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From *El baño turco*
(Buenos Aires: Urania, 1997)
Translations by author.

Three fragments

1.

Vaginas and Butterflies

"Without worship you shrink"
Peter Shaffer

1-Maria

I don't remember anything about my parents. Nothing at all. They told me that they were beautiful and happy. That they took care of me until I was five, when the accident took place. In my lethargic memory they are just balloons made of heat, faded stains.

However, I remember clearly the first night I spent in my aunt's house. That dark mansion from the underworld where I vegetated for seven years, a magic number that changes fate and luck. The high grey ceiling, the huge windows, the blinds always down, preventing the view of the garden, somber and neglected. My aunt and cousin lived isolated from the world, in a distant neighbourhood that was difficult to reach, in a mysterious world where they would tell me stories that never added up

I loved my cousin from that very first night we shared in the old house. Knowing that I would move in, she wept tears of happiness until dawn. Until then, on the few occasions she had visited us, I couldn't imagine how gloomy her existence was. My uncle, the sailor, made sporadic, dramatic appearances twice a year. The rest of the time we assumed him to be travelling around exotic places, from where he would bring all sorts of presents. The parcels he gave us contained expensive but completely pedestrian objects. No oriental statues or bizarre chests smelling of saltpeter appeared before our eyes when tearing the wrapping. During his short stay my aunt would serve dinner in the dining-room, whose access was normally forbidden to my cousin and me. She would lay the long and rectangular table and seat us next to her, like shields. We would have dinner at candlelight and my uncle would narrate stories of his travels. When at last I broke into the attic and lit its contents I understood the basis for all those absurd adventures. The shelves were crammed with books about pirates, travellers and explorers. Only my uncle wasn't a good storyteller; he mixed up the memories of so many aged pages to make up incoherent versions. As incoherent, I would discover later, as his own story, as the life that was slipping through his hands, powerlessly.

I was christened Maria by my parents before they disappeared from the surface of the earth, and from my foggy memory. Maria, the one that saved the world, preserving her purity. If the name is truly what identifies and contains us, I was doomed from the start. A name that spelled virginity and self-sacrifice. A name that blended thousands of women around the

world, women that carried the same seal. Could I aspire to heroism, adventure, experience, with such a name? Until I became a grown-up I had such a notion of obedience that the simple fact of changing my name never crossed my mind. Exchange it, deform it, make it up, adapt it to my ideal, create it from scratch, inherit it from the women I admired in my readings, christen myself in fact, as placing in me the origin of my whole story. Impossible, I was part of a genealogy and a tradition, I had to carry it through my entire childhood and adolescence, hearing inexorably the resound of its connotations, like a magic Tarot card, The Virgin. I had no choice but to fulfill my destiny. Until seventeen I was Maria, and I wrapped myself in the mystical character, believing that in exchange for my devotion supernatural powers would grow inside me. Of course I was wrong. The only supernatural powers were inside my head.

Life turned tangible when I moved with my aunt and cousin. My cousin Luz became the sister I had never had. Although we were the same age, I took her under my wing. We chatted in the darkness, our voices pierced the pitch dark space between our beds. Now I'm amazed at our candor, our power to play down the seriousness of things. My aunt was strict with her and tried being so with me but, unlike Luz, what she said slid off my skin. I remained silent and pretended to listen, but my mind was lost in secret hidings.

Everything got tangled when I trespassed the limits of the strictest rules. The door of the attic was a mystery for Luz and me; my aunt never allowed us in. One night, the day I turned eight, equipped with a box of matches, I announced to Luz my intention of going up. She tried to dissuade me, with tears that were real. I wasn't moved. I left her terrorized in her bed and climbed silently the creaking steps. I didn't know what fear was yet, I didn't know guilt, the eye of sin. That was when I found all those books, piled up and covered in dust. My subsequent existence became divided into drowsy days and nights of exorbitant reading. I didn't have fun with Luz any more, I had crossed the frontier and it was as if millennia separated us. She never complained of my neglecting her, but I heard her weep when I got out of bed to climb and to read.



