she was going to ask me if I had started studying Diego’s manuscripts, but she said, instead:

"I saw you from my kitchen window, and brought you some fruits. As a child you had a talent for poetry. Use it now," she said to me, and turned round. I wanted to ask her what was I, or Flor and I, supposed to plant, and how a talent for poetry could help me in my present situation, but I was unable to speak. While my eyes followed the woman’s trudging toward home I thought that my advancement in life was as slow as her walking. I needed to work hard on physics and mathematics to pass my entrance examination to engineering. That would be real advancement.

All of a sudden I felt lonely and turned to Flor but she was gone. I looked around and saw her dark hair waving in the breeze, leaving the vacant lot. The direction she took told me where she was going. I caught up and followed her to the deserted sheltered cove hidden on the other side of the point of land. The sun approaching the brine dyed it red.

Flor glided under a shower of rays like an enchanted red haze along the black rocks. She found her habitual place, sat down and fixed her gaze on the horizon. The red sun was sinking in the infinite west once more. The sea-breeze, caused by the warmer earth and the cooler sea all year round, smelled of sea salt.

I sat down by Flor but my mind was far from her. My preoccupation with studying engineering had taken possession of me. I was finishing high school and had to major in physics and mathematics to get ready for the entrance examination to engineering. Most students thought that physics and mathematics were superior to other sciences, and engineering to other professions. Mamá and Naña thought that university education was indispensable. I once overheard Mamá telling Naña:

“Nowadays, if you cannot possess land you have to become an engineer, a doctor or some other respected professional in order to earn a satisfactory livelihood.”

“Yes, but how could we have studied under the circumstances?” Naña replied, alluding to the loss of their wealth. “Having had to work, you couldn’t go beyond elementary school, and I beyond normal school.” They never demanded it from me in a direct way, but I realized they were pushing me to accomplish what their situation had kept them from doing.

Flor was sitting by me, but I felt as lonely as before I came to join her. I looked at her and had the impression that she was disappearing from my life, as the sun was falling into the sea to lighten the other side of the world. I knew that, for the moment, the salary she made as a beautician was just enough to share a small apartment with another girl. But I also knew that she had a talent for transformation. She had been the watchdog-mistress of Cojimies, a rough job, but she was also capable of beautifying women’s heads. I was sure she would improve her economic situation.

Sitting by Flor I felt inert, lacking her talent for transformation. Since she was a young child she had been told that she had been born to work, in spite of her being mute. I was told that I must study. She made a salary, I had to ask for whatever I needed. She kept trying to improve her skills in hairstyling, manicure or cosmetic application. I studied what was supposed to be higher knowledge. I had to operate the transformation of my family from impoverished former landowners into successful professionals. For that I would have needed Flor’s talents, but I lacked them. I was neither up to the task that my

elders had imposed on me without saying it, nor to create some joint project with Flor. I understood now the old lady's message: "The old roses are gone, the time has come for you to plant...As a child you had a talent for poetry. Use it now." Flor's reappearance after five years heralded the construction of a good life together, but I was unable to seize the opportunity. I intended to tell her how frustrated I felt about all this, my lips moved as if I were speaking, but my mouth remained as silent as hers.

I graduated from high school with a major in physics and mathematics, but did not take the entrance exam to engineering. Mamá, appearing to be preoccupied, asked me why.

"I feel as if I had just finished a long-distance run, relieved from responsibility, worn out, unable to continue." I said to her. "Besides, going to college means years of poverty."

"But María and I have assured you of our support."

"In spite of that, I don't feel able to undertake the studies. It seems to me that both of you are imposing them on me."

"So you might be just resisting them without your knowledge. We'd like you to go to college, but if you feel unable to do it, we'll accept your situation. We're already prepared for such a contingency."

Mamá and Naña were generous, but my failure made me anxious. The memories of the time when I was afraid that they could die and I would be left helpless, in destitution, returned. Alonso's coffin surrounded by candles on the dining-room table, the tableau of withered chrysanthemums before Señora Isabel's death— those images haunted me. The familiar darkness of the hard times when I felt as though I had been buried alive covered me once more. I fought anxiety during the day, but as soon as I went to bed I became defenseless. Neither asleep, nor awake, I seemed to taste my future misery, and I panicked. My head whirled and the whole room spun at high speed. I clung to my bed until I woke up in cold sweat and faced fear with my eyes wide open.

"Leonor is sick, would you like to replace her for a week or two?" Naña asked me a few weeks after the day I failed to take the entrance exam to the engineering school. Her offer reminded me that, when I was a young child, she would come back home running when I fell sick, although she was busy at school. I felt better as soon as I heard

the rapid tap-tap-tap-tap of her low heels on the hardwood, before she even called my name. Now I realized her intention, and I felt better right away.

"You don't have any one to substitute her? She teaches third class and I'm only eighteen," I answered. I was interested, working for a week or two could help me get away from the impending darkness.

"We don't have substitutes, and the school won't engage a professional teacher for a week or two. Besides, you'll make a little money," she said with a persuasive smile. A little money meant that, for the first time, I would be earning a salary as Flor did. I did not have to be asked for a second time.

What I had learned from Ñaña about teaching became useful all of a sudden. Some parents came to tell me, in the tone they might speak to their children, how they wanted me to teach their children for a week or two. But Leonor's sick leave went on. Week after week I was asked to return on Monday. My anxiety faded and I could prepare for my entrance exam.

Seven months went by. Leonor did not return to work. The school year came to an end.

"We'll sign a petition for you to be hired as a permanent teacher," the students' parents proposed.

"I love the job," I said with sorrow, "but I can't do it next year."

"Why?"

"College," I answered in a mechanical way.

When we learned, a few weeks later, that Leonor had died, Ñaña explained her illness to me:

"Leonor stopped working because of a painful lump in one of her breasts. She had smoked cigarettes since she was a teenager, but when her lump appeared she did not associate it with her smoking, or with cancer. A malignant tumor developed. Her breast cancer was diagnosed too late. Medicine was unable to cure her; all her doctors could do was prescribe palliatives."

I took the entrance examinations at the public and Catholic universities. Should I fail in one of them, I could still succeed in the other one. I was successful in both, and chose the public school. I liked the public university but, as soon as the school year

started, I felt as exhausted as when I graduated from high school. The familiar darkness of the hard times, when I felt as though I was being buried alive, threatened once more to overcome me. This time I got no teaching position to pull me out of the darkness. I prescribed myself a palliative: instead of going to school I regressed to small-ball soccer, which had helped me adjust to our new neighborhood. The heavy small ball became my pill against dejection.

One afternoon I returned home playing with my ball, and gave a thoughtless kick to it in the dining room. I heard a loud crack of glass and saw the pieces of the cupboard door fall to the ground. As I gathered them in dismay, I noticed that they looked like jumping legs, or fists giving blows. The explosive movement of the shattering impact had remained trapped in those broken pieces. I assembled a good number of them into an image, and was glad to discover that it was filled with life and force, whereas I felt lifeless and weak. I took a piece of cardboard, glued my composition to it, and painted the pieces with leftover yellow, blue and red paint from my high school work. I then looked for more scrap glass and made another composition.

What I discovered by accident became a passion. Every time I shattered glass, the emotions that I could not express found a way out. I felt as though I became part of my compositions myself, and disappeared into them. I came to like feeling hidden in my compositions, in my soccer small-ball, in Flor's arms, in whatever was important to me and allowed me to remain in darkness. My inner voice kept demanding that I study, but I did not listen to it. I failed my first year at college, and I was ashamed of my failure. Yet I was proud because, for the first time, I had respected my weakness instead of forcing myself to succeed at all costs. But I felt guilty for having disappointed my elders, and I returned for a second year. As my way of life did not change, the ultimate result was the same, I failed for a second time. Mamá and Naña did not say anything, but their disappointment was evident.

In my mind, my experiences during the two years that followed high school were represented by a coin of sorts. College failure was a dark image on the heads side. Refusing the obligation to succeed appeared on the tails side –which, instead of being gloomy, shone like new. The edge of the coin both separated and linked heads and tails at

the same time. The coin image represented to me the balance that allowed me to survive that period of my life.

"I have it from a reliable source that your father died a few months ago," aunt Luisa told me that year.

"Under what circumstances?" I asked without much emotion, and I realized that the years that had passed since I saw him last had vanished into the black hole of forgetfulness.

"I don't know, you can imagine why."

I could not imagine why, at that moment. A few days later I recalled what she had said when I saw my father for the last time: "I think he's a 'comrade' and is going to hide himself to shake his pursuers." All of a sudden I saw these words as though they were inscribed in red on a white wall, and then I could imagine what had happened to my father.

I had begun to understand the Ecuadorian and inter-American politics of this period. It was 1963, the year of Kennedy's assassination. The severing of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba had taken place in 1961, and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. In Ecuador, in 1963, president Arosemena was overthrown by a military junta led by admiral Castro. The junta declared that the coup had been unavoidable because Ecuador was being threatened by the communists. My father's death might have been related to those events.

I had never lived with my father, and I did not feel I had lost him. I realized just then that I had something in me which had already replaced him. That something was the wisdom I had received at home, which had helped me survive when we came to live in Guayaquil, when my elders were ill, or when I failed at college. I could not have been able to explain how that wisdom had helped me, but I knew that my elders had taught me to look for practical solutions, to be generous, to be unflinching in suffering, to be willing to fight for what was right, and to behave in responsible ways not only in relation to my elders and myself, but to all people. During the most difficult periods of my life those lessons helped me survive. Taken together, those basic principles I had learned characterized what was called *un hombre macho* –a virile man.

Before finishing high school I had completed all of the English courses offered by Guayaquil's *Centro Ecuatoriano-Norteamericano*. I knew well that *macho* had come to mean an insolent, rude man in Anglophone culture. If I had said at the *Centro* that I had been brought up to be *un hombre macho*, I would have provoked reactions of disbelief, or even rejection. But I did not care, I did not live in an Anglophone culture. I could not know I was going to come into close contact with it toward the end of 1963.

Chapter 8

"We're recruiting volunteer interpreters for HOPE (Health Opportunity for People Everywhere). Would you like to help?" one of my former *Centro* teachers asked me in November 1963, not long before the 22nd –the day of Kennedy's assassination.

"You mean the hospital ship coming in December?"

"Yes."

"I thought they'd have professional translators."

"The doctors volunteer without compensation, the nurses and technicians are on half-pay, no money left for translation."

I signed on. I got a chance to be an interpreter because the project's budget was small, in the same way that I had got the opportunity to be a teacher because of Leonor's illness. As her substitute I was paid a small salary. Now I would work without compensation altogether. For a moment I lost contact with reality, and thought of asking that Leonor be treated by the doctors on the ship as a compensation for my work. I recalled that, as a child, I had learned that the forking paths in the caves of the Manta cliffs led to different versions of one's life. I wondered if Leonor was still alive in a different version of her life.

The emergence of ships on the horizon had intrigued me since I saw the first one in Manta. The white Italian liners looked to me like marble castles. I wondered if the sea foam had hardened to become the marble of which the ships were made. They anchored at sea for lack of a deep-water wharf in Manta. Adults took me by rowboat to admire them at night. Viewed from water level, hulls were ramparts; masts and chimneys –great towers; and more lights shone all around the castle-ship than in our whole town. The next morning I ran to my balcony to admire that marble castle from a distance. But sometimes all that was left of it was sea foam.

The HOPE ship was as white, and as large, as the Italian ocean liners, and this time, I was going to work on board one of those castles.

"This is my first chance to use English, Lincoln's language, to help my people," I told the secretary of the HOPE's chief of staff, who welcomed me on board the ship in December, 1963. For an instant, it seemed strange to me that the good-looking secretary

in her twenties was wearing a sweater. Air-conditioned offices did exist in Guayaquil too, but the ship was anchored in the middle of the Guayas, in the midst of the tropics. While inhaling the artificial cool air, I saw through a window, against the reddish-brown alluvium background, large patches of water hyacinths in bloom. The abundant purple flowers on erect stalks that rose three feet in height made them look like floating gardens heading for the ocean. I felt confused. Air conditioning in this place felt like a taming harness imposed on nature and me.

"Shakespeare's," she corrected.

"The Gettysburg Address, printed and recorded, helped me associate writing with pronunciation and improve my English."

"Are you a libertarian?"

"I didn't refer to the Gettysburg Address because I admire Lincoln's political philosophy." I said. "I do admire it, but I didn't mention the Address because of that, but because it was easy to get printed and recorded copies of it at Guayaquil's *Centro Ecuatoriano-Norteamericano*." Yet still, I wondered why I had thought of Lincoln at this precise moment, as I was trying to comprehend Kennedy's assassination. All of a sudden, I knew the answer: the news presented Oswald as the main actor in the drama. This made me recall that an actor had killed Lincoln. Thence the association. While thinking about this I lost contact with reality for a second, then realized that the secretary was giving me a questioning look.

"What do you want me to translate?" I asked, switching on again. "I'd like to start working right away."

She did not assign me to the translation unit, but rather to the storage of printed material and office supplies. I accepted the assignment, hoping that I would get a chance to translate at a later time but, for the moment, I was disappointed. I left the office of the chief of staff, and looked at myself in the mirrors of a large three-door medicine cabinet attached to a wall. I opened and set the doors so as to have my image reflected in all three of them, and discovered, to my surprise, a series of different expressions. This put me in mind of what happened when Sister Caridad read the list of parents' names. On that occasion, I had the clear impression that some children were laughing at me, others were looking down on me with contempt, still others were sad and looked at me with

sympathy. This time, my own face in the mirrors showed me an expression of hope, another of disappointment, one that made me feel successful, another that gave me a feeling of failure. As I set the doors at different angles the expressions mixed themselves with one another. I looked hopeful and disappointed, or successful and defeated at the same time. I did not feel one with myself, but fragmented like broken glass. Confused, I hurried away from the mirrors and started working at the storage of printed material and office supplies as soon as I could.

I had been working there for two or three days, when an energetic black woman in her early forties showed up one morning:

"I'm so nervous," she said to the two employees with whom I worked. "I can't find an interpreter for the physiotherapy training I'm giving tonight. They're volunteers, I can never be sure if they're available."

"I'm available tonight," I exclaimed while forcing my way between the heaps of paper.

"Medical student?"

"No."

"Have you ever done interpreting?"

"I have at school. Give me an outline of your course, I'll run up to the library and make sure I can translate every word," I blurted out at one go, and could not believe my own enthusiasm. A chance to be useful was what I needed in order to feel like living again.

That night the listeners—Ecuadorian doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and technicians—helped me to help them. The objective of the lecture was to update their knowledge of physiotherapy. Without understanding the subject well, I had to reproduce in Spanish what Vanessa said in English. When I did not know the exact equivalent of a word, I explained the general notion to them, as in charades. They were professionals, and some of them told me how they wanted me to translate for them. They spoke to me as if I were one of their students.

"Had you been a professional interpreter they wouldn't have been so involved and cooperative," Vanessa, the chief physiotherapist, congratulated me when the class was over.

“My enthusiasm for translation has paid off.” I told her. “I feel like living again.”

“Were you depressed before?”

“Well, I’ll tell you a story that will answer your question. A whole series of difficult experiences during the two years that followed high school had made me feel sad and exhausted. One day I gave a thoughtless kick to my soccer ball in the dining room, shattered the cupboard door pane with a loud crack of glass, and noticed that the pieces lying on the ground looked like jumping legs or like fists giving blows. The explosive movement of the shattering impact had remained trapped in those broken pieces. They were filled with life and force, and helped me recover my own. Likewise, translating your class has shattered my distress.”

“Is that true? I’m so glad. Now you’re enthusiastic, and seem to have a clear idea of what translation is all about.”

“Translation is like the operation of a canal lock with gates at each end, which raise and lower boats as they pass from level to level in both directions.”

“Hey, is it the ambience of Guayaquil harbor that makes you think so?”

“No doubt.”

“So the message in one language is the boat to be raised or lowered to the level of the canal where it should continue its trip?”

“You got it. I must make sure that the boat doesn’t hit the lock walls, and that it passes in the shortest time possible, while others are waiting. I shouldn’t treat any boat better than the others. Faithful translation is my overarching goal. I want to avoid being *traduttore, traditore*, translator-traitor, as per the Italian term for one.”

“I’m glad you’re on board this boat.”

“Thank you. I said that faithful translation is my overarching goal, but I feel it’ll always remain somewhat of a fiction –an imaginary boat passing from one side of the lock to the other.” I realized at that moment that my last remark applied also to the parts of the present story that could have taken place in Spanish, and are told in English.

The chief laboratory technician heard from Vanessa that she liked the way I worked, and she asked me to translate her course. I alternated between the chemical odors of the medical laboratory, and the perfume of the massage oils that Vanessa applied to the skin

of the patients when she demonstrated the techniques she taught. As weeks went by, conferences of different kinds and medical rounds on board the ship and at various mainland hospitals became part of my regular translation routine. I felt useful when, while running up or down companionways, I heard the loudspeakers paging me for some special job.

When I arrived aboard the ship, my expressions in the mirrors of a large three-door medicine cabinet showed me that I did not feel one with myself, but fragmented like broken glass. When I found satisfaction in translation I returned to the same medicine cabinet. This time, as I set the three mirrors at different angles, I saw in all of them a single image, reproduced many times. It was a sincere smile, very much my own. I had become one with myself.

I translated at the HOPE's chemistry laboratories, and I had my own language laboratory. In fact, it was an imaginary lab in which I studied the chemistry of language. In my lab the interactions between English- and Spanish-speaking people took place in a gigantic test tube. The product of these interactions were strange compounds, such as Medicspanglish, a dialect made up of Spanish and English medical terms. But Medicspanglish could not be spoken with words alone. It required facial, hand and body gesticulation. I remembered Flor, with her signs and gestures. She did not need words to say what her mouth could not, but I, as a translator, had to overcome translation problems with words:

"An old mother..." I said one evening during a laboratory course, and a skeptical expression appeared on the audience's faces. Dolores, the chief laboratory technician, turned to me:

"What have you said?" she asked.