Literature nourished me for years as sacred, ever-replenished bread. It opened my eyes to everything I hadn't seen, what I had before my eyes and what was beyond the walls of my aunt's rusty house. It gave me a taste for dangerous ambition, boundless heroism, of adventure as the one and only way to live life. Until I started my religious education I didn't know fear and so I still didn't suffer the split that would mark my existence like an ocean. As time went by, armed with a neurotic conscience and a need to see everything as a line, a chronological and causal line, I believe literature sprouted in me the notion of sin, the necessity of sin as the vanishing point, the escape from the sadness of a dull life. It was a sentence, in any case? Either I would end up as my cousin, who underwent my aunt's experiment- lots of religion, no literature—and lived placidly and mediocrily without knowing it; or as myself, unsatisfied for ever.

The truth is that I shut myself up to read and the dirty reality faded away for a couple of hours. Then I based on my readings the genealogy that would make me a pirate or a detective. Despite knowing what my aunt told me about my parents- two university professors- I made up stories where they had been explorers or scientists or travellers and had died for a fair, noble cause and I felt proud making deals with myself, deals that were like blank cheques that would condition me for ever.

My cousin would receive the crumbs of my adventures, but even then she would settle for things and lack curiosity at all, I never heard her complain. I would tell her the stories I read, brushing up its versions until they pleased me completely, I fulfilled my calling as a storyteller, which even today lies buried under countless disguises. Like the serial stories from

other centuries, I would cut the stories in the most exciting part and make my cousin suffer through the manipulative talent that is given by having the power of words. When years later I had to keep silent to complete my education, I would choke at night and didn't know the reason.

Despite the hints I would get from Luz's behaviour, I never gave in to her lack of will. Until the day I decided to run away. It was the crucial test that showed how far she was from my ambitions. Also it was what shaped my aunt's resolution that would cut my future in two.

I've said my aunt was harsh. After one of my uncle's ghostly apparitions, she got worse. I was about to be thirteen and, undiscovered, had digested hundreds of novels of adventure, biographies of heroes and travellers. I was stuffed with borrowed courage. In the first months of that year my aunt showed a gigantic calling of arrogance and grudge. She didn't even let us go out for a walk and we had to work hard to leave the house spotlessly clean, day after day.

Even if Luz hadn't told me, I knew she was in love with the boy who lived across the street. Not that they had spoken or anything, it was one of those platonic love affairs which can be perpetuated endlessly and single-handedly when you haven't dealt with men before. A simple look, a gesture is interpreted as complicity. I had noticed that when we went to the bakery at the corner, we always passed him by. At first I thought it by chance. Then I studied Luz's movements and discovered there existed a complicity, though tacit and full of question marks. Then, when my aunt got driven by her frenzy for revenge, we were no longer allowed to go out. I saw Luz worn-out, trying to hold back her tears, which flooded her inside.

Another event added up so that the thirst for justice I had learnt from my readings burst. My aunt started suffering from insomnia and would get up at all hours to walk around the house like a ghost. In one of her errands she discovered the light coming from the attic and wanted to know what was going on. The scene that took place after her triumphal entry was fatidic. We yelled other and said everything we had thought of each other for those seven years. Until I stated something that hit the nail on the head. I said that I knew why my uncle hadn't turned up again, that he had run away with another woman because he didn't stand her any more. I saw my aunt's face turning livid. She fell silent and left and I knew I had put my finger on it.

The next day, at breakfast, she announced coolly that I would attend a boarding school as soon as classes began. I would live and study there and only come home for the holidays. Luz had a nervous breakdown and begged for me as I had never seen her begged for anything. But I was too proud to apologize and, like the heroes of my readings, I accepted my fate stoically.

However, during the night I changed my mind. I would try to run away. I planned my escape as my favourite characters would have. I didn't address my aunt during that time. Finally, the big day arrived. I hadn't shared this with Luz because, unintentionally, she would give me away. In spite of my secluded existence, I was able to feature fear as the predominant feeling in Luz. The night before the escape I had regrets. I watched her in her sleep, the eyelids shaking by who knows what new nightmare and for a second imagined her life at her mother's hands. Then I woke her up and told her my plan. She agreed, still drowsy, and I went to bed convinced that everything would work out, as in fiction.

It still remained a long day of confinement to go ahead with the plan. First thing in the morning I gave Luz instructions for her luggage. I was puzzled at not recognizing the feelings I expected: gratitude and excitement towards the real world. Instead I saw her frightened to death and frantic. Her nerves were so on edge that my aunt must have realized something was going on.

In the afternoon, I lost sight of her. Aunt had called her to help her clean one of the guest rooms- in vain because no-one was using it- and I felt lucky to be able to rest before the adventure.

I didn't see Luz again, my aunt locked me up in a room with no windows and left me there for the rest of the holidays, getting me food when she felt like it. In those days of sudden prison I first despaired and finally I developed a gift for patience. I knew my aunt had hassled her till extirpating the truth and I was furious. In time I understood that Luz was unconsciously dying to be discovered. She was in dire straits. She admired me and wanted to leave with me. But she wasn't strong enough to make the leap. In the endless hours of meditation that I lived that summer I remembered Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Tom used to say, made to choose between an adventure and a pie, Huck wouldn't hesitate in keeping the pie whereas he would choose the adventure without giving it a second thought. That definition would come up in my mind in the most unexpected times and places , but would still be my motto in the end, when I had grasped its true meaning.



The night before the beginning of the classes, my aunt took me out of my confinement so I would have dinner with Luz. I knew she was making an excuse for my cousin, I saw it reflected on her pale, worn-out face. She didn't seem the same. During dinner, my aunt uttered hardly any word, she simply watched me. Luz told me stories from the holidays sieved through my aunt's censorship, encoded so that I would understand and complete them in my mind. The farewell was very sad. My aunt didn't let us spend the night in the same room, judging by Luz's expression, I guessed this time she would run away with me if I asked her.

I was woken up when it was still dark. My aunt forced me into a cold, distressing bath and gave me immaculate clothes and a suitcase with the least belongings. Luz got up in her nightgown and clung to my neck with only one arm. Soon I understood that she was holding a parcel in the other hand. I managed to smuggle it under my coat until I was on the train and sought refuge in the toilet to open it: it was the dog-eared edition of The adventures of Tom Sawyer that I had read so many times. That proof of courage reconciled my flagging spirit with Luz's, in spite of the differences that would always separate us.

The train ride with my watch-dog-aunt was fresh air for me. I was moving away from the gloomy house where I had spent seven years of my life and a summer locked up in a tiny room. As my aunt yawned or read the newspaper I amused myself with my own thoughts.

When we got off the train, the sight of the school didn't succeed in scaring me . It was a rectangle painted in white lime, outlined in the horizon. Besides the train station and some scattered houses there was only the desert, wind and dust. My aunt wanted to take me by the arm but I wouldn't let her. We walked with determined steps towards the entrance of the school, a wooden gate that seemed to divide two universes. My aunt used the lion-shaped knocker. A nun with a boring look led us through a well-tended garden to the headmistress' office. But for our shallow breath, it was as if we were in a fish tank, such was the silence.

Mother Superior would terrorize anybody. A hair-net made her hair invisible, highlighting her plump, tense features. She didn't speak more than was necessary and her look infused submission. She didn't like when I didn't look away. Then it was time for the farewell. For a minute I thought my aunt was hesitating and held my breath. But her face hardened, she gave me a quick kiss on the forehead and went away. A skinny nun showed me to my next dwelling.