"An old mother," I answered in a dull manner. I was finishing a long, busy day of work.

"I said an 'O' mother, you know, the 'O' blood type?"

"An 'O' mother," I repeated like a recording, and chuckling filled the room. The technician was a New Yorker of Irish descent, in her forties. Her students called her "Miss Dolores." With a Spanish accent her name sounded like *mis dolores*—my pains. To a Spanish speaker her name could seem to have preordained her to work in health care.

She, who worked hard on her Spanish, once burst into a class looking for me to translate for her, and apologized: *perdonen por haber interrumpido*: pardon for having interrupted. She should have said *interrumpido*, but it was surprising that such a small mistake, an *a* instead of an *i*, could provoke so much friendly chuckling. People loved her, but her difficulty in speaking Spanish caused her problems:

"Could you help me?" she stopped me once in a corridor. "I asked this nurse if she was hungry, I wanted to have lunch with her, and she gave me a dirty look." Dolores looked worried. "Could you ask her why?"

"She asked me if I have a man," the nurse told me, and I started tittering.

"What are you laughing about," Dolores asked, puzzled.

"Instead of asking *Tiene hambre?* Are you hungry? You asked her *Tiene hombre?* do you have a man?"

"*I* instead of *a*, *a* instead of *o*, your vowels disembowel me," she exclaimed, feigning despair. "Thanks be to God I'm in medicine and not in military relations!" Her tone was very melodramatic, but she made me wonder how many international conflicts of all kinds were products of simple misinterpretation.

Dolores was not the only victim of the manifold difficulties in speaking a foreign language:

"While analyzing the arthritis of one of his patient's hands, the author of this article refers to the other hand," a confused, short, stout and cheerful Ecuadorian doctor resembling Señor Morán, the Manta registrar who composed my fictive birth certificate, once told me at the ship library. "I don't understand."

"Let me see, doctor," I said. "Okay, what happens is that 'on the other hand' is an expression that means 'from the opposing point of view.'"

The moral implications of the use of language also complicated my work:

"Will you please not translate 'the part,' an arm, a leg, as *la parte?*" two shy Ecuadorian nurses asked me during a physiotherapy class. "We're from the Andes, you know. At home *la parte* means genitalia."

I decided it was time for me to go into my imaginary language laboratory and do something to improve the interactions between English- and Spanish-speaking people on the ship. I talked about it to Vanessa and Dolores:

“I want to offer a one-hour weekly class to the English- and Spanish-speaking staff and students, so as to improve mutual understanding. How could we do it?”

“Well, you’ll be the teacher, and we’ll help you choose sentences indispensable to the daily professional, cultural and human relations between workers,” Vanessa said, “if that’s all right with you and Dolores, of course.”

“All right.” We said.

“I can make a handout with the Spanish and English versions of all sentences for every participant.” Dolores offered. “A Spanish speaker will read a sentence in Spanish. An English speaker will repeat it, and read its translation in English. The next Spanish speaker will repeat the English sentence, and read the next sentence in Spanish, and so on.”

“Good idea.” I said. “People will work on pronunciation, vocabulary and construction of sentences without a formal study of the languages. Nobody likes grammar.”

Vanessa, Dolores and I hoped that a better understanding among the twenty-odd participants would spread to all English- and Spanish-speakers on the ship. My own personal dream was that the same could be done between the English- and Spanish-speaking countries. But my lofty intentions did not protect me from trifling mistakes. I once typed “physic” instead of “physical” on the weekly handout. “Physic” made the participants think of something taken to effect a bowel movement. This triggered a laughing discussion of treatment with purgatives, during which some participants hurried giggling and holding their bellies to the washrooms. Words became urgent actions.

Our hospital with its departments, medical personnel, students, patients and translators was a floating island that had borne three different names. As the chief of staff once told me:

“The U.S. Navy’s *Marine Walrus* became the *USS Consolation*, ‘the first hospital ship to receive casualties directly by helicopter.’ This veteran of World War II in the Pacific, and of the Korean War, is now finishing its career as our *SS HOPE*.” The doctor said with sadness. “Our old walrus is ailing, and there are no spare parts for it. Every time

a part breaks a replacement has to be built to order at a high price. As we doctors do with our patients, the crew takes care of the ship, and remains hidden behind the scenes."

I was interested to know what the crew did to keep the enormous ship functioning as a six-story hospital, medical school and residence. When I asked them how things worked, they showed it to me. I was impressed by a machine they called "the cow." A worker put in it bags of powdered milk and flat waxed cardboard boxes, and picked up the hundreds of containers full of milk that came out. How wonderful it would have been for the people of Guayaquil's slums to have such "cows" set up in their quarters, and be able to drink milk every day.

I once took advantage of my friendly relations with the workers to ask one of them, the carpenter, for help. At lunch time that day I was telling a nurse about this, when she turned to her friend who was devouring a detective novel and asked her:

"What's a carpenter doing on a hospital ship?"

"FBI agent?" replied the other girl as she kept reading.

"Why not?" said the first one. "This is U.S. territory, but the only authorities are the chief of medical staff and the captain..."

"Let me tell you the whole story," I cut her short. "The carpenter made a frame for a picture I gave the chief of staff. He didn't have to do that. The carpenter is just generous, that's what I'm trying to tell you."

"I see. I imagine you made a typical Ecuadorian painting for the chief of staff."

"No, shattered glass stuck on cardboard and painted."

"Oh, you're such a toady, what favor are you after?"

"None at all. The doctor saw a picture I gave Vanessa, the chief physiotherapist, and asked me for one. I felt flattered by his request and made one for him."

"Sorry, I don't really think you're a toady. I think you're a carpenter yourself but, instead of repairing woodwork, you stick shattered glass or languages together," she said in a tone that sounded facetious.

A thickset, stern-faced, balding sailor with a hoarse voice would sometimes chat with me at breaks:

"Interesting," he once said, looking at Guayaquil's lights across the water. "There's no official racial discrimination in this part of the world." He said that as though discrimination were something entirely natural, and he added, "I've seen 'No Blacks' signs in India." Time after time he would blurt out whatever his memory served up to his conscious mind. He would then sigh with nostalgia and tell me a story about the relations between people he had seen around the world.

"'No Blacks?' Aren't people from India dark-skinned?" I asked, curious.

"Ninety percent of them are black, but they segregate Africans. It's the pot calling the kettle 'black.'"

"Official discrimination isn't necessary here. Have you seen the great differences in the prices of goods and services?"

"Yeah, ridiculous."

"That's how segregation works here. Price determines one's place in our society. Poverty is as dark-skinned as elsewhere."

Vanessa stopped worrying about finding volunteer interpreters when I became her regular translator. By now she knew why I was on the ship, but wanted to know more about the others:

"How come these Ecuadorian translators, who could be making money in town, work here for nothing?" she wondered. "This is not a rich country."

"But *they* are rich," I explained. "They've been at school or on vacation in the U.S., know English well, have spare time, and want to help."

"They're different from you."

"I'm the exception that confirms the rule, but I know their kind, I've attended private school with people like them."

"How was that possible?"

"Well, my birth parents were poor people, but I was brought up by impoverished former landowners."

"How could they send you to private school if they were poor themselves?"

"They worked hard to pay for it and for whatever allowed them to keep up at least the appearances of what they considered their social rank. That's why I feel I have much

in common with the local medical personnel. Most of them are Mestizos who have struggled to make ends meet, study and have a profession.”

“You like them.”

“I do. They are sound-minded, have a strong sense of belonging, a fighting spirit, and a good sense of humor. They treat me as one of their own, and don’t hesitate to ask me for help with translation.”

“So that’s where you belong,” Vanessa concluded.

“Not quite,” I said. “I’m on friendly terms with them, with the staff and with the translators, that’s all...And speaking of staff relations, may I ask you a delicate question now that we’re friends?”

“Shoot.”

“Is it true what a white worker told me, that for a black person to hold the position you have at the Rochester Mayo Clinic you must be ‘three times better than a white one’?”

“So they say. Who told you so?”

“Someone who likes you.” Dolores, who in fact liked Vanessa, had told me that in confidence, and I could not reveal her name.

Vanessa’s patients were natives marginalized in the slums since colonial times. Their treatment served to demonstrate the techniques that the local medical personnel learned on the ship. The HOPE tried in this way to help both, the poorest people and the local medical personnel. Some of Vanessa’s patients told me they were surprised to see a black woman as a HOPE professional. The tone in which they said it showed that they saw her as living proof of the underprivileged people’s being able to advance in society. Their admiration was still greater when Vanessa’s work produced remarkable improvement of their condition.

At the end of the project the patients threw a big party for her. She invited her superiors. Not one of them came to witness the homage, however. She kept smiling after the party, while tears glistened in her eyes. One year later a former HOPE worker would tell me that Vanessa had died of a heart attack during the ship’s voyage in Africa. In her early forties, she ended her journey in her ancestral home. That same year Black Muslims

assassinated Malcolm X in New York City. I thought of Vanessa then, and hoped that the darkness in which black people found themselves during that period would usher a happier dawn.

“It’d be a shame if you don’t become a doctor,” a prominent HOPE physician told me two months before the ship’s departure. He knew I had won a one-year Fulbright scholarship to study psychology in Arkansas. “We can help you get a scholarship to study medicine in California. Arkansas is an agricultural state,” he added in a tone of preoccupation.

“Thanks, doctor,” I replied, “but that’s where I’m going, I can’t accept what I haven’t earned.”

Psychology had been very important to me during the dark days of my failure in engineering. When the *Centro Ecuatoriano-Norteamericano* opened the yearly competition for scholarships in the U.S. I asked for one in psychology and won it. I hoped that studying psychology would help me find solutions to my problems and, at the same time, improve my English in the U.S. But after this wonderful experience of translating on board the HOPE, I recovered my motivation to work and to enjoy life, and my academic interests shifted from psychology to medicine. I would have loved to become a doctor, but the proud *hombre macho* in me, who had helped me weather many storms before, refused the doctor’s help, almost despite myself.

When the HOPE left Ecuador in September 1964 I was not there to see it. I had taken my leave earlier in order to travel to Arkansas. Mamá came to visit the ship the day I left it. The chief of staff asked me to translate for him:

“Tell your mother we’re proud of you, and grateful for your contribution to the project,” the doctor said with a smile of encouragement. His smile showed he realized how awkward his request made me feel. I knew Mamá expected a dignified and modest attitude from me in such a situation, and I feared not to be up to her expectancies. But I had no choice, I had to translate. While doing it, I noticed that she was paying more attention to my demeanor than to what I was saying, and I saw pride in her eyes. Those eyes told me she had overcome the disappointment and suffering caused by my college

failures of the past few years. At that moment she reminded me of Flor, who was capable of expressing her feelings without saying a word.

When the HOPE was gone all that was left of the marble castle was the foam which had melted during the night. But this time I could not be disappointed. I was not there to see it.

Chapter 9

The cloudy, humid morning of my departure for Fayetteville, Arkansas, a neighbor gave me a ride. I thought that letting those I loved see me off at Guayaquil airport would be painful for them. I did what the adults had done when Cuatro died one night while I was asleep. They buried him in secret that very night, and told me the next morning that he had disappeared. They intended to save me the suffering, and to save themselves the pain of seeing me suffer. This time, I was the one who wished to spare them the suffering. But, while trying to make it better, I made it more painful for them, and for myself. When the car started away from home my eyes remained fixed on theirs. They became smaller, darker, smaller, merged into the darkness. I tried to smile but I choked and cried. I lost Flor for the third time when I left for Fayetteville.

Waiting for my flight at the airport terminal I felt discomfort in the clothes I was wearing. Mamá had seen to it that I dress myself *with propriety* for my trip. I did as she wished and donned a dark brown suit, a light brown tie and a quality hat—one of those known in the rest of the world as “Panama,” but which originate from Montecristi, Ecuador. I could roll it up to a little bundle, put it in my pocket, take it out and bring it back to its original shape without breaking it. I wished that the minute-hand of the wall clock on which I was fixing my eyes were as flexible. It seemed to have stopped altogether. My mind kept pushing it forward. I wanted to escape from the present moment, from the hubbub of voices, the waves of deodorant, sweat, perfume and tobacco smoke which made me suffocate in my solitude.

At 12:55 a dull recording drowned the hubbub and the Muzak:

“All passengers for Panagra flight number 9-6-4 for Panamá, San José, Guatemala and México please report to gate number three.”

The Muzak resumed, the minute-hand moved forward, I boarded the DC-8-62. I had one of those free tickets that Panagra gave to scholarship holders, and feared being left behind if a paying passenger needed my seat. I did not have to wait long. They dumped me in Panama where I paid twelve dollars—a large sum for me—to sleep at the airport hotel, lit by candles during a power failure. Alone and far from home for the first time, I recalled the death of Alonso, the child with Down syndrome who came to live at

our home in Manta when his mother died. When he died we all helped to place his coffin on the dining room table, and lit around him some of the candles we kept for power outages. Now I found myself surrounded by outage candles. I felt happy when a new day dawned and I was allotted a seat in a plane bound for Mexico city.

I changed planes in Mexico, and before too long plunged into the oppressive sultriness of Houston. But it just did not feel right to get rid of my warm clothes. Why? I did not know. I stopped before the shop window of a mirror store and saw in the mirrors smaller and larger versions of a young gangster from some Hollywood movie, whose face was identical with mine. One of my doubles in the mirrors looked at me with a happy, understanding expression; another with bitterness, yet another seemed reproachful; and, the worst one, was laughing at me. If I fixed my eyes on the happy one its expression became bitter. If I fixed the bitter one it became reproachful. Every time I fixed my eyes on one of them it became one of the others, so that I could not know which one corresponded to my real feelings. I looked around me to see if someone else had seen what was going on, and could confirm or contradict what I was seeing, but I was alone.

At the bus station I came across a group of people my age, half-naked to suit the weather. They looked me up and down as though trying to guess in what kind of film I was playing. I tried to find an answer to that question myself, but my head was bathed in perspiration, and my mind stalled like a car engine in a river. Together with them I took a bus bound for Fayetteville.

"Are these young people, by any chance, going to the University of Arkansas?" I asked one of the guys.

"Most everybody, including myself. Where's that accent from?"

"Ecuador, South America."

"You feel you're one of us, all dressed up like that?"

"No, I don't."

"Get rid of your coat, tie and hat, and you'll see what'll happen."

I did as the guy said, and I "saw what happened." Every time I took something off I felt I belonged a little more with the other young people. They started asking me questions and making me feel that I belonged with them. But it was easier getting rid of my coat, tie and hat, than of the stiffness caused by my fear of not belonging. Yet, by the

time we arrived in Fayetteville, on the Ozark highland country, I had all but forgotten about it.

My scholarship stipulated that I live in a dormitory with the poorer students, and have my meals at the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity, with the well-to-do students who paid for them. My sponsor was the U.S. senator John Williams. While walking down from the tall dorm on the hill to the one-story fraternity house at the edge of campus, I wondered who kept on placing me between the poor and the rich, in Ecuador and now in the U.S.; who was making me adjust to both while remaining alone, and why in this sad though familiar situation I was on the defensive, as I had been since I grew up in Manta's Barrio Córdoba. I remembered the lines of poetry Mamá had taught me in case one of the ladies in the neighborhood made some cutting remark about my complexion. Yet the ladies back there never made any remarks, and neither did the people in Fayetteville. They alluded to my origins in friendly ways:

"I've heard you're Mexican, but I know you're Castilian," our third-floor janitor told me with some hesitation, after looking me over in the corridor.

"How do you know?"

"Well, Mexicans taught me how to tell the difference. You move and walk like a European."

"The Barrio Córdoba."

"What?"

"Nothing."

After talking to the janitor I wondered how he would have treated me if he had thought that I was "Mexican." To him, the way I moved and walked, learned behavior, cultural traits, made an important difference. Pi Kappa Alpha dwellers paid more attention to racial characteristics:

"You and Wiz [a Cherokee student] are gonna marry Indian girls and start a new tribe, the Blackass. Ha-ha, no offense, we're just showing you we like you." Those who excuse themselves accuse themselves. I felt they indeed liked me, but...

The school personnel showed more formal preoccupations:

"There's no item describing me under 'race'," I told a worker while filling out a form. "I'm a South American mestizo. Should I mark off 'other'?"

"No, mark 'white'," the frail man hurried to reply with a worried expression, "or they might think you're a Negro." He pronounced the word *they* like a foreigner referring to locals.

"You don't have the local accent," I said, curious. "Are you a foreigner yourself?"

"Yankee," he said, with a smile revealing the old animosities.

I met with my sponsor, senator Williams, a few times during the school year. On one occasion he invited me to have dinner at his stately white mansion in the Ozarks, not far from the campus, when the mountains seemed to have dressed up in lush, colorful customs. After dinner he asked me, with his elegantly modulated Southern accent:

"How are you getting along with your fellow students?"

My sponsor knew that my academic marks were satisfactory, but I did not get marks for my adjustment. I thought that a good way to answer his question would be to tell him how I perceived the difference between the college students in Ecuador and Arkansas:

"Well, sir, Ecuador and Arkansas are different, but dorm students in both places belong to the same race," I replied with a chuckle, knowing that the word "race" was used with careful restraint in Arkansas.

"Race?..." he repeated, giving no sign of having noticed my chuckle, or that I had not answered his question.

"They behave in similar ways, which makes it easier for me to adjust."

"I see. And how about Pi Kappa Alpha students?" he asked, stroking his thin white hair. It seemed to me that he pronounced *Pi Kappa Alpha* as if this fraternity belonged to a social level lower than his own.

"Quite different, sir," I said, taking advantage of the occasion to express my impression that fraternities and sororities were part of a system of discrimination: "In Ecuador's Amazonian region there are native tribes that display patterns painted on their bodies, but we have no tribal organizations with Greek letters on their clothes. To me, the

three letters show how much one is worth in dollars. Should human relations follow commercial laws, sir?"