The nun that escorted me didn't open her mouth in the entire way. We went through tiled, empty hallways. She would suddenly stop and breath out raggedly, hoarsely. Reaching the end of a row of blind doors, she pushed me into a room and closed the door gently. I still can smell the damp concentrated in there. White walls, dark wooden beams on the ceiling, a tiny window next to it. A rudimentary bed with rough sheets, a rickety chair and two bare shelves.

I was relieved to verify that the door hadn't been locked. Relief, though, was short-lived. Where could I escape in that remote spot of the earth, surrounded by nothing? For the first time I lost heart. Determined not to shed a tear I examined with a blurred vision the cold tiled floor and I managed to climb onto the chair to look through the skylight. The view took my breath away, a yard full of trees, a fountain whose trickle was only heard by straining my ear, a black figure kneeling, with extended arms, in front of a statue erected in the middle of an opening, its head hidden by branches.

A period of darkness followed. Huge, extraordinary nights, colder and colder days, filled with silence. I was dazzled by the effigies in the chapel. Statues of saints dressed in old clothes and real hair that would make me shiver. And those gestures, those mouths that seemed about to speak, to tell me why they had ended up like that, suffering... the long and tiled aisle of the church, which we followed every morning to take a seat on the stiff pews.

As I hadn't had my Communion, they kept me isolated from the rest while they were imparting the catechism to me. There was no physical pressure, it was a gentle torment that enticed me to believe, trust in a simple world of catalogues and orders. An alphabet of sin and a list of rewards in the other world. It was so easy and beautiful. You could feel heroic just by refraining from hating, fornicating, stealing or questioning the truth. It was a paradise of certitude. At mass I would see the other pupils, submissive and immovable. It didn't feel wrong to become a model of chastity. Hadn't the Virgin been chosen? I started to believe that my baptism name held an encoded destiny. I thought that nothing that had happened had been by chance. I felt redeemed.

I spent the rest of my life wondering what had driven me to get entangled in such a contradictory doctrine. Even at that age, I should have suspected of the whys never answered and of the absurd syllogisms. I'm more and more convinced that what really dragged me into it was the opportunity of surrendering to an absolute power, invisible and superior. A shelter that would protect me from the weaknesses and perversions that I had glimpsed in my night reading hours, in my adrenaline-fed yearning to follow the steps of my favourite characters.

Religion injected unknown feelings in me, fibers that were grafted in my deep being for ever. Like fear. The fear of abominable white eyes that would confront, as long as I lived, curiosity and adventure, that would face battle until taking away the taste of everything else. And paranoia. The divine paranoia of feeling the eye-that-sees-everything for ever examining and judging my actions. The eye as a remote control inserted somewhere in that wild land that was inside me, but with which I refused to live.

Two episodes induced me to a mystical delirium, even before communion. The first was the fasting I was forced to for almost four days: just bread and water. My body was a mass of raw flesh, blazing before my eyes and making demands like a being independent of my will. My saliva turned green and I urinated violet. All my being was boiling, sensitive to the influence of any element. I wasn't able to determine what was the outside and what the inside, the skin would not divide the world from my soul any more, everything became mixed up in an endless painful universe.

In that state I witnessed an apparition. It was night and I couldn't sleep. I was so overexcited that I couldn't even lie in bed and draw the beams of the ceiling in my mind. Not

even walking barefooted succeeded in calming me down. At last I climbed onto the feeble table and, as the first day, observed the garden of my vision, the one to which I resorted when all my patience abandoned me. I forgot it was night. I could see nothing. It was a divine call, what else. I escaped silently from the room and ran still barefooted through the hallways that were like in my nightmares, empty and endless. Finally I found the gate that led to the yard. I slid among the low branches of the trees and sensed the sour smell of jasmines. Then I spotted the light, it was wrapping my body and turned it blue. I approached it like a robot: it was the Virgin, beaming a wealth of virtue. I didn't endure it and rushed back to my room, suddenly aware of my frozen feet.