Mr. Williams' smile showed that he had seized the sense of my question and that he agreed with its implication but, instead of answering it, he reached for a fine, small wooden box. In the colorful image on the box, a girl was standing on a balcony, and a young man was climbing the wall towards her. The image was framed by the words *Romeo y Julieta* and *Made in Habana, Cuba*, and by two rows of gold medals. When Mr. Williams opened the box, the sharp aroma of premium cigar tobacco wafted into my nostrils.

This symbol of wealth was produced by a poor country with an anti-capitalist government, and was smoked by someone who represented a rich capitalist country. This irony might have been Mr. Williams' answer to my question. While I was trying to understand, I fixed my eyes on the image on the box. All of a sudden, I saw an island where Juliet's balcony had been, and Romeo was swimming away from it. Juliet appeared to be very sad, but she did not seem to have the means to stop her lover. This scene was taking place between my eyes and the image of Mr. Williams, who was busy with his guillotine-style cutter, the beginning of his cigar ritual. Without turning to me, he asked:

"How would you describe human relations at the fraternity house?"

"It resembles a planet," I said. I was trying to sound intelligent, and pretending to have forgotten my unanswered question: should human relations follow commercial laws? at the same time.

"A planet...?"

"Well, the house mother and the black cook are the poles of the planet," I said. "The students treat the black cook with respect, but she's confined to the kitchen, her reservation," I continued, although my analogy seemed to be dissolving as I was making it up. "White students from the dormitories are meridians that link the kitchen with the dining room to serve the fraternity inhabitants. Without money you may belong to the white race, but not to the ruling class."

"Doesn't that hold true for Ecuador too?"

“The way of classifying people there is different. In Ecuador there’s a continuum of color from darkest to lightest. In Arkansas, even the smallest amount of ‘black blood’ makes someone black. It’s just white or black.”

“You make it sound like ‘heads or tails,’” he said, pulling at his cigar.

“That’s how I see it,” I said, my voice failing in the thick cigar smoke. I continued: “Thursday afternoon my lab teammate told me: ‘A new Negro has arrived.’ I turned round and saw a guy with blond straight hair: ‘That guy looks Caucasian,’ I said, they’d call him Gringo at home.’ ‘Check his ass’ —excuse my language, sir— my teammate said with certainty, and he was right.

“Uh-huh.”

“Our classrooms are also ‘heads or tails.’ Blacks sit in the first rows, then there’s one left empty between them and whites. The empty row acts as the edge of the coin, it both separates and links blacks with whites.”

“I see...” There was a pause. “Do you like football?” Mr. Williams asked, switching away from the delicate subject of race. I felt I had gone too far, and tried to shift to a more jocular tone:

“Do you mean Footballianity, sir?” I realized immediately this was an awkward joke, but it was too late...

“Football...what?”

“Footballianity, the student religion.”

“Oh, like Christianity. I’m sure you know that our Razorbacks are the best in the nation,” he said, assuming an ordinary-man attitude, clashing with that created by his *Romeo y Julieta*.

“I do, Sir. My roommate, the other guys from my floor, and even myself, are all Razorbacks. The stadium to us is like a church where we celebrate a religious ritual. That’s why I call it Footballianity. When the Razorbacks charge we shout ‘Go, pigs, sooooo...!’ as if we chanted a litany in a High Mass.”

“What you mean is ‘Woooooooooooo, Pig ! Sooie!

Woooooooooooo, Pig ! Sooie!

Woooooooooooo, Pig ! Sooie!

Razorbacks!!”

“Oh yes, ha-ha, that’s it, you got it, sir!”

“And don’t forget to raise both hands in the air, as I did, and wave your fingers during the ‘Woo.’ Then you pump both hands down on the ‘Pig,’ and raise your right hand back up on the ‘Sooie.’”

“Why ‘pig’?”

“In the 1920s farmers began issuing hog calls to encourage a lagging Razorback football team. They started this tradition. But the way you speak about football, *Footballianity*, gives the impression that you’re interested in theology. Are you?” Speaking of the Razorbacks had enlivened Mr. Williams. Still, as I was not sure whether his last question was a serious or jocular one, I gave a neutral answer:

“I’m interested in football, both kinds.”

“Both kinds...?”

“Yours and what you call soccer.”

“Oh, soccer, *your* sport religion.”

“To locals soccer is an exotic game. Saturday afternoon I was playing alone, kicking a soccer ball into the home-plate screen of the deserted ball park. As I kicked it above the screen a passerby shouted: ‘Wow, nice field goal!’ ‘Thank you,’ I said, ‘but that was not a field goal but a miss in soccer.’ The guy made a puzzled grimace and resumed his way. I felt as exotic as the game of soccer here.” Something told me that what I had just said was too stiff, it sounded like explication, I felt frustrated.

“He was trying to be friendly,” Mr. Williams said.

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“And I’m sorry for you and for us. If soccer, the world’s favorite sport, were popular here it would draw tighter our bonds of friendship with you, South Americans, and with the Europeans. Well, my consolation is baseball. The Caribbean peoples, including the Cubans, in spite of politics, follow our championships with great attention. I’ve heard Castro used to be a pitcher.”

I felt that last remark was a good way to finish the conversation about sports. I was tired of that subject, and decided to tell Mr. Williams how I was getting along with the people unrelated to the university:

“And as for my relations with the Fayetteville people,” I told him, “they’re good. Friday evening I went shopping downtown for some art supplies. A middle-aged worker, his overalls covered with dust, saw me coming out of a store with my arms full: ‘Are you gonna walk uphill loaded with all that stock?’ he asked. —‘Yes, I’m going up to the dormitory,’ I said, looking at the hill without enthusiasm— ‘I’ll give you a ride,’ he said, and drove me to the very entrance.”

Mrs. Williams, who was reading in the corner of the room, and had theretofore not shown more than a few polite signs of interest in the conversation, turned to me:

“Well, it’s clear to me that you’ve been well received in Fayetteville, and that you feel well at the university, but you haven’t told us how you feel in our house.” She said with a smile, “I imagine it’s a very different environment from your own.”

It was not easy for me to answer her question. Now I felt this environment was foreign to me, now I felt right at home:

“It certainly is different from my own environment, madam. But the way of life of people of your rank in Ecuador is similar,” I said. Mrs. Williams’ face showed surprise.

“Really?”

“Well, the language and the architecture are different, of course, but the maids serving the table put me in mind of what I’ve seen at home.”

I would have liked to emphasize that both in Arkansas and in Ecuador menial jobs were done by non-whites, and that this was unfair, but I knew that such statement would be unwelcome in their house.

“Where I see a great difference is in the composition of your society, madam,” I continued, “It’s like a painting with few colors and little nuance between them.”

“Whereas Ecuador is all nuance and no separate colors, a real melting pot, right?”

“Well, that’s what I’ve been told about *your* society, Madam, but the melting pot I see is filled with more myth than reality.”

This time I was sure I had overstated the case. Mrs. Williams’ eyes turned to her husband, then back to me. I read in them: “You’ve gone too far.” She changed the subject and brought up something common to both Arkansas and Ecuador, the Spanish conquest, perhaps in order to make me feel more at home and less critical of her country:

“Do you know that the first European to reach Arkansas was Hernando de Soto, at the end of the sixteenth century?” she said, and we left the present and went into history.

When the visit was over, I left on foot and reflected on my conversation with the Williamses while walking along the alley from the house to the road. They had offered to drive me home, but I wanted to walk, to be alone, to recover my tranquillity, to understand what I had experienced at the Williamses. In the slanted shower of red-gold sunbeams, the procession of trees bordering the alley, clad in yellows and reds, celebrated the last days of warmth.

As I walked, it became clear to me that in the local culture everything of the material, social and spiritual nature, not just the matters of race, had to be defined, measured, filed, classified and labeled. This seemed obsessive to me, accustomed as I was to the signless roads, and infinite racial amalgamation of Ecuador. To my fellow college students, measurements and statistics were a mere systematic arrangement of what they knew from everyday life. They were as much used to the confining gridiron of the football field as I to the openness of the soccer field. To me, measurements and stats were straitjackets that bounded tight the arms of reality.

I feared the stats, they were dangerous, in particular to fainthearted people. When they learned that something had a high probability of occurring they became convinced that it would indeed happen. They behaved in such a way that what they predicted were about to happen proved right. Our psychology professors called this “self-fulfilling prophecies.”

“Deep thoughts?” said a girl’s voice coming from behind me. She startled me, and I turned round. Against the red-gold sunlight I saw the blurred, glowing image of a young woman on horseback, a young version of Josefina, the lady of Cojimíes. When I could see her better, her manner of carrying her head and body, and her long chestnut hair made the resemblance more evident still.

“Huh?...Uh-uh,” I managed to utter, returning to full awareness. “Yes, I was thinking of something very important until you startled me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I was returning from some friends’ when I saw you coming out of the house, and wondered who you were. You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No, I’m a student from South America, Mr. Williams is my sponsor.”

“This is the most beautiful time of the year. Would you like to ride around the hill?”

I wanted to walk to find tranquillity, but I was attracted to the girl. I hesitated for a moment, and then accepted her offer as I had obeyed, as a child, Josefina’s order:

“Yes I would...A beautiful sea of color.”

“Come, you’ll ride behind my saddle.”

The wind changed the foliage into colorful waves, and made it whisper a song in praise of autumn. The girl’s hair streamed in the wind toward the east like a fragrant fire. Now it enveloped my face, now it left it free again. Pines, oaks and hickories, symbols of strength and endurance, dominated the scene. Palm and banana trees would have seemed fragile beside them. No bananas or coconuts could I see, but there were plenty of pinecones, acorns and nuts in a world of squirrels, chipmunks, marmots, deer, jays, woodpeckers and mocking birds. I knew there could be no monkeys in that region, but my eyes still seemed to find their forms among the branches. The perfume of pine was in every cone, that of coconut oil was a distant memory. Arkansas, a southern state, was a faraway north to me.

I found myself in a foreign environment, but riding on horseback was familiar to me, and while the girl remained silent she reminded me of Flor, who existed in a different orbital path around the same core of reality. This girl was a projection of her in the path on which I found myself. Her breathing and the movements of her body in harmony with my own brought her in closer and closer contact with me. We got off from the horse in a hideaway made of branches and leaves, and we resumed the same intimate rhythm on the ground. Time and space became meaningless. In the shadows of the hideaway, shadows ourselves, Flor in her orbital path, the girl and I fused into a single transient shadow.

The Dean of Psychology supervised foreign scholarship holders. He was abreast of my academic and cultural work.

“We appreciate your participation in our cultural programs,” he told me after an international student show. “I enjoyed your interpretation of the classical popular song *Maria Helena*.”

“Delighted to hear that...but my guitar player and I were not in perfect harmony,” I replied.

“I didn’t notice, the ambience was so joyful...I have good news for you. Our foreign students will visit an Indian reservation in two weeks. I know the native Americans are less foreign to you than to students from other continents, but I’m sure you’ll enjoy the visit. I’ll be there with you.”

At the reservation, I said to the Dean:

“You’re right, sir, the Indians and mestizos of the reservation resemble those of Ecuador. But it seems strange to me to hear them speak English.”

“Why? Everybody speaks English around here.”

“I know, but these people live in a reservation, separated from the rest of the population. The Spanish that Indians and mestizos speak in Ecuador sounds natural to me, because all types of people share the same territory. There’s no reservations at home.”

“Two Americas, two cultures.”

“Yes. The other day I was visiting with my sponsor, Mr. Williams, and his wife, and I told them that in Ecuador there’s no separation, no black or white, no “heads or tails,” but rather a continuum of color from lightest to darkest. One’s position in the color continuum is among the important factors, as are money and education, that determine how much privilege a person enjoys.”

“I suspect that money is the ultimate ‘separating’ factor in Ecuador.”

“Right. Last year, when I translated on the HOPE —as you know— I explained to an old sailor who used to chat with me that the great differences in the prices of goods and services separate those who have access to them from the rest. Price determines one’s

station in our society; the dark skinned have much greater chances of suffering from poverty.”

“The inhabitants of the reservation want to know who you are. All foreign students will make presentations of their home countries.” The Dean said to me.

When my turn came, I tried to portray Ecuador in such a way that our hosts and my fellow foreign students would understand. I took advantage of what I had learned from Flor and on board the HOPE in order to explain in a simple way. I placed myself between two girls, a Colombian and a Peruvian:

“Colombia is north and Peru is south of Ecuador,” I said, pointing at them. “Our two neighbors are always eager to do us favors; they keep helping us to get rid of the land we can’t use.”

The Latin Americans in the audience caught the irony of my words and burst out laughing, even though Ecuador’s partition was no laughing matter. Hostility between Ecuador and Peru had been going on since 1941, when the Peruvians invaded our country. The U.S. and several Latin American nations forced Ecuador to sign the Protocol of Rio de Janeiro, as a result of which our territory suffered a considerable reduction. The argument to justify the usurpation was the need to foster hemispheric unity against the Axis Powers in World War II. Colombia had taken a small slice of Ecuadorian territory before that, but with time it had become a good friend.

The Latinos knew that now, in 1964, the tension between Ecuador and Peru had reached a critical point again; hostilities could start at any moment. Yet I thought that the way they laughed at the irony of my words was disproportionate: they were taking advantage of the occasion to let off foul steam. Sitting on a shaky folding chair, my Salvadorian friend Manuel laughed beyond control. He bent backwards, his feet up in the air, flipped like a pancake, and landed on his back. “Oh!” the frightened audience cried out. Manuel got up, giggling, unscathed, and the audience burst out laughing again. The Peruvian girl had not understood what I had told the audience to cause such merriment. When I repeated it for her in Spanish, she did not find it funny.

A plentiful meal followed the presentations. The inhabitants of the reservation and the Latinos shared a food basic to their nutrition: corn. Eaten by all of us together, it was like the host in Holy Communion.

The next time I met my sponsor, I recalled my reflections after leaving his home, and I told him:

“Mr. Williams, it seems to me that the society here resembles a department store. People, social and spiritual relations, bear names like labels on articles for sale.”

“Labels?...” he repeated stretching out the vowels, as though bracing himself for some unpleasant social commentary. I noticed his defensive reaction, but I just could not stop myself:

“Well, for instance, why does one say ‘senior citizens’ but not ‘junior citizens’? because being old is considered bad. Labels such as ‘senior citizen’ suggest that something nasty is written on their back, they nourish prejudice instead of opposing it.”

“As a Latin American would you prefer the nasty denomination ‘spic’ or the ‘Hispanic label’ –as you’d call it?”

“Neither one, Sir, I need no labels stuck on me, I’m not a ware for sale. We had the Holy Inquisition in the Spanish world. Sticking ‘nice’ labels on people is a new form of Inquisition. Those who refuse to submit to it, and call people by their proper names instead of labeling them, are the new heretics.”

“Why do you worry so much about this?”

“Because ‘nice’ labels conceal social problems that need to be corrected. They are the perfume that hide the stench of injustice. They keep people from expressing their feelings in straightforward, honest ways. It forces them to wear masks. I suspect that’s why some of them use drugs, to escape the masquerade. The Pharisees, whom Jesus compared to whitewashed tombs, were the Apostles of this kind of hypocrisy.”

“There you go again. As I told you the other day when you called *Footballianity* the people’s passion for football, you give the impression of being interested in theology.”

“Theology or not, sir, I think that, as the Romans imposed their *Pax Romana*, the new pharisees could impose *Pax Euphemica*, and proclaim hypocrisy the new law. Their flag would be white, with a whitewashed sepulcher in its midst.”

When I finished my attack against social hypocrisy, Mr. Williams gave me a questioning look. He seemed to wonder if I was so angry because I had been a victim of

it, but he did not ask any questions. I replayed my words in my mind and found them excessively aggressive myself. My thinking shifted to a more rational mode: a spic in the U.S., a bastard at the private religious school in Ecuador...perhaps social hypocrisy is not all that bad after all. My reason thought so, but my feelings did not change.

I met my Salvadorian friend Manuel on the following weekend and told him about my conversation with Mr. Williams. Manuel gave me the same quizzical look, and did not ask any questions, either. I felt certain that social hypocrisy had kept Mr. Williams and him from asking why I hated it to that extent.

We were sitting at a small corner-table at the student-union cafeteria. Manuel caressed a bottle of his customary Coca-Cola, which disguised a mix of one third of the soft drink, and two thirds of Bacardi Black rum. As the bottle had a feminine shape, and he treated it as his accomplice, Manuel called it *Consuelito*, from the Spanish feminine name *Consuelo*, consolation, with a diminutive, tender ending. He did not drink alcohol elsewhere: "I wouldn't find any pleasure in drinking if it weren't forbidden. Interdiction is the real drug," he would say looking at the "no alcohol" sign.

Manuel's general concerns were different from mine. He had one in particular, to which he returned time after time after drinking half of *Consuelito*. When he was ready to talk about it, his dark round eyes went out of focus and seemed to look through my head at some faraway reality:

"I keep wondering how much effort and time would be required to close the gap in economic development between the U.S. and Latin America," he said, looking as worried as might be someone commissioned to find a solution to the problem. I had the impression that what bothered Manuel, whose prominent family was descended from the conquistadors, was that the U.S. dominated the economy of the former Spanish colonies.

"Really?" I said in a mocking tone, to emphasize that he kept repeating that question like a refrain. I then decided to force him to think, instead of worrying: "Why is it so important?"

"Catching up is an imperative duty."

"Are you sure high economic development is good?"

“Well, since the beginning of time, generation after generation, wandering from place to place, through crisis and war, people struggle with hunger and illness, they must be looking for a higher level of development...no?”

“Maybe, but what I see around here is that when people can eat all they want, many of them stuff themselves with fast food, become obese and sick. Development makes people used to instant coffee, fast food, immediate satisfaction that causes new problems, and the vicious circle keeps perpetuating itself.”

“Well, that’s easy to understand: people struggle to satisfy their needs, and when they do they just can’t stop.”

“So *you* should stop worrying about catching up.”

“I haven’t satisfied my need yet! Come on, I’m sure you worry as much as I do. The other night I had a dream. I saw steps on a craggy misty mountain with the top obscured by clouds. Every country stood at a higher or lower step of development. The inhabitants of every step kept trying to attain the next higher slippery step for generations. When they succeeded in attaining it, they forced the inhabitants of this new step to help them keep climbing. During their lifetime people could see only a small part of the climbing process, they could not see the whole of it, and it seemed to them that those who had climbed higher belonged to superior races. That’s how people think in Latin America, that their underdevelopment is natural because they are inferior.”

“See? Even your dream shows that high economic development has become an obsession that takes up too much room at the expense of everything else. We forget, for instance, that we have great writers, like your own novelist Rubén Darío.”

“Rubén Darío was a Nicaraguan poet, not a Salvadorian novelist.”

Like Martin Luther King, Manuel had a dream. But he was not speaking on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Our corner table was comfortable, if small. Manuel caressed Consuelito, taking sips. A teenage couple danced and sang “you love double-mint gum” on the TV screen during a break of a Johnny Carson show rerun. Like many other Latin American students in the U.S., we talked about but did not take part in the social struggle.

It was December 1964. On the 11th of that month Che Guevara had delivered his “Colonialism is doomed” speech before the United Nations in New York. Martin Luther

King, Che and Manuel all had great dreams. As compared to theirs, my dream seemed to be very humble. All I longed for was that English- and Spanish-speakers could talk to one another and reach a better mutual understanding, as we had endeavored to do on the HOPE. But I had begun to realize that my humble desire could prove a greater dream than theirs. I had the depressing impression that the political speeches of all colors, that I heard, were self-defensive and dogmatic. It was hard to find anyone disposed to discuss reasons for or against their own stances and those of their opponents. It was as if the participants of my language course on the HOPE had tried to prove to one another that their own language was right, and the other wrong. By 1968 John and Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, Che Guevara, Martin Luther King, and countless other, minor, political figures were going to be assassinated in the Americas.

A scholarship of the type I had provided for free plane tickets. With the latter came the risk of having to give up my seat to paying passengers. I also was obligated to take part in public-relation events, whether I liked it or not.

“We’d like you to represent our university at the ‘Adventure in World Understanding’ at Michigan State University during Christmastime,” the Dean of Psychology told me in November. His politeness made the request sound like an open proposition but, considering the kind of scholarship that I had, it was in effect an order. Still, order or not, I was happy to participate in the Adventure.

Before I came to Arkansas Mamá saw to it that I dressed myself “with propriety” for the trip. In Houston’s oppressive sultriness, I was so worn out that at a certain moment I felt that my mind had stalled, like a car engine in a river. Now I was going to East Lansing in the winter, and did not have warm clothes. When I told my third-floor neighbors that I was going to take part in the Adventure one of them said:

“We’re in December, have you ever been in a place as cold as Michigan in winter?”

“Never,” I replied, and imagined a freezing sensation that I had never experienced.

"I'm from Milwaukee," the guy continued. "I'll lend you warm clothes, if you want." The bighearted guy was also big-bodied, and loose clothes were not fashionable at the time, but my poverty helped me find excuses for wearing them.

At Michigan State, the *Adventure* director, an old lady who had organized international meetings of this kind for many years, welcomed me. She told me she had received a documentary on the HOPE, made by a Miami TV crew, in which I had taken part at the beginning of the project. I had been busy at the time trying to adjust to my translation work, and had all but forgotten about the documentary, which had never been shown in Ecuador.

"Would you like to take part in the presentation of the documentary?" she asked me, appearing certain that I would say *yes*.

"Before I decide whether to take part or not, madam," I said, "I'd like to see how they've portrayed people's lives in Guayaquil slums. I'm wary."

"Why?"

"Well, madam, I suspect that the documentary may expose the shocking aspects of poor people's lives without trying to explain the causes of, or to establish responsibility for it."

"What makes you fear that?"

"While watching television in Arkansas, I've noticed that sensationalism is excessive. If the HOPE documentary has been made in a similar way, I cannot assume the responsibility of taking part in its presentation. I'm not willing to help disseminate sensationalist misinformation."

"All right, we'll watch it together, and you'll decide."

The documentary confirmed my worst fears. I refused to take part in its presentation, and offered instead to participate in the musical numbers. To my mind, that was a sufficient compensation for my refusal. I passed for a member of three different nationalities in three musical numbers. There were few performers, and I was available, so I got a chance to learn, from firsthand experience, that the true substance of music is the same in all countries. I recalled Vanessa's reaction on the HOPE when I told her about my good relations with the Ecuadorian medical personnel: "So that's where you belong," she said, and I replied: "I feel well with them and try to be on friendly terms

with the staff and the translators, that's all." I felt the same way with the participants in the Adventure.

With the Mexicans I sang *Cielito Lindo*—"lovely little sky"—meaning "dear sweetheart." With the Bolivians I did a Quechua dance act, and an Italian asked me to accompany him in singing *Funiculi, funicula*, about the first funicular on Mount Vesuvius.

"How can I accompany you," I said to him. "I don't speak Italian."

"We won't sing in Italian, either," he said, "we'll sing in Neapolitan."

"Is there such a language?"

"It's my language. Don't worry, I'll help you learn it by heart, and give you a rough idea of what it means. You don't have to understand well what you're saying."

"Come on! I worked as an interpreter last year. I need to understand. I won't do that." I am glad I ended by accepting to sing in Neapolitan. I enjoyed it a lot.

The Mexicans gave me a stanza of *Cielito Lindo* that I found difficult to sing: *Pájaro que abandona, cielito lindo, su primer nido, si lo encuentra ocupado, cielito lindo, bien merecido*—a bird that abandons, dear sweetheart, its first nest, if it finds it taken when it returns, dear sweetheart, it serves it right. While completing this stanza—when I got to *merecido*—I went out of breath, and stroked my throat in an effort to recover it. The public laughed with empathy, but as I was in the back row of singers those in the front were puzzled, as they could not understand why the people laughed. I was explaining this to them as soon as we finished, when a pretty girl with dark hair, dark blue eyes and a dress of the same color, came smiling up to me:

"Oh, I was so scared when you went out of breath," she said. "I stroked my throat as you did to recover mine."

"I know you did, I was looking at you since you came to sit on the first row."

"I knew you were looking at me..." And we were both pleased to discover...love at first sight? No, we did not think so, but we spent as much time together as it was possible during the few days that were left of my stay at Michigan State. When I returned to Fayetteville, Emily and I wrote letters to each other. She, who was descended from an old Michigan family, aspired to become, like her father, a university professor.

Weeks after the Adventure, I wondered if I had been out of breath at the end of my stanza about the bird's first nest because I had abandoned my own first nest somewhere. As soon as this thought came to my mind, images of Ecuador, Mamá, Ñaña, Flor, flooded the screen of my mind.

I spoke about my experiences on the HOPE at schools and churches in Arkansas. How refreshing it was to speak and to laugh with the young people who were active in pursuing the improvement of the relations between the races, of the health services for the poor, and other social causes. They freed me from the depressing impression that the self-defensive, dogmatic politicians had made on me. I told the audiences how much Vanessa, the black chief of physiotherapy, had helped the poor of Guayaquil's slums. I told them that Dolores, the Irish New Yorker, chief of laboratories, had made available to those people testing that they could have never afforded. I told them that Medicspanglish could not be spoken with words alone, but required facial, hand and body gesticulation. They imitated it amid the general merriment, and became fluent in it.

After every meeting the organizers gave me an envelope with fifteen to twenty dollars donated by the audience. Half a fried chicken with fries, buns, butter, honey and coffee cost sixty cents. I dreamed of buying a seven-year-old 1957 Chevy, a car that was worshiped by dormitory dwellers, and sold for one hundred and twenty five dollars on campus, but I never could put by one hundred and twenty five dollars. There were no meals for me at Pi Kappa Alpha on Sundays, but my memory still feasts on the smell and taste of the chicken in a basket I ate at a roadside diner. Twenty dollars was a lot of money to me, and one hundred and twenty five –a fortune.

During my stay in Arkansas I was invited to two, quite different, official dinners. The first one was served during the visit to the Indian reservation. The second one took place at the Rotary Club's annual meeting. In the first one we shared corn, the food sacred to native Americans. I do not know how much I ate, but it was a lot. A gourmet meal was offered at the Rotary Club dinner, during which I made a speech thanking my sponsors, who paid part of my scholarship. This time, while the guests enjoyed the banquet, I answered questions:

“What are the most effective ways to help Latin American students?” a man asked as I was cutting off my first morsel of steak. I got up and answered, but as soon as I sat down a woman asked:

“Is Castro a threat to the Western Hemisphere?” In 1961 Castro had declared Cuba a socialist republic, himself a Marxist-Leninist. The Cuban-Soviet alliance placed ballistic missiles in Cuba, which precipitated the crisis of 1962. In 1963 Castro moved Cuba toward a fully-fledged Communist system. The U.S. intervention in Vietnam became a full-blown war in 1965. The Soviet Union was thought to be the U.S.’s real enemy in Vietnam. I wondered why the woman asked me what everyone already knew from the media. Did she want to force me to take a political stance? I repeated what was being said in the media, and hoped this would be the last question –when the next one came:

“Will you have fond memories of Arkansas?” The aroma of my fine steak disturbed my train of thought. I got hungrier and hungrier. My guts grunted, but all I ate were a few bites of my only gourmet meal of the year. The gazes of Mr. Williams and his wife, who were sitting not far from me, kept urging me to accept my frustration. I continued to answer questions, and resigned myself to my fate. The Williams’ daughter, the girl who gave me a ride on horseback, seemed to be daydreaming of something interesting. I envied her.

At the end of the school year I had my compensation for this unfinished gourmet meal that I could not forget. A Washington orthopedist, for whom I had translated on the HOPE, invited me to D.C., and took me to a restaurant frequented by government officials. An inscription on a plaque, set into the ornate and carved wood paneling on the wall behind my chair, read:

“The agreement putting an end to the Cuban atomic missile crisis was reached at this table in October 1962.”

The doctor –an old lady to whom this ambience was familiar– noticed my interest in the plaque. She assumed a stern expression, resembling Naña’s when she explained Diego’s writings to me.

“This restaurant serves as a meeting place for unofficial negotiations between the U.S. and other countries,” she said matter-of-factly.

I felt proud of sitting in a place that was instrumental in improving the world understanding. I relaxed, and as I was taking a deep breath the sharp aroma of premium cigar tobacco wafted into my nostrils, and made me think of my sponsor.

“I wonder if my sponsor participated in the Cuban agreement,” I said, without quite knowing why.

“What’s his name, again?” the doctor asked.

“Mr. Williams.”

“May well be.”

I looked around me: no one was smoking...

Whether my sponsor participated in the Cuban agreement or not was a secret. But there was a greater secret that would not be revealed for many years. A man named Vasili Arkhipov, a Soviet submarine officer, blocked an order to fire nuclear-armed torpedoes on October 27, 1962, when the submarines were under attack by U.S. destroyers. We escaped a nuclear war because of one common Russian sailor.

Two and a half years had passed since that crucial moment. Now I was surrounded by the luxury of this restaurant. Our Latino waiter made me feel comfortable amidst the ornate and carved wood paneling by telling me in Spanish what to do at the right moment:

“I would advise a rose wine...”

The waiter could not know that I had never had a meal with wine in my life. The way he talked and looked at me told me he thought I must be some very important Latino person, since I was sitting among his patrons, instead of serving them. When we finished our meal the doctor paid the twenty-dollar bill –as much as I got for speaking about the HOPE in Arkansas, or more than thirty of my half-chicken dinners in Fayetteville.

A Greyhound took me from Washington to New York City.

“Don’t go to New York,” some students had advised me in Fayetteville, “New York’s like Turkey, the third world, you won’t like it.”

“I come from the third world,” I told them, “I’ll like it.”

But when I emerged from the subway in Brooklyn, I found myself in a complex world that I could not understand. The sound of languages I had never heard mixed itself with the roaring of vehicles of all kinds. I smelled burnt gases from engines mixed with the scent of foods I had never eaten. Black garbage bags dotted the gray sidewalks. “The guys in Fayetteville were right,” I thought, “I don’t like this.”

I must have been roaming the streets like an automaton for hours when I realized, as the sun was setting, that now I actually felt at ease in this environment. I felt like someone at the end of a flu infection; my immune system had beaten the virus, although I had not recovered my strength. My perception of New York had changed. To hear different languages had become a natural and interesting experience. The smell of pizza was more pervasive than that of street hot dogs. Pizza had been conferred the rights of Brooklynite citizenship. A hot dog with sauerkraut was an exotic European image. I realized that the melting pot existed in the U.S. and—in my mind—I apologized to Mrs. Williams, my sponsor’s wife in Fayetteville, for what I had said to her. Although it was true that in Arkansas the melting pot was filled with more myth than reality, in Brooklyn it was real, filled to the brim with a variety of people who were different from those of Ecuador, but just as colorful and charming.

In the days that followed I visited some acquaintances from home in Brooklyn, some from the HOPE in Manhattan. On Sunday morning I went to Mass with Dolores, the HOPE’s chief laboratory technician, and her old mother, and returned to their home feeling the weight of the New York Times, a heavy brick, under my arm. I then headed for the 1964-1965 New York World’s Fair at Flushing Meadows, Queens.

The Fair’s theme, “Peace Through Understanding,” sounded to me like the “Adventure in World Understanding,” at Michigan State University—but it was not about universal singing, dancing and comedy. The New York fair was dedicated to “Man’s

Achievement on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe.” Apart from Catholic High Masses, I had never seen such lofty spectacle. I had the impression that high technology was a new religion to which one had no choice but to convert. I tested one of the more modest contrivances there –a rose touch-tone phone placed beside a black one with a rotating disk. Columns that marked seconds beside each of them demonstrated how much time the rose one saved. While dialing a number on the backward black one, I thought of the millions of people in the world who had never had a phone, rose or black. I regretted that, unlike music, high technology was not universal. It was reserved for the privileged ones who could afford it.

During those days in New York I saw Emily for the last time, the girl I had met at Michigan State. She was going to continue her studies in Europe. It was the last time I saw her. This brief last encounter reminded me of the one with my father. I looked forward to a next meeting that would never take place. And this time Ramona, our maid in Manta, and aunt Luisa were not there to pat me on the back.

When I spoke about the HOPE at churches in Arkansas I became acquainted with some local activists. One of them invited me to a Baptist convention to be held in Atlanta. That was my next stop after my visit to New York. In its own way, the convention was not less lofty than the New York Fair. Surrounded by floral ornaments, preachers delivered rousing sermons. They seemed to be trying to outdo each other’s talents for drama. Having been at the New York World’s Fair and at the Baptist Convention in a rapid succession, I was under the impression that High Technology and Christianity were colossal forces, and I wondered which of the two was preponderant in U.S. society.

In Fayetteville I was making my things ready for the trip back home when our third-floor janitor came to see me with a worried look on his face:

“We’re at war with China,” he said, and I felt that “we” included me. This gave me the warm sensation of being accepted, along with the dread of being at war with a giant:

“Are you sure we’re at war with *China*?” I asked him.

“With China, or is it Vietnam? You know, that side of the world.” The evening news answered that question. The U.S. intervention in Vietnam, which began in 1963, one year after the Cuban missile crisis, had become a war.

I took a bus bound for Houston, the starting point of my return trip. I got off in Mexico City. I had heard as much about great art as about crime in the former capital of the Aztecs. I wanted to stay for a while but my pockets, as usual, were empty. Mamá made an effort to send me some money, just enough to stay at the modest boarding house of a family who had fled Spain at the end of the Spanish Civil War:

“The Society of Friends, the Quakers, paid for our transportation from France, where we had fled in the first place in 1939, to the Dominican Republic,” the lady of the house told me. “But we were unable to adjust to Generalísimo Trujillo’s era. My husband was depressed, drank for relief, and died of a heart attack. In 1944 I ran away with my two little daughters and came to live here.”

The lady found refuge and solace in Mexico, but I felt apprehension the moment I set foot in the city. As soon as I returned to our Latin American world my old worries came back. I felt again the pain that my failure in engineering had caused myself and my elders. I felt again the pleasure that my success on the HOPE had brought us all. I told myself that if I had worked in engineering as hard as I did on the HOPE, I would have succeeded. I felt forced to try again to be successful in engineering.

I wrote an application for a foreign-student scholarship to study engineering at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*. On a Wednesday, I got an answer from them: “You are not a regular student of an Ecuadorian educational institution. You have not submitted your student record, references or recommendations. Your application is not fit for acceptance.” This negative answer put an end to my hope to get a scholarship, and to the obligation to try again in engineering that haunted me. All I could feel was emptiness. I roamed the streets of Mexico for a whole week.

The following Wednesday I felt like doing something meaningful that would help me overcome the feeling of emptiness. While walking and wondering what to do, I found myself before the *Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, which had opened the previous year. That misty day the entrance hall appeared to me as a tunnel into the

clouds. It reminded me of the arches at the foot of our cliff in Manta, which guarded the gateways to the caves. I saw water pouring down the rim of a great stone umbrella-fountain. I was sure that the water was not fit to drink, and yet imagined drinking it, as I did in Manta. As soon as I imagined my third draft, something invisible pulled me along one of many paths. I felt like a helpless child again, unable to resist, as if I were dreaming or sleepwalking.

The path led me into a temple of the *Mexica*, the indigenous people of the Valley of Mexico, the rulers of the Aztec empire. A monumental stone was enthroned in its midst. I squinted and scrutinized, detail by detail, the woman sculpted in the monolith. She wore a skirt of writhing snakes and a necklace made of human hearts, hands and skulls. Instead of fingers and toes her hands and feet had claws which, according to a museum worker who explained the monument to me, served for digging graves. Her breasts hung flaccid, she had nursed many children. She was *Coatlicue*, the Mother of Gods who gave birth to the moon, the stars, and *Huitzilopochtli*, the Hummingbird of the South, the Aztec god of the sun, of war and death.