I woke up with a high temperature and the nuns fed me and soothed me to make me forget my vision. When I was strong enough to go for a walk, the Mother Superior took me to the garden where I swore I had witnessed the miracle. I covered my eyes not to see the place that would be empty in the yellow sunlight of La Pampa. The nun took the hands off my face firmly. In front of me a gigantic statue of the Virgin rose. It glows in the dark, she explained to me plainly. I went back to my room and had a fever for another two weeks. My body recovered the grasp of reality and I saw its contour separate me from the sheets, the furniture and the rest of the world, protecting me.

However, something was indented in me for ever, the capacity given by fear and uncontrolled passion to experiment reality with your whole body, about to burst. In the edge of insanity.



I discovered in me a sinister will to obey, to be part of something else. My literary world was devastated for lack of use, I was dried up and, what's worse, alone. By the time I joined the others, my spirit of adventure was bent, I wanted to be another one, actually, the best. Having tasted margins, revelry, I didn't have any other choice but to try submission, seduce those above me with the tamest, most servile attitude.

With a bowed head I came in the chapel that winter morning to receive communion. My body and mind bewildered by sickness and fever, my senses sluggish, my notion of duty filling my entire mind. I wasn't dressed in white, I was wearing a greyish tunic that blended with the skin of my hands, clasped together. When sitting down I noticed that others sat beside me. They varied in age and complexions, none of them showed the amount of respect I considered appropriate. I immediately felt all the eyes on me, I knew I was the only one ready for the big leap.

Enraptured in my own thoughts, I didn't realize the moment to approach the altar and receive the host had come. One of the nuns led me by the shoulder. I was the last in line. The body and blood of Christ, said the priest, his big blue eyes staring at my half-opened mouth. Amen, I whispered, my whole body shaking. The body of Christ, the body and blood, the blood of Christ, the voice continued resounding in my ears until I was in my cell, still licking the aftertaste of wine that remained in the roof of my mouth.

The next day I was led to the classroom and joined other twenty pupils, some of whom I recognized as communion mates. I sat isolated from the rest, I felt darkly pure and empty.



The classroom was somber and icy. It had a low ceiling and colonial bars in the windows. Through the tangled drawings of the irons I could see one of the yards. I sat next to the window, at the back, and spent the class hours watching my classmates. What I felt was a mixture of envy and despise, but the latter would prevail, tainting my intentions and communication with them.

I was interested particularly in a group commanded by a short brunette, whose deep voice didn't allow any retort. They were a dozen at the most, but they were the centre of praise or attack of the teachers. For some they were brilliant, for others, wrinkles in need of ironing. They plotted secret games and stocked codes to avoid being contaminated by the undesired.

From my privileged angle, I would ponder continually without reaching a decision. In this way the first months passed. However, my questions remained unanswered. What did they do in the hours they disappeared? Did they trespass the walls of the school? How did they get accomplices to avoid being given away? The effect of mystery in my routine-driven life started to displace slowly the mysticism that tied me and I rescued some of my adventurous soul.

One day I finally satisfied my thirst. It was extremely hot, the kind of dry heat that invades the pampa when the summer is getting close. Discipline was relaxed because of national issues, elections, education budget, disputes with the Church. Those words didn't mean a thing for us, but on practice they became hours of idleness, when we could sneak out at will.