“The Hummingbird of the South” evoked in my memory the hummingbirds that stuck their slender bills into the bosom of the roses in Carolina’s, Ñaña’s sister, garden, and fed on nectar day after day. And, as a god of death, Huitzilopochtli ruled over the hummingsbirds that died of sorrow when Carolina’s house was demolished and the roses were gone. According to Aztec mythology, Coatlicue wore a necklace made of her children’s hearts, hands and skulls in order to purify them in her chest. As I was looking at Coatlicue’s necklace I heard a recorded female voice coming from behind me, above my head: “If you do not live up to your capacities, if you impede the evolution of your soul, Coatlicue will devour you. You will become part of her stone body forever.” “I’ll live up to my capacities,” I promised Coatlicue. “I won’t impede the evolution of my soul.”

Since I arrived in Mexico City I had seen discarded newspapers in different languages on the reading tables of a downtown international newstand, and I had not paid much attention to them. But since the day I promised Coatlicue that I would not impede the evolution of my soul, I felt a need to understand what was written in those newspapers. Learning languages other than Spanish and English was the new direction of

the evolution of my soul. I became interested in two newspapers in particular: *Le Figaro* and *Der Tagesspiegel*. Learning French and German became an urgent need for me. I bought the small paperback dictionaries that I could afford, and started trying to understand *Le Figaro* and *Der Tagesspiegel*. I even dreamed of becoming a United Nations interpreter, but I heard that for that job Russian was required, and I could not imagine how I was going to learn such an exotic language. I was thinking about all this one day when, all of a sudden, I realized I had run out of money. I reached for my free Panagra ticket and returned home. I decided to continue my study of languages in Ecuador.

Before all else, I needed to be admitted to the *Universidad de Quito*. The psychology I studied in Arkansas would make my admission to the psychology department easy, but my main interest lay now in languages. I got minors in French and German. I wanted to take Russian, but it was not taught at the university.

I had visited Quito in the past, but I never lived there. It seemed strange to me at the beginning to be living three kilometers above sea level. It takes a few weeks to grow the additional one million blood cells indispensable to be active in this city, one of the highest capitals in the world. Running or playing soccer without this adjustment makes one feel pierced by arrows that shoot through one's body. The city's culture is the product of the interaction of three others: the native, the Inca, and the Spanish. Quito used to be the capital of the *Chincha Suyu* and *Anti Suyu*, the northern sections of the *Tawantin Suyu*, the Inca Empire.

The city spreads out in a valley and climbs the surrounding slopes. The university campus clings to those slopes. The ornamental tile murals on the exterior walls of some of the buildings make them look colorful, light and graceful. It is hard to believe that so many violent confrontations between the students and police and military forces have taken place in such a charming setting.

As there were no vacant rooms at the student dormitories, I took a small one at a boarding house near the university. One evening I told my landlady about my desire to study Russian.

"Oh, what a coincidence!" she said. "My ground-floor tenant is a Russian lady, but I don't think she's a teacher."

"One doesn't need to be a teacher to teach one's own language," I said full of hope.

"Do you want me to introduce you to Mrs. Kravchuk?" She offered.

The frail lady was in her fifties. Her large gray eyes, that seemed to be focused on some faraway reality, and her slow movements and speech, gave her a ghostly charm.

"I'm not Russian," she explained, "I'm Ukranian, but that makes no difference to the local people. I do know Russian and have some old books that I could use to teach you, although I'm not a teacher."

"So you agree to teach me Russian, madam?"

"Why do you want to learn Russian? Someone might think you're a communist agent."

"Well, madam, I speak Spanish and English, one Latin and one Germanic language, I want to learn the best-known Slavic language."

"What for?"

"Russian is one of the five basic United Nations' languages. I want to become a U. N. interpreter, not anyone's agent."

"I wonder if you're as talented as you're enthusiastic," the lady said candidly.

"I don't know, but my motivation is serious," I assured her.

Mrs. Kravchuk began teaching me after telling me her own story:

"My parents fled the Ukraine with my brother, my sister and me during the Bolshevik Revolution. I was a little child." Her eyes and her impassive tone showed she did not have clear memories of this period, and was merely repeating the story she had learned as a child. "We lived long time on ships until we came to live here. When I was eighteen I married an Ecuadorian navy officer and had children. One of them is a sailor, a navy officer like his father. Oh! Speaking of sailors, I've a Russian book about a sailor named *Polevoy*, that I could use to teach you."

"Do you, by any chance, have a Russian handbook, madam?"

"No, unfortunately. Wait a second...See? This five-by-four-inch book bound in cloth-covered cardboard is titled *Kortik*, The Dagger. It tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy who coveted a dagger that Polevoy, the sailor, had hidden in a secret place." *Kortik* and the fragrance of fresh vegetables, that were always present in the lady's home, are stashed together in the stockroom of my memory.

It was evident that when Mrs. Kravchuk agreed to teach me she did not realize how complex it would be for me to learn the Cyrillic alphabet, the vocabulary, the seven-case declensions and the Russian pronunciation –all without the help of handbooks. The best possible way to accomplish this seemed to be to learn the whole expressions, as the

children do; seize the overall meaning, and then analyze the elements. Mrs. Kravchuk would say: “доброе утро!”—pronounced “dobroe utro”—good morning! I would repeat the expression, associate the sounds with the Cyrillic letters, and learn the meaning of each word. My experience with the class I offered to Spanish and English speakers aboard the HOPE helped me, but what I had to accomplish this time was much more complex.

Mrs. Kravchuk realized the difficulties I had during the class hour, and did what she could to help me. I told her about the problems I had when I left her apartment, after the class was over.

“Well, you’ve observed that I’m able to cope with the task during the hourly lesson, but as soon as it’s over and I leave your home I feel that my mind is not working in the usual way. It loses part of the control of my body. I walk awkwardly, and have to think every time I take a step, until I recover my ordinary gait.”

“All this because you’re learning Russian?”

“Of course not, madam, it’s clear to me that this isn’t caused by the study of Russian alone, but by the combined effect of my efforts to succeed on board the hospital ship HOPE, and in Arkansas—as I told you the other day—and by my present efforts to study psychology, French, German and Russian.”

“Besides, you, a *costeño*, mustn’t feel quite at home in Quito.”

“I don’t. As you know, the *Sierra* has a climate and a culture different from my native *Costa*.”

When we took a break in the middle of the intense Russian course, I told Mrs. Kravchuk about the HOPE and Arkansas, and what I had been doing during the past few years. When I told her that I had attended the Atlanta Baptist convention, she said:

“There’s a Baptist church beside campus, did you know? You can’t miss it, it’s an odd building, unlike anything around it.” The tone in which she said this made me think she was suggesting that I should go to the church for relief, but I wondered what she meant by “odd building.” I did not ask her, but I went to the church that very evening. I did not have to inquire who the minister was. It was easy to single out the middle-aged man amid a group of young *Quiteños*. The minister, Mr. Smith, was quite approachable

and friendly. I told him I had attended the Atlanta Baptist Convention and, after fifteen minutes of conversation, I allowed myself to tell him in a jocular tone:

“I congratulate you on your church, Mr. Smith, it looks like an odd Swiss chalet made of concrete.”

“Ha-ha,” he laughed. “Yes, yes, everybody says so, that’s why we got it so cheap from the former owner. It wasn’t a church before.”

Mr. Smith invited me to participate in church activities. I thought it ironic that I found in this foreign religious center the communal spirit nonexistent in local Catholic churches. Unlike the Protestant ones, they did not have community centers at the time. Mr. Smith had not mastered the Spanish language, but his parishioners and I understood him well, and he understood us. As Flor had taught me without saying a word, and as my HOPE experience had confirmed, language is much more than words.

But the Protestant Churches in Quito could not preach the gospel without words:

“To the Protestant Churches, Quito is one of the most important radio centers in the world,” Mr. Smith once told me, “We’re three kilometers above sea level, right in the middle of the world. HCJB, *The Voice of the Andes*, has been broadcasting religious and cultural programs in many languages to the whole world since the 1930s. This includes Quechua, the language of the *Tawantin Suyu*, the Inca Empire.”

Before the minister told me this, I considered HCJB and HOPE as two institutions not related to each other. But when Mr. Smith explained to me the importance of HCJB my perception changed. I came to believe that preaching the gospel and giving health care were two related methods used by the U.S. to consolidate their domination of the Western Hemisphere. I wished my Salvadorian friend Manuel, who kept wondering back in Fayetteville as to how much effort and time might be required for Latin America to become as rich as the U.S., were there to discuss this issue. I imagined he might have said: “If the U.S. helps us become as rich as they are, I don’t care if they use the gospel or health-care to establish themselves as the dominant power.”

The Baptist church was humble, both on the outside and the inside. The Catholic churches were filled with artistic treasures. Since Quito became Spanish, in 1534, the native artists copied the European works of art with slight alterations that gave the pieces a distinctive native spirit. From a distance, the Jesus on a crucifix at *La Compañia* Jesuit

church looks Spanish, but as you approach you see the skin, the cheek bones and the hair of the native. The gold plating shows European images, but it glows like the pre-Columbian Sun God. Such alterations could be a form of vengeance for the slavery imposed on the natives. Vengeance or not, they were the only way in which the native artists could assert their own culture. And cultural assertion appears in all aspects of Quito life, including the cuisine, composed of European recipes and local ingredients.

In December I found and took a vacant room at a student dormitory. Now I lived on campus, immersed in the university world. As in Fayetteville, the dormitory stood at the top of a hill, beside the university. But in Quito the hill was steep, grass-grown and deserted. Early one evening, days before Christmas, I returned to my room from downtown. I had been living at the dormitory for two weeks. I was going to go down to Guayaquil the following day. I was not far from the dorm, high on the slope, when I turned round to watch the street lights that had just been turned on, all around the city. The rarefied air gave a strange halo to the lights. It transformed Quito into a Christmas tree with lights glittering at different altitudes in the streets and buildings suspended like garlands and candles over a dark airy sea.

At a downtown bookstore, a girl from my French class had told me what had happened on campus after I left for downtown:

“A leftist militant seized a truck belonging to the military geographical institute and brought it to campus. He and other leftist students hid the cartographical material under the landing of the stairs of one of the buildings and set fire to the truck.”

“Did the firefighters come?”

“They did, but the militants kept them from extinguishing the fire. So the military must have thought that their material had burned in the truck. Within an hour a SWAT team surrounded the campus. They advanced toward the center of the campus, driving the students, teachers, office and maintenance personnel, as well as visitors, toward the army trucks. An old male professor who was objecting to the violence done to us, female students, was beaten. Doors were blasted open by machine-gun fire when it would have been sufficient just to turn the knob. People were forced onto army trucks and taken to

unknown destinations. I took advantage of the turmoil to run away from the campus, together with many others.”

“How come you know the whole story?”

“We –who ran away— put together the jigsaw puzzle.”

While I was enjoying the view of the lights glittering at different altitudes in the streets and buildings suspended like garlands and candles over a dark airy sea, I thought about what the girl from my French class had told me. I had said to her in response that, since the riot was over, it was pointless to worry about that. After my conversation with her I decided to return to my room, and get ready for tomorrow’s trip to Guayaquil. Now that I was not far from the dorm I felt calm, and enjoyed the view of the glittering lights. But I was surprised to see that I was not looking from the slope but hovering above the city, gliding from one Christmas decoration to the next, as if I were dreaming, even though I knew I was awake. I heard the church bells strike one, two, three, four, five, six times. As the last stroke boomed through the air I found myself standing on the slope, and felt as if I were awakening from uneasy dreams. I then recalled what the girl from my French class told me about the events of the morning, and realized all their gravity for the first time.

As I approached campus an ominous stillness made me shudder. I shuffled along toward my dormitory, looking over my shoulder. My eyes searched for the slightest movement, my ears were pricked up, the cold evening wind of the Andes felt strange on my skin, my legs were ready to sprint away. I saw a few military trucks, and wondered why they remained on campus when the rioters had already been arrested. I made to retrace my steps, but it was too late, the soldiers would have thought that I was trying to escape. I came up to a group of soldiers who stood or sat by a truck:

“I’m returning to my room,” I said, “I was downtown.”

“Go talk to that officer standing by that truck,” a soldier ordered me. “He’ll tell you what to do.”

“But I’m just returning to my room,” I repeated, to no avail.

“Get on that truck!” the officer commanded.

There was no point in arguing. I climbed the back of the truck and sat on a bench. A neighbor gave me two bread rolls:

“We better take some food for the trip,” he said in a friendly tone. “We might be going to the Amazonian jungle.”

“I thought the riot was over and they were gone.”

“They made us believe so, and caught us when we returned.”

Within ten minutes the trucks left campus and took to the stone-paved streets. Having to climb the slopes slowed them down. In the dark, a known militant who was sitting near me started slipping his backside between the bench and the overhead canvas covering. He was indeed well known on campus, but had not been recognized by military detectives perhaps because he looked like most other students. The soldiers sitting at the back end of the truck did not notice what he was doing. The uphill slope became steeper. The truck had to turn around a corner at a very slow, almost crawling pace. The militant slipped back between the bench and the canvas until his whole body was out of the truck; he then let himself fall back on the pavement like a coiled cat, and merged into the darkness. The SWAT soldiers were parachutists used to jumping with special gear, and now the militant escaped them by jumping without equipment.

The trucks arrived at the military quarters up on the high slopes. The soldiers ordered us to get off and march between two rows of them toward a building, with our hands on the back of our heads. The only book I was carrying was the *Dictionary of Psychology* by English and English, a small brick that looked like *Kortik*, my Russian reader, only twice as thick. I held it behind my head for protection while the soldiers punched, kicked, insulted and derided us.

At the entrance of the building, marked *Teatro*, two soldiers searched us and established our identity. They looked for militants. Two other soldiers sat at a desk and typed the data. A soldier found the two bread rolls that a neighbor had given me, and stuck them into my mouth:

“Keep chewing, and tell me your name,” he ordered while I choked, unable to speak. This made the four soldiers laugh with scornful pleasure. They pushed me into the small theater. All the seats were occupied by prisoners. I sat with many others on the cold tile flooring. The overcrowding made the air warm, stale, smelly. The theater stage was deserted and dark. The action was taking place on the floor.

The militants were brought to an adjoining room. The glass wall-window between them and us showed the interrogation unfolding like a silent film on screen. The sight of that soundproofed room put me in mind of the skeleton closet of the nuns' school of my childhood. I feared, back then, that the nun would lock me up in the closet under the stairs, where there was a skeleton suspended from a rack like a hanged criminal. Now I feared being locked up in the interrogation room.

During the entire night all of us, prisoners, were in fear of being interrogated and tortured. However, at dawn, all of us, except for the militants, were set free. The militants simply "disappeared." What became of them? One could only conjecture. When I left the military quarters on the high slopes, I looked for the neighbor who gave me two bread rolls in the truck, but I never saw him again. Is he a militant? I wondered. "We might be going to the Amazonian jungle," he had said to me. The Amazonian jungle, where he feared being transported, and which might have been his ultimate destination, was to the east of the Andes, on which I stood. But it was hard for me to imagine the Amazonian heat on that chilly morning, when the city huddled under a blanket of mild mist in the valley. I still had my dictionary of psychology, which represented both psychology and language, the subjects of my studies in Quito. I gave it a kiss of thanks for having protected my head.

The military never caught the militant who jumped off the truck and merged into the darkness. According to the stories told on campus, he was the one who had seized the truck belonging to the military geographical institute. He had found it with the door unlocked and the key in the ignition switch while the driver was getting a soft drink. Like most students, I knew that militant's name, or nom de guerre: Julio.

The pre-Columbian, emblematic animal of Ecuador is the condor. The black wings of the condor beat the thin air, rend the clouds asunder, and make the dawn flicker above the peaks. The intense political activity of the 1960s had transformed the Universidad de Quito into a nest of young rebel condors, which perched on the Andes like the city itself. In 1963 president Arosemena was overthrown by a military junta, led by admiral Castro. The junta declared that the coup had been unavoidable because Ecuador was being threatened by the communists. My father's death might have been related to those events. Admiral Castro's military junta was going to rule the country until 1966. The sparks of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, of the one-year-old Vietnam war, of the quest of Che Guevara, the knight-errant who had been fighting in Congo-Kinshasa and then in Bolivia, set 1966 on fire.

Campus was a battlefield. The students fought the establishment with whatever intellectual or physical weapons they could find. Julio's destruction of a military truck was part of this fight. The black military boots pounded campus autonomy, threatening to crush the rebels. The conflict affected the regularity of academic activities, classes could be cancelled, libraries closed. But the old compulsion to succeed, and the regret of my failure in engineering, had started to haunt me again. I must get a scholarship to Europe or North America. So I did not allow fear to keep me from working without respite at any time for the A's that brought the possibilities of scholarships to those continents.

I knew that the support of student representatives, such as my old friend Felipe, who had come to live with us in Manta after his mother had died, made it easier to get a scholarship. I was going to have lunch with him on a Wednesday at 1 P.M., towards the end of the school year. Lunch time on Wednesday was one of the few empty spaces in his busy schedule. I had told Felipe that I wanted to study German and Russian linguistics.

"All I've left in the world is Felipe, and he's already able to work as a farmer," Felipe's father had told Mamá with a mix of resignation and pride when he came to take him from our home to a small banana plantation he had rented, in the early 1950s. "Is it expensive?" Mamá had asked him. "Cheap," the father had answered, "it's just a corner

of the rain forest, mosquitoes attack you as soon as the sun falls below the horizon, but it'll blossom together with my boy, you'll see."

In the early 1950s Felipe's father could not know that the international demand for bananas was about to grow in extraordinary proportions. He could not imagine that he could make enough money to buy the small plantation and a larger, adjoining one, and to send Felipe to a boarding school in Quito. Older than his classmates, coming from a rural region, Felipe had to work as hard at school as he had at the plantation. He never forgot the misery he had experienced, and wanted to contribute to the advancement of society by his own political engagement. He was now in his last year of political science studies and, as a representative of those students who fought for a socialist political system, had started to exert a certain influence in school affairs.

On Wednesday at 12:45 I put my books on a chair by a small corner table, my coat on the adjoining chair, at a new cafeteria, unknown to me until then, and went to wait by the cash register. Amid the student hubbub, the slow minute-hand of the wall clock that I kept watching made me feel lonely and anxious. I was hungry, but the smell of food annoyed me. At 12:55 a thin but muscular man in his late twenties, with straight brown hair and dark glasses, pushed his way between the students, as though they were the vegetation of the rain forest. His powerful physique, smooth movements and easy smile seemed out of place in this academic environment, whose chief strengths were intellectual, not physical:

"Hola, my old friend," he said to me. "Let's get some lunch, find a table and talk about your scholarship in a socialist country."

"I've taken that corner table, see?"

A moment before Felipe's arrival I knew what I wanted –but now, as we started talking, I was not sure I knew it any longer. I did not admit my indecision to him, but Felipe seemed to read it on my face. His high-pitched voice made his encouraging words sound all the more passionate:

"I'm sure you'd succeed in German and Russian linguistics. You'd represent us well in the German Democratic Republic or in the Soviet Union."

Felipe's generous show of confidence gave me a pleasant, warm sensation, which was replaced by cold fear as soon as I realized that the prospect of studying in a socialist

country was becoming possible. I tried in vain to recover the enthusiasm I felt for working on the HOPE. This time I had to choose between disagreeable alternatives. If I went to study in socialist Europe I would become a dissident like Naña, Diego and my father, and I would have to face the consequences. If I did not go I would miss my only chance of studying in Europe, as I had lost the opportunity to construct a good life with Flor. I did not know what to say to Felipe.

“Your confidence flatters me, my friend,” I said, “but do you think they’ll give me a scholarship when they find out that I had a Fulbright last year, and translated on the HOPE the year before that?”

“You want a scholarship or not?” Felipe’s response made me realize that I was disqualifying myself because of fear. I was ashamed.

“I do.” I said in order to hide my fear.

“Never mind the HOPE and the Fulbright. Scholarships are an academic matter, period,” he said. “You’re not engaged in politics, you’re free to accept any scholarship.”

Felipe was firm and reassuring. He helped me overcome my indecision.

“Are you going to help me get one?” I said, dry-mouthed, and could not believe that I had asked for help with so much boldness. He ran his fingers through his hair and adjusted his glasses:

“I will,” he replied with determination.

“How?”

“I’ll recommend you to my fellow representatives at the Student Federation. I’m sure you’ll get one.”

“Well, let’s suppose I get one.” I said. “What if they jail me when I come back?”

“You can’t have your cake and eat it too.” Felipe knew all the right answers. I knew I was going to accept his help, but still, I remained fearful.

“Thank you for recommending me.” I said, in the formal tone I took on every time I feared the consequences of my decisions. My voice sounded strange to me, as if it belonged to someone else.

When Felipe took his leave, I stayed seated and reviewed our conversation in my memory. Some frightening questions came to my mind. They reminded me of the vipers hidden in the ferns brought from the rain forest to Carolina’s garden. The vipers set the

snake-like ferns in the wicker baskets in movement until a neighbor slashed their heads off with his machete. I wished now that I could slash the head off my fears, still the questions kept coming to my mind: Would I be able to have a profession one day if I were to fail at linguistics in a socialist country, after already having failed in engineering in my own? Or, would I be sent to a camp for political prisoners in the Amazonian jungle when I came back? Would my family and friends be afraid to be related to someone who could be a “comrade,” all the more now, after what happened to my father apparently?

But that was all in the future. All I could do for the moment was to wait for the Federation’s decision. When I arrived at this conclusion, I felt relieved. I lingered at the cafeteria, and enjoyed a pleasant odor of incense coming from a half-open window. Where could it be coming from? The breeze must have wafted it up from an open window of a lower floor, where some students could be meditating. When I came into this new cafeteria, unknown to me until then, I had not noticed that the windowpanes were made of stained glass, through which a dim light of different colors was filtering. I had never seen stained-glass windowpanes in cafeterias. I squinted to make sure that what I was seeing was real. Long, hard benches appeared before my mind’s eye through the dim colored light, to replace the cafeteria tables, and brother Enrique, my sixth-class teacher, was kneeling at a prie-Dieu. He got up and said:

“Calm down, someone will come for you without delay. Your parents will not abandon you.”

“My mother will not arrive on time, brother,” I said. “You called her to come for me, but she doesn’t have a car. She must be forcing her way through the riot to get here. I’m old enough to walk home, and have already done it many times.” I said. “May I leave?”

“The brother superior has forbidden to let the students go on their own.” He said.

“But now there’s only my friend, Eduardo, and me left, brother,” I said. “All the others are gone. Eduardo’s father might come on time, but no one will rescue me.” I said in fear. “The shots sound closer and closer. Are we going to get killed?”

“The rioters may want to do harm to us, yet the Lord will not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One,” brother Enrique replied, as though reciting a litany. “We must never lose hope. Let’s pray to the Virgin for help: *Bendita sea tu*

pureza / y eternamente lo sea, / pues todo un Dios se recrea / en tan graciosa belleza./ A ti celestial princesa,/ Virgen sagrada María,/ te ofrezco en este día / alma, vida y corazón. / Mirame con compasión,/ no me dejes madre mía,/ en mi última agonía / sé mi amparo y protección.”

When we finished our prayer, the chapel benches disappeared from my sight. The dim, colored light filtering through stained glass was replaced by clear white light. I looked around for brother Enrique, but all I could see were crowds of students. My brow was wet with perspiration. I wiped myself. A cool, refreshing gust from a window brought a rich perfume of eucalyptus. I wondered how this was possible. There was a eucalyptus grove on campus, but it was too far for its scent to reach this cafeteria...

At 1 P.M. the following Wednesday, seated at the same table, Felipe said with a big smile:

“Did I tell you I was sure you’d get it?”

“I’ll never be able to repay you. Do I get a letter of confirmation?”

“No, we deal with our comrades in secret, your scholarship will be waiting for you at the Union of International Students in Prague, you pay your ticket to Zurich, where you buy another one to Prague. I’ve a meeting in Prague in November, but you’ll be in the Soviet Union or in the German Democratic Republic by then.”

That night my sleep was light and broken. As soon as I fell asleep some frightful scenario made me awake covered in cold sweat. I was being imprisoned, interrogated at the theater of the military quarters, sent to the jungle, bitten by hundreds of vipers. I needed the company of someone I loved. In the morning I rushed down to the coast, to Guayaquil, by bus. Mamá was my only parent –I, her only child.

“Your scholarship makes me so happy and so sad,” she said. “You know what could lie in wait for you on your return home.”

I wished I could tell Mamá that I was more afraid than she was, but I needed to comfort her. I wished I could be as firm and reassuring as Felipe was when he helped me overcome my indecision. The best I could do was to imitate him. I ran my fingers through my hair and said:

“Scholarships are academic, period. I’m not engaged in politics, I’m free to accept any scholarship.”

“All right,” she said with a resigned smile, “Are they paying your ticket?”

“No, I’ll repay you when I start working.”

“They sell on credit.”

Mamá got a ticket to Zurich and borrowed money for the rest of my trip. May drew to its end. The day of my departure arrived. I had many dictionaries and few clothes. While packing I could not stop mumbling my prayers and my German expressions.

June, 1966. A neighbor gave me a ride to the Guayaquil airport. Letting my next of kin see me off at the airport would have been painful. When the car started away from home, my eyes remained fixed on theirs. I could not turn away from them. They became smaller, darker, smaller, merged into the darkness. I tried to smile, but I choked and cried.

While waiting for my flight I looked for a wall clock and fixed my eyes on its minute-hand. It seemed to have stopped. My mind kept trying to push it forward. I wanted to escape from the present moment, from the hubbub of voices, the waves of deodorant, sweat, perfume and tobacco smoke which made me suffocate in my solitude. At 12:55 a dull recording drowned the hubbub and the Muzak:

“All passengers for KLM flight number 7-5-4 for Curaçao, Lisboa, Zürich and Amsterdam please report to gate number two.” The Muzak resumed.

I got the aisle seat of a two-seat row. My fingers, wet with sweat, were skimming over my documents for the third time when I heard a muffled male voice:

“May I...?”

“Please, pass to your seat.”

A short thin man took a seat next to me. From a distance he would have looked Spanish but, at close range, his cheek bones and reddish-brown skin gave him a distinctive native appearance. I thought the guy was wearing clothes that were too warm for the northern summer, as I did when I left for Fayetteville. This memory made me nostalgic, or sad, or angry...I did not know, which. It sent me back to the shop window of that Houston mirror store where I saw in the mirrors different expressions of my face at the same time, and I could not know which one corresponded to my real feelings. I felt like crying, and the cigarette smoke, deodorant, perfume, loud words and laughter around me made it worse. The only way to run away from it all was to look through the window. We flew at low altitude. The weather was nice, but what I needed was the company of those I had left at home. Trying to forget about them, I turned to my neighbor.

“What a never-ending succession of trees, eh?” I said to him.

“Yes,” he said with an expressionless face.

"You see those deep holes in the forest, and houses standing on the bottom of the holes? I pressed on.

"Yes, so what?"

"Why, it seems like the houses could be pulled out of their holes by the smoke strings that climb from their kitchens... You look sad."

"First time I've left home."

"You play chess?"

"I do."

"I can ask the hostess for a chess-set."

"Okay."

Talking to the guy felt like dragging a wheelless cart full of rocks over rough concrete.

"Nice small carboard set," I said. "Let's go... What's your name?"

"Federico."

"Take the whites, go. Where are you flying?"

"Prague."

"Me too, the girl allotting the seats must've thought we'd like to sit next to each other, we're both going to Prague."

"Possible."

"A scholarship is waiting for you at the Union of International Students?"

"Uh-huh."

During the fourteen-hour flight to Zurich, with stops in Curaçao and Lisbon, I tried from time to time to start up a conversation with Federico. He was as tight-lipped as any of his chessmen. Eventually I gave up trying to make him speak. When the plane touched down in Zurich, I sighed with relief. We had to get off, and take a Czechoslovak Airlines flight to Prague the following day.

We went through customs. The officer, for reasons of security, perhaps, seemed to check if we spoke German, my minor at the Universidad de Quito:

"Wie lange möchten ihr beide in der Schweiz bleiben?"

"Less than twenty-four hours."

"Ihr brauchen kein Visum."

"Thanks, we know we don't need visas."

Federico spoke no foreign languages. I told him what was going on. Our airfare included a twenty-four-hour stay at a hotel. Someone showed us to the bus. While we waited for it Federico's eyes seemed to search for something.

"You look worried," I said.

"Thieves." His eyes kept sweeping the bus stop.

"Where do you live in Guayaquil?"

"Five Corners."

"Rough neighborhood."

I did not enjoy my one-day stopover in Zurich. My mind was already in Prague. I kept bracing myself for our arrival in that city without any confirmation of our scholarships. Federico remained hidden in silence, as though on guard against some threat unknown to me. At 1 P.M. the next day we boarded a Czechoslovak Airlines plane bound for Prague. We flew at low altitude, nice weather, a good pretext to start a conversation.

"This never-ending succession of dwellings looks like a single happy town, eh Madam?" I said to an English-speaking woman in her forties, who gave me a look as if I were an innocent child:

"Don't you believe it, a war could start at any moment in this area, we could find a heap of rubble instead of Prague."

"Well, warmongers would be dead too."

"No, they live far from the curtain."

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are entering the Czechoslovak People's Republic," our captain announced. Our plane had torn through the invisible fabric made of fear and hate. I looked through the window: nothing had changed in the landscape.

A robust customs officer in his fifties questioned us in English, stressing the first syllable of every word. I would later learn that, in Czech, stress is always fixed to the first syllable:

"What you intend to do in Czechoslovakia, why you don't have return tickets?"

"We got scholarships for Eastern Europe, we're not going back," I answered.

“Eastern Europe is big place, why Prague?”

“They told us to come here.”

“Show scholarships.”

“They’re waiting for us at the Union of International Students.”

“This is customs,” the officer said. He removed his gray cap with his left hand, scratched the crown of his head with the right, seemingly as lost as I was. He turned to someone sitting in the back of the room, looked something up in a book that resembled a telephone directory, made a phone call, then returned to us:

“You have no scholarships. I have to deport you.”

My worst fears were confirmed. Deportation. Prison on arrival in Ecuador. An expensive ticket to pay on credit for nothing. I imagined Federico did not need to understand English to realize our predicament, but I still explained it to him, just to make sure.

“What’s your problem?” he retorted, “I have no problem.” His eyes had gone out of focus. His words conveyed a strange, hostile aloofness. I had the impression that he was denying reality, and that I must take charge. I turned to the customs officer:

“Sir, could you put me in contact with the Union, please?”

“All right, hurry up, it’s 3:45, they close at 4,” he said, with a mixture of sympathy and impatience.

I explained our situation to the Union representative, and she said in Spanish:

“I realize your predicament, come to see me –Jana, J-a-n-a— tomorrow morning at 9. Write down the address: 5 Vocolova, V-o-c-e-l-o-v-a street. Now let me talk to the officer.”

After talking to her he said, smiling:

“I give you visas for twenty-four hours, and show you to bus.”

A middle-aged man, with salt-and-pepper hair, took a seat beside us. Beneath the slanted sunbeams reflecting on his glasses, his sharp gaze seemed to scrutinize us. But something told me that this was a kind man who could understand our predicament.

“Hello, my name is Karel,” he introduced himself in English.

“Nice meeting you for the second time,” I said, “I saw you up there, I’m glad you speak English. Are you Czech?”

“Czech architect back from a congress in the West. I couldn’t have done that without English.”

“But German remains better known than English here, as I understand it.”

“It does. Prague was, at different times, the capital of the German Holy Roman Empire, part of Austro-Hungary, and of a German protectorate during World War II. Did you know that Kafka and Freud were Czech Jews, but wrote in German?”

“Thank you for telling me.”

I had thought people from socialist countries could not travel to the West and back so easily. This man could be from the secret service, too. I knew I was not a spy, but I did not know about Federico. Be that as it may, I turned to the man:

“Could you help us get our bearings in the city?”

“My pleasure. You’ll love my beautiful Prague.”

If Prague was beautiful, why had the airport road fallen into disrepair? Were the authorities building a moat to isolate the city? My first view of the Prague Castle on the river Vltava, the largest ancient castle in the world, as Karel told us, proved that a humble road can lead to splendor. In the green exuberance of June the castle sprouted from the high hill on which it stood, while at the foot of the hill Charles Bridge, with its thirty statues and statuary, linked one side of the city to the other, as it had in the past the East to the West. Karel was right, one had to love his beautiful Prague.

“We have twenty-four-hour visas and an appointment at the Union of International Students tomorrow,” I told Karel at the downtown terminal, to show I was not hiding anything. “We need a cheap hostel.”

“Show me the Union address...5 Vokelova. The best place for you is the dormitory by the Strahov stadium.”

“And the cheapest way to get there?”

“Trolleybus 176 to the dormitory and back, people will show you the way to Vokelova, a few blocks from here.”

“We need a map, Czech money and bus tickets.”

“Let’s go to that restaurant first.”

“We can’t afford a restaurant.”

"We're not going to eat," he said, looking surprised that I could not comprehend the situation.

At the restaurant, he beckoned to a waiter and turned to us:

"Give me a few dollars," he whispered with a blank face. I gave him a five-dollar bill, he palmed it off to the waiter, the waiter disappeared, reappeared, put something into Karel's hand, and he passed it back to me.

"Four times the official rate," Karel whispered.

Professional magicians could not have surpassed Karel and the waiter in the art of sleight-of-hand. I had given Karel a five-dollar bill and received in Czech korunas the equivalent of a twenty-dollar bill. The state had lost fifteen dollars. We got maps of Prague from a display unit, trolleybus tickets at a newstand.

"Come to see me when you can," Karel said as he handed me his card, after writing "5 Vocelova" and "Strachov" on it. He had either forgotten we might be gone tomorrow, or knew we would not.

It seemed to me that every important place found itself high on a hill in Prague; first the Prague Castle, now the dormitory by the Strahov stadium. Our trolleybus broke down during the climb. But the view of the city that we got from that altitude while carrying our baggage was a fair compensation for the inconvenience.

"Welcome to the cold north," a Latin American student who lived in Strahov greeted us. "Are you afraid of the coming winter?" The words "coming winter" sounded like another century to me, as I knew I might be gone tomorrow.

"I'm afraid of thieves," Federico retorted.

"We're among friends." I interfered before the guy could reply, and after that nothing else was said. I managed to avoid a brewing quarrel, but I felt displeased. Why did I have to stick up for Federico? Or was it for myself that I did it? I needed to breathe, escape to the open air. I went outside, chose one of several paths, and followed it as fast as I could. It was getting dark, a growing shadow kept blackening the ground. I looked up and saw a gray colossus that made me feel like a dwarf: *Velký Strahovský Stadion*, the Great Strahov Stadium.

In the shadow of the giant I felt small and vulnerable. The frightening questions that beset me back in Quito, after Felipe had promised to recommend me to his fellow representatives, returned again. Prison and death seemed imminent for a moment. Yet I did not submit to fear and arrived at the same conclusion I did there. All I could do for the moment was wait for the Union of International Students' decision concerning our visas and scholarships. I stopped worrying and enjoyed the view of the site of the Spartakiads. Ecuadorian student representatives, who had been invited to watch the mass gymnastics displays, had told me about them with enthusiasm. But now, instead of thousands of gymnasts in the sun, darkness filled the stadium. I sprinted to a deserted four-hundred-meter track and started jogging around it.

I noticed that part of the darkness moved along the track ahead of me like a gliding shadow. It hovered around the track, faster than I could run, caught up with me, and went beyond. I recognized him at that moment. Yes, it was him, the athlete I admired the most of all those I had seen in the newsreels in motion-picture theaters at home. He had won the five and ten thousand meters and the marathon at the Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952. He had been thirty years old at that time, and he looked unchanged now, in 1966. I saw the same face, contorted as if in terrible pain; his head moved back and forth and seemed to be out of control; arms held high, as if to clutch at his heart after having been stabbed. An expression of pain crossed his face, as if he were to drop to the ground, felled by a mortal wound.