That midday became endless. I was going to the showers to freshen up. I found the door locked from the inside and placing my ear on the wooden door I heard muffled giggles. I bent till my eyes pierced through the keyhole. What I saw took my breath away. My classmates, the ones sharing the privilege of being members of the select group, were lying in different postures on mattresses and gym benches. They were completely naked and must be coming from the showers, considering her moist, flushed skins. They were chatting in a low voice and giggling. Their softened faces were gleaming. I watched one of them stroking another's head, her long hair resting between her legs. It wasn't about sex or eroticism, it was so natural, they were so concentrated on what they were talking about- I knew even though I couldn't elucidate any words- that the body rubs seemed just condiments. I stayed kneeling in the hall, a towel in my hand, watching avidly through the keyhole, risking being found and punished, until I saw them move languidly and start covering their innocently lustful bodies. I ran to my room and lying on the bed, restless for the first time since my communion, I felt a tinge of envy and wanted to give them away. To distil my grudge for not belonging, being always lonely, satellite or centre but on my own, an only part spinning uneasily. I wasn't happy, the delusions of leadership should be confirmed by the cheering audience to become real.

Nothing was ever the same again. My dreams of virginity and saint-mary-who-are-in-heaven were covered in holes until being held only a skeleton, a skinless, fleshless frame.

It was the beginning of the era of the conscience. After learning from books and mysterious ideologies, I finally faced the living, the material and tangible.



From that afternoon I searched the way to be part of what I had seen, I didn't want just to be a witness through the keyhole, I wanted to belong there. My desire to accomplish that was so strong that it paralyzed me the moment I was about to make contact with any member of the sect.

On the other hand, my progress in obedience subdued the nuns that taught us and soon I had the honour of taking the goblet that contained the hosts to the altar. I should walk along the slow aisle of the chapel with steady hands.

It was Sunday mass. The pews were crowded. The priest, only shaman in that tribe of sexless but incandescent women, stood in front of us with her blood-coloured tunic. I made my way to the room where the goblet was kept, opened the secret cavity with the golden key and held it in my fingers. I walked tall towards the altar, but before the stares of the congregation –and of the priest-man who didn't look away from my hands- I started shrinking until I was an insect kneeled down before the insatiable god. I handed the goblet hastily, ran

along the aisle and sobbing sought refuge in the slender, pale blonde that I had seen naked in the showers. My head sank in her warm lap. I felt her fingertips stroking my hair spread over her. The ethereal god that I had swallowed skillfully smashed into pieces for ever. I had been accepted.

That same night I received surreptitiously the invitation to my “baptism”.



I must say it wasn't easy to go back to the real world, to fall in it after being in a cloister for five years. The promised holidays at home never existed, my aunt would find an excuse to postpone them indefinitely. My letters to Luz were censored, so we almost wrote in code. That's how I learnt about the romances and hopes frustrated by her mother, who, having learnt from her experience with me, sharpened her claws so that Luz wouldn't escape. How she did it I will never know, I was absent during the adolescent period in which definite personality is developed and somewhere along the line a link in the chain was lost. What I remembered about my cousin didn't prepare me for what I found when I came back from school.

Graduation took place in the rusty yard where I had believed to receive the visit of the Virgin. I immediately spotted my aunt, sat among the visitors, but I couldn't find Luz.

The farewell speech was insipid and the monotonous voice of the nun reciting it created a hypnotic effect. I found myself going back to the past, trying to weave the thread of my life before school to connect it to what was coming next. I didn't succeed. Those empty five years had provided me with an uterine refuge where to live numbly, devoid of the necessary reflexes to survive in the outside. I felt my muscles stiffen. Compared to my childhood fantasies, my pious dreams of eternity seemed bad translations of sentimental novels.

When the act finished I looked for Luz and finally saw her, clung to the arm of a good-looking boy, barely older than her. I guessed it was her boyfriend because of the intimacy with which they addressed each other. Then I focused on Luz's face while she was approaching me among the people, waving desperately.

I stopped as if struck by lightning. Luz looked pale and her once lively pupils were small black spots, fixed and muddy. Then she saw me and cheered up. She let go of her companion's arm and pushed her way to fall in my arms. We didn't speak, just verified that we weren't who we used to be. The distress of that realization held on to me. I couldn't imagine any anchor ready to save me from the immense tide.



2- Eva

I thought that finishing school and going back to the city would turn out to be a liberation, but I just went from one jail to another.

My aunt's house kept being the damp, dark cave of my childhood. There were some changes in her attitude and in my cousin's, changes that didn't take long in proving sinister. Luz's will, never strong, was completely bent. Her obedience to my aunt didn't involve submission but a perverse game with fear. Used to her mother's pronouncing judgment on what was right and what was wrong, and to her choosing for her, my cousin was terrified of taking her life on her hands and running the risk. Somehow I had learnt the same at school, maybe pride saved me from a common fate.

However, my reflexes were so numb for being locked up that I couldn't pluck up courage to leave. Meanwhile, the anger of seeing and listening to my cousin so tamed built up in me like an extremely dangerous poison.

My aunt insisted on me studying. Luz would start going to college to become a Geography teacher in march, the summer went by sticky and excessively slow and I didn't seem to reach a decision.

Perla, my friend from school, is to whom I owe my salvation. What would I have done if I had gone on with that attitude, soaked in my family's parasitic spirits? I would probably have become one of them.

Perla called me one morning to tell me she had a job in a publishing house, that they offered a position as an assistant and asked if I wanted it. I said yes and spent a day and a half trying on my cousin's clothes and learning to look like an adult. I didn't have any trouble in getting the job. It was a publishing house in San Telmo neighbourhood, near the river. Just the possibility to escape home every morning and see Perla was enough to balance the small salary. Slowly, my pale complexion recovered its colour and I started to discover, with borrowed eyes, the reality in front of me.



Nobody noticed me at first. I lived in the shadow of Perla and felt grateful for being far away from my aunt's house. Then I became independent and turned into Eva.

My boss, who up to then communicated with me through his secretary, popped his head round the door one morning and addressed me. He didn't remember my name-as nobody else did-and after looking up and down at me ended up by asking. I lifted my head and in a flash of inspiration I said "Eva".

It was past six in the empty office and I couldn't understand what had driven me to lie. Neither could Perla but she restrained from questioning me. I walked home savouring my new name. And I was Eva for a long time, behind my aunt and cousin's back and my official life. I inaugurated a double life.



It might be said that I learnt to be Eva through Perla. Once exposed to the surface of everyday life, our relationship changed, even though it was her who adapted to the changes.

At first I couldn't ignore the ranks learnt at school. Perla was the slim blonde I had discovered naked through the keyhole. She was also the one that had sheltered me when I ran from the altar and sought refuge in her lap. That action decided my admission in the group that gathered behind the authorities' back. I couldn't either forget our sessions at candlelight, in damp desolate corners of the convent, where we drank alcohol and sang invented songs, which were senseless gusts of poetry.

Perla and I became inseparable, she had a firm but subtle influence that made me feel honour to obey. After my useless search of a higher, divine power that protected me from myself, she was a worldly being that I was able to touch and smell and in whom I had a blind faith.



Why would my aunt be so emphatic about compulsory chastity in the same perverse and suspicious way that the nuns from school? Together with my education to be Eva, I studied my aunt's sermons and Luz's reactions. And I filled up with hate at seeing her crushed under my aunt's commands. What was the purpose of being pure and stainless? To save oneself for the right man? To wait to walk down the aisle and swear "for ever"? if she put so much emphasis on sex, some crucial meridian must cross it.

Then I decided to be like one of the girls Philip Marlow liked, a girl loaded with sin. Perla laughed when I told her, but was willing to teach me the things she had always known, for some magic reason maybe.

From that moment on I would sit in her bed-sitter and wouldn't avert my eyes from her while the preparation ritual before going out lasted. Perla had a bath and talked to me from the tub, floating in bubbles, while I toyed with her cigarettes sitting on the toilet lid. Then, wrapped in her ochre robe, she spread lotions and make-up on her body. She tried several outfits before making a decision and her preference for colours varied according to the period of the month.