Journalists called Emil Zátopek the "Beast of Prague," because of his strange way of running. I called him Spartakus, after the gladiator who became the leader of the slave uprising against Rome. To me, Zátopek was a reincarnation of Spartakus. Zátopek's expressions of excruciating pain showed how much Spartakus suffered in the struggle for freedom.

That night I saw in my dreams thousands of gladiators fighting for freedom. Zátopek's pain was on all their faces. Their leader's face kept changing: now it was Spartakus's, now Karl Marx's, now Mao Tse-tung's, and now Che Guevara's. They were fighting their way to freedom along an endless corridor bordered on the one side by an invisible curtain made of fear and hate and, on the other, by a great wall.

The next morning at 9 we met Jana at 5 Vocolova. She was nicer looking in person than she sounded on the phone, and a few years older than we were; intelligent, athletic, smelling of plain soap: no fancy cosmetics. Her fresh smell stood in contrast with the stale air of the old office crammed with papers:

“I’ve found your documents,” she said in Spanish. “They weren’t processed correctly. I’ve started making requests, but vacation time is approaching. I can’t promise anything.”

“But we have no visas or the means to wait,” I said, worried.

“I’ll get you one-week visa extensions, and refer you to a state-owned hotel, free of charge. You’ll get free meal-tickets for the hotel restaurant, for one week.”

All the hotels in the country were state-owned and filled with tourists, but unlike the latter we paid for our meals with tickets instead of money. I felt rich with my roll of one-by-one-half-inch tickets, colored yellow, blue and red, for each of the day’s meals. But I was embarrassed and felt like a second-class guest when tourists saw me paying with those tickets.

A number of Latin American students referred by the Union stayed at the hotel. They invited us to a meeting where they discussed the most effective ways to get scholarships for the universities in the socialist countries. In the middle of the discussion Federico, who had not said a word until then, suddenly pointed at me:

“Don’t listen to him!” he exclaimed. “He’s not a communist!”

I started with the same fear of rejection I had had since childhood. I wondered how Federico knew what I did not know myself. To my relief, the others exchanged meaningful glances, which showed they had understood that Federico, for some reason, just wanted them to ostracize me, and they stared him then out of countenance. He seemed disconcerted, and returned to his usual silence. I wondered if Federico had attacked me because he was a secret agent, but I could not imagine what good my exclusion could do to any political cause.

A week went by, with no scholarship in sight. Jana got a new visa for us and transferred us to the Florida –a foreign-student hostel, a few blocks from 5 Vocolova. I got a room with two others on the fourth floor. Federico was on the second, good riddance. For the first time I felt like a refugee, not a foreign student with a scholarship. Unlike the hotels where tourists remained for only a few days, the Florida was like a government asylum where foreign students could stay for indefinite periods of time. Jana was begging different countries for scholarships but, charity being voluntary, she could not guarantee that I would get one. One more misery added itself to my fears of failure, imprisonment and death. Waiting at the Florida for a scholarship felt like being confined and abandoned in a limbo.

The night following our last meeting with Jana my sleep was light and broken. As soon as I fell asleep, some frightful scenario made me awake in a cold sweat. I was imprisoned, interrogated at the theater of the military quarters, sent to the jungle, bitten by hundreds of vipers, and abandoned forever. The following night I tried to read myself to sleep with my German and Russian handbooks. I could not concentrate. Unrewarded work is senseless. Another Latin American student, who was also waiting for a scholarship, seemed to have the solution to my insomnia:

“These Czech stories translated into Spanish are great sleeping pills,” he said with a chuckle. A story about a guy named Gregor who becomes an insect did help me fall asleep, but it gave me bad dreams, too. I became afraid to awake one morning from uneasy dreams and also find myself transformed in my bed into a gigantic insect. I needed the company of people I knew. In the morning I rushed down to the reception desk, and asked whether there were other Ecuadorians staying at the Florida.

“*Hola monito*,” hi little monkey, a guy who also stood by the desk said to me. People from the Andes call those from the coast in this way. The guy’s Amerindian eyes, nose, mouth and body contrasted with his light skin and dark-blond, curly hair.

“You’re from the coasht, eh?” he said with his Andean accent.

“Yesh.”

“Do you like the name of the hoshtel?”

“Shounds Shpanish.”

“Ha-ha, shtop making fun of my accent.”

“You arrived here before me, who lives here?”

“Students, political exiles.”

“Waiting for scholarships?”

“Most, the others take advantage of the cold war just to have fun.”

Three days later, Gabriel, the Andean guy, and I were roaming downtown and found ourselves in need of some Czech money. I went into a restaurant on *Václavské náměstí*, Wenceslas Square, the heart of Prague, beckoned to a waiter, as Karel had done once, put on a blank face, palmed off a few dollars to the waiter—who disappeared at once, then reappeared, and gave me back in korunas four times the official rate.

“Hey, you know how to use the black market!” Gabriel said. “Who taught you?”

“The day I arrived in Prague a Czech man took me to a restaurant where a waiter gave me, through that man, the equivalent of twenty dollars for a five-dollar bill.”

“That waiter probably works for the government. That’s one of the ways to collect the hard currency necessary to buy high technology in the West.”

Gabriel and I went to a food kiosk and bought steamed white sausages with mustard, brown bread and beer. Considering our predicament, this was an extravagance paid for by the black market. A Latino activist and his assistant, visiting the city, all expenses paid by the Union, joined us.

“Prague girls are so pretty,” the activist said to his aide. “Could you get me a hooker?” His fellow went for a walk around Wenceslas Square. Hookers, whose clothes and general appearance did not really differ from those of average strollers, smiled and made eyes at men in discrete ways to offer their services. Within fifteen minutes the activist’s fellow returned in the company of a good-looking, auburn-haired woman in her twenties. She greeted us all with the professionalism of an agent of public relations, and left with the activist.

“Remember what I said about taking advantage of the cold war to have fun?”

Gabriel whispered to me.

“Is that another way to collect the hard currency necessary to buy high technology in the West?”

“May well be.”

I waited for a scholarship as I did, in childhood, wait for someone to rescue me during a riot in Guayaquil. I needed something meaningful to fill my inner emptiness. On fine evenings, Gabriel and I sat on the steps of the National Museum on Wenceslas Square, which teemed with tourists. Like anglers sitting on a riverbank, we fished for pretty girls. On one such evening I lured the girls in with brochures of famous people who had lived in Prague.

“What great scientist, your fellow countryman, taught at Charles University?” I quizzed a girl from Dresden.

“Beethoven? Just joking, I don’t know. Who was it?” She said with a roguish smile.

“Einstein, of course.”

“Uh-huh...yeah...he was...German.”

“You don’t look sure.”

“No!...yes!...Do you ask all girls such difficult questions?”

“Well, sit closer to me and I’ll explore *your* question.”

“So that’s your little game, du Schwein.”

She came to sit very close to me, and filled my cold emptiness with her warmth. I felt her head clinging to mine, her arms, her legs, her feet intertwined with mine. Our voices and breathing blended into a single one, and our eyes could only see our eyes. Around her blue irises I saw a fine ring as dark as her pupils, and I felt that my soul entered through her pupils into her soul. We moved to a recess at the top of the steps, where darkness tucked us in. Her irises became black, her shining teeth framed her restless tongue, until a young-woman’s voice undid the darkness:

“*So da bist du ja!*” “So that’s where you are!” the voice said to the girl who was with me.

“Was is den los?” the girl answered.

“You don’t know what’s going on? We’re twenty-five minutes late, *los!*” “hurry up.”

“*Augenblick mal!*” “Just a second!” I’m writing my address.”

“Wait!” my inner voice cried, but no sound came from my mouth.

“*Tschüs!*” “Bye-bye!” The girl disappeared into her bus. The bus became smaller, darker, smaller, merged into the darkness. Rooted to the ground, I fell asleep. Emptiness again replaced the warmth that the girl had brought to me.

The next afternoon I did not feel like eating at our cafeteria, the only one where my meal-tickets were valid. Gabriel knew what to do:

“Go to any cafeteria and stand in line with a two-crown coin concealed in your hand.” He said in the natural tone of an expert. “Hand the coin surreptitiously, instead of a ticket, to the woman serving the main course. She’ll drop it into her apron pocket. You don’t need a ticket or money for the rest of the meal.”

“Her fellow workers don’t blow the whistle?”

“They share.”

Sleight of hand came in handy at the cafeteria, too, just as it did in the black market. In the weeks that followed I learned how bribery and the black market “corrected the flaws of the system,” as some Czechs would say. They argued this helped them survive during World War II, and save the Hradcany Castle and Royal City, the Gothic Cathedral, Charles Bridge and the National Gallery –the monuments at the basis of their national identity. Klement, the bald, stocky Florida clerk in his fifties, gave me his version of how this happened:

“Well, if I could get fine cigarettes, chocolate or alcohol in the black market I could bribe the Germans. They pretended not to see that I had sausages hidden in my coat, instead of shooting me. Sometimes I got them pretty girls.”

“I can understand that, but how about the monuments?”

“Same thing, on a large scale. Go to Warsaw. They still haven’t finished the reconstruction of the city. The Germans demolished it.”

“Karel is not the only magician in Prague, present or past.”

“What you talking about?”

“Nothing.”

I learned, too, that the administration of the Florida tolerated the drunken orgies of Latino socialist playboys, who shouted *viva la revolución*, glorifying the revolution that they wanted to make in their countries, while reveling with their Czech chums

thousands of miles from home. Most such Latinos had influential political connections. They called themselves socialists or communists, but their participation in the social struggle was as fictive as that of my Salvadorian friend Manuel and other Latin American students in the U.S., who called themselves capitalists.

One of those nights, when my sleep was light and broken, I had a dream that brought back an ominous memory. As soon as I fell asleep I could hear the tapping sound of a blue beetle and the voice of Diego's old cook telling me: "When the blue beetle makes a sound like tap-tap-tap, that's an evil omen, but if you crush the beetle nothing will happen." In despair I searched for the beetle all around me –until I woke up in a cold sweat, and wondered if something evil was going to happen to me.

Early in the morning I rushed down to the reception desk. Klement looked worried:

"You must report to the Union with the other Latinos," he said shaking his *Rudé Právo*, Red Law, newspaper he had been reading.

"Where are they?"

"Gone, hurry up, they must be waiting for you." His light blue eyes had become almost colorless.

"Why?"

"Because of the fucking drunken brawl."

"What?"

"Federico was partying last night, noticed that his money had disappeared, called the police and told them. The cops made all the revelers strip and found the money in Federico's shorts."

"Five Corners."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Anyway, when the cops left, Gabriel beat Federico, others took part in the brawl, the cops returned...Now hurry up, go!" he yelled, and pitched his *Rudé Právo* at me. Poor Klement was not responsible for what happened in the hostel but, while rushing toward the Union, I wondered how the administration of the Florida was going to explain their tolerance of wild reveling to the police.

The hardwood drummed and creaked under Jana's low heels as she paced the space behind her desk back and forth. The sound of her heels reminded me the rapid tap-tap-tap of Naña's low heels on the hardwood when I was a young child, and she would come back home running when I fell sick. The tapping of Jana's heels made me feel better in my present sickness –my fear of deportation. As soon as she spotted me, the last one to arrive, she exclaimed with restrained anger:

"We're considering your deportation."

I was dumbfounded for a moment; then I recovered speech, ran my fingers through my hair, and assumed an attitude of authority, as I imagined my friend Felipe would have done.

"Federico comes from a rough neighborhood," I said. "When he couldn't find his money he thought he'd been robbed, the brawl was inevitable, he needs time to change his ways..." This, surprisingly, helped me argue our way out of the jam. Jana showed some understanding:

"Federico's behavior sparked off the brawl, but all participants are responsible for it. I know that some of you come from underprivileged sectors of capitalist society, and that this has to be taken into account when judging your behavior," she said, starting to calm down. "Still, we expect you to endeavor to respect the rules of our institutions."

All of a sudden, one of the Latinos, a fainthearted guy, broke into nervous laughter. This was too much for Jana.

"I'm trying to help you and you laugh at me, you..." she cried out in indignation.

"You know this guy," I told her. "He was scared to death, and when he felt the worst was over, he laughed because of the relief he felt."

We rode out the storm. Jana put us all on probation. I had taken my dream of the blue beetle to be a bad omen, but nothing truly evil happened to me. I wondered if my active participation in the meeting was an equivalent of sorts of killing the beetle. I did not know the answer to that question, but I felt relieved and took a deep breath for the first time since I got up in the morning. The only trace of uneasiness that I felt had to do with my being unable to learn from past experience. I had spent all that effort to save the others in spite of the bad time Federico had given me while I was trying to help him. Why did I not just tell Jana that I had not been at the party –and thus spared myself the

worry? But I was too tired to think straight. I had better return to my bed to make up for last night's restlessness.

As I approached the main entrance to leave the building I saw my fellow Latinos. They had gathered down there after the meeting and continued the discussion. I searched for another exit with my eyes, so as to avoid them –and I saw a strange beam of light coming from a dark corner of the lobby. I squinted and discovered that my very own person was standing in front of me, staring at me in bewilderment. Sudden cold made me shiver. I observed, too, that my double was surrounded by black frame decorated with golden owls and bats. That explained the gleam against the dark background: I had been staring at a mirror. I made to leave the building, then stopped. My double in the mirror kept staring at me with great intensity. I then recalled that a friend's father had rescued me during a riot in Guayaquil. That was why I kept trying to save others. I saw a sincere smile, very much my own, on my double's visage, and heard Gabriel calling my name.

"So here's where you've been hiding," he said. We left the building and walked back to the Florida.

"I'm grateful to Jana," I told him on our way back. "I feel certain affection for her."

"Affection? I wouldn't kick her out of my bed, would you?"

"I'm faithful to the girl from Dresden that I met by the National Museum," I joked, chuckling. In fact, I had never seen her again, and there was nothing between her and me.

"Come on, you're not even writing to each other anymore."

"She's not leaving her boyfriend."

"See? She makes sense. So, would you kick Jana out of your bed?"

"Is it possible to kick the law out of your bed?"

"Okay, okay, forget Jana, she's not within our reach anyway. How about Daniela, the one who works at the hostel's laundry?"

"You like her, eh?"

"Like her? I would eat her up. She's tall and slender, but everything in her is rounded and delicate."

“And she’s six years older than we are, and works at the hostel. Haven’t we had enough problems, Gabriel? Remember, we’re all on probation.”

“Be honest, Daniela likes you and you like her, but you fear trouble.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“I’d risk deportation for her, you lucky dog. I saw her blinking her long eyelashes at you the other day. She told you something I didn’t understand, what was it?”

“Gabriel wants to go with me, but I want to go with you.”

“Shit, okay, I’ll take Martina, she wants me, they’re alone in the laundry on Thursday.” Martina was Daniela’s fellow worker.

On Thursday afternoon Gabriel and I pretended we were going out for a walk, and reentered the building through the back door. A warm white mist smelling of cleanliness wafted through the open laundry door. We heard Daniela and Martina’s voices. I felt torn between desire and fear. Gabriel realized how I felt, and he pushed me across the doorsill with a snicker.

The women’s clothes were as white, gauzy and airy as the mist inside. Daniela sat on a table by the heap of snowy blankets. Martina approached Daniela as though going to tell her a secret, but all of a sudden she turned to me:

“Guck mal! Look!” Martina slid her right hand like a snake between Daniela’s thighs up to the crotch and pulled. Daniela screeched with pain and lust. Martina laughed:

“Siehst du? No panties.”

Like a bull in rut, Gabriel charged Martina from behind, and took her to a large table in the back of the laundry. The warm mist vibrated with their moaning and laughing. Daniela and I made a mattress with the heap of blankets, and blended into a single being. Fear and reality were replaced by a pure delight that was independent from space and time. I relived my first experience with Flor, when she took my hand and made me stroke her smooth thighs, leading me closer and closer to where her legs forked. Once again my body became a ball of light, and my light made Flor glow all over. When reality returned I realized I had made love to Daniela, not Flor... I enjoyed the silent whiteness that surrounded us like clouds on a summer’s day.

“Strange,” Daniela said returning to full consciousness. “Not a sound coming from them.”

“They’re gone.”

“Working hours, she can’t leave.”

Daniela went to take a closer look, then beckoned to me. An eight-limbed creature was snoring and breaking wind in its makeshift bed.

“Let’s wake them up and tidy up, there’s catch-up work to do.”

“That’s okay with me, we could do it every Thursday.”

“We won’t do it anymore.”

“That’s how unlucky I am: the greatest love I’ve ever had, and now it’s all over...Is it all over, Daniela?” I asked, dejected.

“I mean, doing it here is madness. Come to my place next time.”

Slanted sunbeams brightened every detail of Daniela’s little apartment, her own figure and the flowers she kept in small pots wherever sunlight could reach them. The otherwise invisible specks of dust whirled like microstars inside the sunbeams. Colorful potpourris filled small jars. Daniela’s motley rag dolls and cushions were in sharp contrast with the whiteness of the Florida laundry. The rag dolls brought back the tender, sad memories of Flor. They lasted a fraction of a second, until I saw an athlete smiling at me from a wall.

“My husband. Handsome, isn’t he? He’ll be here in half an hour,” Daniela said, her eyes playful.

“Goodbye, then.”

“Come on, he defected in sixty-one.”

“How?”

“He was a pharmacy student and a weight lifter, defected during a competition in France.”

“He knew any political secrets?”

“He knew how to use drugs to win medals.”

When I returned to the Florida, I heard a familiar throat-clearing behind me. I turned round. The face matched the sound. Julio, the rebel who had burned the military truck at the Universidad de Quito had arrived from Ecuador. He kept clearing his throat as though getting ready to make a speech. Unlike my Salvadorian friend Manuel, who dreamed of high economic development, and told me in Fayetteville that “catching up is an imperative duty,” Julio fought for social equality and justice. The most probable cause of their different political stances was their different social standings: Manuel was white and rich and Julio native and poor. Their social position was one of the consequences of the oppression in which the natives had lived for centuries.

“Welcome, Julio. Shopping for a perfect society in Czechoslovakia?” I joked. To a committed political activist like Julio, “shopping” belonged to the “depraved jargon of capitalism,” it could never be associated with “a perfect society.”

“Here or anywhere I’ll try it before I buy it,” he replied, throwing back at me the jargon he despised.

“Would you try the Chinese Cultural Revolution if you had a chance?”

“Sure.”

The ongoing ideological conflict between the Chinese and European communists was the talk of the Latino student community. Che Guevara sided with the Chinese, and Julio with Che. In December 1964 Che had delivered his “Colonialism is doomed” speech before the United Nations in New York. Now he was in Africa, engaged in revolutionary activities. Just like Martin Luther King, Che, and Manuel, Julio had a dream. All I longed for was that people could talk to one another and reach a better mutual understanding.

Julio showed no hesitation to take part in the conflict between the Chinese and European communists.

“I don’t care if I were to lose my scholarship in socialist Europe because of my participation in the Cultural Revolution.”

“Gabriel and I attend the Chinese embassy’s information evenings. Do you want to come with us?”

“I can’t wait to enjoy the revolutionary austerity of the embassy,” he said, clearing his throat.

A few days later Julio, Gabriel and I attended the Chinese embassy’s information evening. Mythological woodcarvings, the Long March on long canvas, sketches of Máo Tse-tūng’s golden visage projected from a ruby background, decorated the walls. It was not my first visit to the embassy, yet the Chinese music and scents still impressed me so that they flooded my body and my mind. Máo’s little red books, *Quotations from Chairman Máo Tse-tūng*, were the same size, five-by-four-inches, as my *Kortik* (The Dagger) –the book Mrs. Kravchuk used to teach me Russian. All piled up in a disorderly heap in a large box, the little red books seemed to have a life of their own, like bees in a hive. My eyes were fixed on them, while my mind was trying to guess whether some enemy was setting the European communists against the Chinese so that they ended by annihilating one another.

We watched two short films that evening, which glorified *The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*.

“A Czech communist told me that what Mao wants is to rid China of its ‘liberal bourgeoisie’ elements, and to continue the revolutionary class struggle.” Gabriel said to us. “Máo tries in this way to regain control of the party, after the disastrous *Great Leap Forward* that led to a significant loss of his power to rivals Liú Shào-qí and Dèng Xiǎo-píng.”

A banquet followed the documentaries. The tables were laden with vegetables and fruits carved in the shape of flowering plants. The exquisite aromas of meat, fish, pasta and rice completed the artistic composition presented by the haute cuisine. Won-ton and dim-sum, all that I knew about the Chinese food, would have appeared poor if placed amid such splendor.

“They know we’re tired of cafeterias and hanker after their delicacies,” Gabriel whispered to Julio, who was astonished to find himself so far from the revolutionary austerity he had expected.

“Brainwashing,” I whispered to them. “Transference of our craving for their cuisine to Máo.”

The refined, tall, robust officials, women and men, did not resemble the contemptuous caricatures of the “starving, ignorant Chinese masses” drawn in the West. With an elegant gesture, an official I had not seen in earlier information evenings offered me in English his calling card printed in Chinese and Roman characters:

“**外交官** Wài Jiāo-guān,” he said running his forefinger over the Roman.

“Why you won?” I tried to imitate.

“Good!” he grinned, “Did you like the films, comrade?”

“The singing and marching were remarkable,” I said. I tried to be polite and avoid discussing the destruction of historical reserves, artifacts and sites of interest thought to be at the root of “old ways of thinking” by the Red Guards.

“Capitalism has the upper hand over us right now, but we shall catch up, overtake it, and send it to rest in the books of history,” he said, as though reciting a litany, while his keen eyes scrutinized my reaction.

“I look forward to the disappearance of poverty in the world,” I said, imitating his tone.

“Would you like to see on site how our Revolution is accomplishing that end, comrade?” he said without changing his tone. His invitation made me instantly re-experience the inner conflict that I had had to deal with back in Quito, when the prospect of studying in a socialist country started to seem real. I wanted to witness the Cultural Revolution, but I feared the consequences of doing so. I recalled the worried expression of our Fayetteville janitor when he told me “We’re at war with China.” The official’s scrutinizing gaze remained fixed on me. I was dumbfounded for a moment, unable to respond. A tap on my right shoulder interrupted my train of thought.

“What are you talking about?” Julio, who did not speak English, asked me. His eyes glowed, anticipating adventure.

“The official asked me if I wanted to see on site how they’re making poverty disappear.”

“He’s inviting you. Are you going?”

“No.”

“Tell him I’ll go if he invites me.”

“I know you will, but don’t you still need time to think about it?”

“Action is more productive than reflection, I’m willing to go against all risks, you can’t have your cake and eat it too.” That’s what Felipe told me, too, I recalled. Julio’s eyes were not focused on me, but rather on some faraway place. His smile was one of someone who had lost contact with reality. Is he seeing the burning military truck? I wondered. Or is he beholding some distant perfect society?

“Okay, Julio,” I said, “I’ll do that for you.”

I did not think Wǎi Jiāo-guān understood what we were saying, but he seemed to comprehend Julio’s excitement.

“Your friend would like to be invited?” he asked avidly.

“Yes, he wants to go.”

“Tell him we’ll be delighted to oblige,” he said, without asking me again if I wanted to see the Revolution from up-close. I did not know him, but I felt certain he knew well who we were. As though speaking from memory, as he had before, he added.

“The translator will tell your friend how to get an official invitation, a visa and a free ticket.”

The translator then gave Julio the card of an official named Gōng Wù-yuán, who was to pick him up at the Florida, and drive him to the airport when his documents were ready. The procedure took two weeks. When everything was in order, Gōng Wù-yuán called on Julio’s room early one morning. I saw them off at the entrance. Klement, the hostel clerk, shook his head, long-faced, down in the mouth.

Two weeks passed after Julio’s departure without news of him; the revolutionary dragon seemed to have gulped him down. I intended to talk to Wǎi Jiāo-guān at the next information evening, but the Embassy had not announced any in the days ahead. I made to call Wǎi Jiāo-guān, then stopped short. Their phones must be tapped, I thought. I decided to wait another week. When the week went by I did take the risk. Hesitant, I had dialed one, two, three digits when I suddenly heard the familiar throat-clearing behind me. I turned round; the face matched the sound. Julio was back from China.

The stories he told gave the impression he might have returned from hell. His stories sounded absurd and improbable, but he kept swearing they were true:

“The Red Guards don’t respect anything from the past, there are no old people left.”

“Why?”

“They’ve killed them.”

“Come now! The Chinese venerate their elders.”

“I swear it’s true! The Red Guards piss on the monuments of their national heroes, and burn whole libraries! Alexandria is repeating itself! And they’re not the only mean ones: parents don’t permit their daughters to socialize with foreign guys!”

“But you were a guest of their government.”

“Didn’t matter. People still think foreigners are evil, they looked at me as some exotic animal.”

“But with your hair and eyes you resemble them a little, no?”

“Made no difference.”

“Well, I asked you if you needed a period of reflection.”

“I don’t regret it, in China or anywhere I’ll try it before I buy it, as I once told you.”

Julio was nowhere to be found in the few following days, but I came across him at a cafeteria after a week. From a distance, he seemed immersed in deep meditation: Rodin’s *LePenseur* sitting on a chair. His hand supported his head, he gazed at his borscht as though the solutions to his problems were dissolved in the red liquid.

I came over, he looked at my feet, then looked up.

“Hola,” he said with sadness.

“What’s up, Julio?”

“You mean what’s down.”

“What’s down, Julio?”

“I’m down, can’t you see it?” he said, clearing his throat, “I got a one-year suspension from studies.”

“I thought you weren’t afraid of that, anyway...What are you going to do?”

“Stuff myself with sweetness. Yuck! Unskilled labor at a chocolate factory.”

Upon my arrival I got a twenty-four-hour visa extended first to one week, then two, three...With every week that passed in anticipation of a scholarship the beginning of the

school year became closer, and my discouragement grew deeper. Time after time Jana would say to me.

“Sorry, no offers.”

His influential acquaintances helped Gabriel to get a scholarship to the German Democratic Republic. He left for Dresden on August 5. I would have liked him to visit the girl from Dresden whom I had met on the steps of the National Museum, but some silly jealousy kept me from asking him to do it. I did not feel anything for her...or did I, without my knowledge? I would have liked to spend more time with Julio, yet I avoided him, for his low spirits deepened my own melancholy. I would have liked to call Karel, but I would have had to make excuses for disregarding his initial invitation. I did not know who he was, but something told me he knew well my present situation. Federico had been shipped back to his Five Corners. Jana hinted to me that they had suspected him of being an anti-communist agitator. He was lucky they sent him home with all expenses paid, instead of putting him in prison. I did not believe their suspicion was justified. I thought he provoked his deportation so he could blame others for it, and return home with all expenses paid.

By the end of the second week of August the Florida was almost empty. The few who kept finding difficulties with getting scholarships redoubled their use of influential acquaintances. The last one left on August 31. I kept thinking of asking Felipe for help, but I did not believe he had the power necessary to influence the process. Lacking connections, I was stranded in the deserted hostel. The frightening questions that flooded my mind in Quito after Felipe had promised to recommend me to his fellow representatives, returned again. Failure...prison...death seemed imminent for a moment. In Quito, I did not submit to fear. In a moment of sudden illumination I understood that my fear was not part of my present reality, but rather of an illusory future. All I could do for the moment was wait for the Federation's decision. When I arrived at that conclusion, I felt relieved. Now I tried to recover that feeling, but that was hard to do. I could no longer convince myself.

The once dreaded future was now, and it was different from what I had imagined. I had braced myself to be beaten by material woes, not by the emptiness of heart in the dark. I paced the floors up and down, searching for people in the abandoned rooms, as I

had looked for Inés, Alonso and Felipe back in childhood. Little by little I had realized then that Inés and Alonso were dead, and Felipe was gone with his father. I had felt chest pain and spat, at one moment, and was disappointed not to see any pus or blood in my saliva.

While pacing the lifeless Florida halls I noticed, as I had at the Strahov Stadium, that part of the darkness, instead of remaining immobile, moved along the corridors ahead of me—a gliding shadow. That shadow kept hovering along the corridors until it found itself close to me and then went beyond me. At that moment I discerned in it some human forms. I had the clear impression that those who had inhabited these rooms were in that gliding shadow, and that they had come back to accompany me. I was rejoiced to see them again, but as soon as I realized that what I was seeing could not be real, they disappeared and left me as lonesome and dejected as before. Emptiness filled the entire space once again, and I ran to the staircase to escape it. Daniela helped me keep my spirits up, but when I returned to the Florida, the darkness surrounded me again. Fearing I was going insane, I wrote a letter to Mamá:

“...I’ve failed, please, send me a ticket, I’ll repay you once I start working...”

With difficulty my hand signed the letter and put it in my pocket. My feet shuffled along toward the nearby post office. I was surprised to see that night fell in the middle of the day. Had the moon come between the sun and the earth? I had not heard anyone say a solar eclipse was imminent. And even if this was an eclipse, why were people’s faces and hands becoming transparent, to the point that I could see their fluorescent bones and their flashing, bloodstained teeth? And why did the paving stones move up and down as piano keys? Could it be they were playing a funeral hymn? Why was there so much gloom all around me?

I could not understand or believe all this was in fact going on. All of a sudden, an outflow of blue sulfuric flames, ash, vapors and stifling gas ripped the piano keys apart, and a naked goddess emerged. It was Flor, my Valdivian goddess, a life-size version of Diego’s and Señora Isabel’s ceramic figurines. Flor brandished a weapon and I had instantly the clear sense she was slashing at the vipers of my mind. My letter was torn and burnt up in the flames. Flor disappeared. The flames became smaller, smaller, faded from sight, the stifling gas dissipated, daylight returned. People, the paving stones,

everything looked normal once more. I sat exhausted on the curb, beginning to feel hope again.

Another month and a half went by. A few leaves still clung to their branches the morning Klement, the hostel clerk, suddenly told me:

“Jana has left a message for you.”

“Deportation?”

“Sarcasm? Are you so tired of waiting you can only make taunting remarks? Jana said you’re to meet a representative at a Charles University cafeteria, at this address. You’re to wait for the representative by the tea faucets on Wednesday at 1 P.M.”

“German? Soviet?”

“I don’t know.”

I reviewed my German and Russian handbooks, to be prepared for the meeting. On Wednesday, at 12:45, I put my books on a chair by a small corner table, my coat on the adjoining chair, and went to wait by the tea faucets. I looked for a wall clock, and fixed my eyes on its minute-hand. My mind tried to push it forward. At 12:55, a thin but muscular man in his late twenties, with straight brown hair and dark glasses, squeezed his way through the throng of students, as through the vegetation in the rain forest. His powerful physique, easy movements and bright smile seemed out of place in this environment:

“Hola, my old friend,” he said in a high-pitched voice. Felipe? I could not understand or believe it was in fact him standing in front of me. In a trembling voice I asked:

“You’re the representative Jana wanted me to meet here?”

“I’ll explain everything to you. Let’s get some tea, find a table, and talk about your scholarship in a socialist country.”

“I’ve taken that corner table, see?” I said, my heart beating rapidly.

While we were sipping our proletarian, faucet tea, Felipe ran his fingers through his hair, adjusted his glasses, assumed an attitude of authority.

“I told you I’d have a meeting of representatives in Prague in November? At that Union meeting, Jana blamed our Federation for your predicament, which obviously is

their fault,” he said firmly. “The Polish representative heard this and, appalled, offered you a scholarship. I know that would change your plans completely –but, would you like to study in Poland?”

“Yes!”

When Felipe left for the International Student Union, I remained seated for a while, reviewing our conversation in my memory. The frightening questions that came to my mind every time I thought about the future returned again: failure...prison...death...I could not flee from those thoughts in my own mind, I had to face my future: would I be able to have a profession one day if I failed at linguistics in a socialist country, after having failed at engineering in my own? Would I be sent to a political prisoners’ camp in the Amazonian jungle when I go back? Would my family and friends be afraid to be related to someone who could be a “comrade,” all the more so after what it had been conjectured happened to my father?

That was all in the future. All I could do for the moment was go to Poland and start studying. When I arrived at this decision I felt relieved, and enjoyed the pleasant odor of incense coming from a half-open window. Where could it be coming from? The breeze must have wafted it up from an open window of a lower floor, where some students could be meditating. I noticed that the windows in the cafeteria, one I had never been in before, were made of stained-glass, through which a dim light of a mix of colors was filtering. I squinted to make sure what I was seeing was real. Long, hard benches appeared through the dim colored light, instead of the cafeteria tables. Brother Enrique, the teacher in my last year of elementary school, was kneeling at a prie-Dieu. He got up and said:

“Calm down, someone will come for you without delay. Your parents will not abandon you.”

“My mother will not arrive on time, brother,” I said. “You called her to come for me, but she doesn’t have a car. She must be forcing her way through the riot to get here. I’m old enough to walk home, and have already done it many times.” I said. “May I leave?”

“The brother superior has forbidden to let the students go on their own.” He said.

“But now there’s only my friend, Eduardo, and me left, brother,” I said. “All the others are gone. Eduardo’s father might come on time, but no one will rescue me.” I said in fear. “The shots sound closer and closer. Are we going to get killed?”

“The rioters may want to do harm to us, yet the Lord will not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One,” brother Enrique replied, as though reciting a litany. “We must never lose hope. Let’s pray to the Virgin for help: *Bendita sea tu pureza / y eternamente lo sea, / pues todo un Dios se recrea / en tan graciosa belleza. / A ti celestial princesa, / Virgen sagrada María, / te ofrezco en este día / alma, vida y corazón. / Mirame con compasión, / no me dejes madre mía, / en mi última agonía / sé mi amparo y protección.*”

All of a sudden, a door creaked open to reveal a thickset, stern-faced, balding man who said in a hoarse, anxious voice:

“Eduardo, hurry up, let’s run to the car and get out of here before it’s too late!”

“Could we take my friend with us? He lives a few blocks from us.”

“Do you want to come with us?”

“Yes!”

Now that I had been rescued once more by my friend’s father, in my mind, I returned to the Charles University cafeteria where I had just met with Felipe. The dim colored light filtering through stained glass was replaced by clear white light. The specks of dust whirled like microstars inside the sunbeams coming through a window. I noticed that my head was wet with perspiration. I wiped myself. A cool gust from the window refreshed me.

My friend’s father and the Polish student representative had played similar roles in my life. When I was rescued in childhood I started to understand how politics affect every one of us. Now again, politics had made possible an important change in my life. It was thanks to politics that I could study at a European university.

It was mid-November, 1966. At the Union, Jana congratulated me. I thanked her and said:

“I’m happy and worried at the same time. I’ll have to catch up with a class that has been studying the Polish language for two and a half months. This is mid-November, Jana.”

“November in Polish is *listopad*, the month of falling leaves,” she said. “The trees take off their foliage gown and get ready for the winter battle. Your winter battle will be against time, fight it like a tree.”

The day of my departure for Lodz, Poland, arrived. I had many dictionaries and few clothes. While packing, I could not stop mumbling my prayers and my German and Russian expressions. With a loud jolt, the train bound for Lodz departed from Prague’s Main Railway Station. The friction of the train’s wheels against the rails chanted: *list-o-pad, list-o-pad, list-o-pad*... Yes, I thought, *listopad* means “falling leaves,” and a leaf in Russian, English, German and Spanish is also a sheet of paper, with a page on each side. In the fiction of my life some leaves have already fallen, I’m turning over a new one... *list-o-pad, list-o-pad, list-o-pad*, the wheels kept chanting.

The End