At last she saw herself in the mirror as she wanted and with a sigh of satisfaction she was ready to charm her man. Her boyfriends, as the colours also varied per week and in a few months she had become Marlow's ideal girl. And my infinite envy.

I stayed most Saturday nights at her flat after she had gone out and rehearsed the steps of the ritual down to the last detail. However, something in my attitude made my condition of candid virgin transparent.

Finally the big day came and Perla asked me to go out with her current boyfriend and a friend. I won't describe the sorrows of an arranged first date, I'll just say that the one who was for me didn't speak about anything else but football and television and also had a sad look. Nothing that agreed with my ambition for erotic experiences.

Monday morning I woke up outraged and fierce, my aunt made matters worse with her sermons about college education and Luz was submerged in her perfect amebic personality. I escaped as soon as I could and reached work an hour before the rest of the staff. It was cold and I stayed in my boss' office snooping around his desk. I was at it when the cleaner came in. When I saw his skin gleaming with sweat I confirmed my intuition. I approached him shrugging off my coat and started to unbutton my shirt with enough speed to hide the tremor of my hands. He left the household cleaners, locked the door and knocked me down the desk. He penetrated me as limpidly and silently as I wanted and went away without even a goodbye kiss.

That morning my euphoric joy baffled Perla, who still thought about the weekend failure, and my punctuality in the following months was a question mark nobody managed to answer. Until the end of the affair I didn't trust my secret to Perla, I wanted to know if it showed in my eyes, in the movements of my hand- once childish- and in my body now profaned.



It's necessary to be involved in the ritual, the courtship ceremony. Learn the symbolic language that lies underneath the gestures and acts of men. Many times you start by getting sick with paranoia and doubting until determining what's the meaning of a phone call, a non-phone call, an idiom, an unanswered question. At first I accepted the legend of the rescued woman, at the service of others and expecting their needs. Any rebuff, any outburst of spontaneous passion might cause estrangement or loss.

After my sudden, calculated initiation, I passed through many men's lives, trying to take them and forget them, collect them to gain experience. I wanted to load myself with sin, be Eva in my very essence. I wanted above all to look like an experienced woman. I surrendered to the riskiest adventures. Whenever I doubted, I would cast a look on the people I lived with. A lonely, resentful woman, tied to a unilateral oath of fidelity; and the other one, allowing herself to be chained to a monotonous, servile life, a life without surprises or excitement, predictable to the smallest detail. That would be enough for me to go on.

I was simply attentive to looks and gestures. I learnt to observe without being noticed, to catch the other's attention while they were speaking, to brush the other's bodies just enough to encode a message.

I was drawn by casual adventures and it didn't take me a long time to complete the education I wished so much: in Buenos Aires men always want to have sex. In the most ridiculous places and situations and many times even breaking the moral laws made by themselves.

At night I held endless telephone conversations with Perla. I told her every intimate detail. As I didn't like to lie to her, I tried that my dates were truly exciting. I had to use my imagination. Once learnt the model, the ceremony of seduction might become cyclic and routine. I invented situations that would force us to redesign the stages.

Meanwhile, my telephone conversations fed my aunt's anger and Luz's hopelessness, which grew little by little face to what was going on. Until now I've never wondered why they simply didn't cut off the line, or get a gadget to prevent me from dialling. Now I think that maybe one of them, or both, listened to my words and got seduced by the thread of the story.

Perla didn't stop asking me why I insisted on living there and invited me once and again to move in with her. Her flat was big enough for both of us and we could share the expenses. But she wouldn't understand that, for my revenge to be full and successful, my aunt and cousin must witness the entire process of my getting experienced. They must be consumed internally till feeling guilty for turning me into what I was. They must regret having locked me up in that wretched prison where everything they taught me was wrong, they must serve the same sentence as me: to see reality and bite their lips.



But once I let out the wrath, there was no going back. When I started to realize how much I would have to rebuild in me because of those years of imprisonment, it was like waking up from a nightmare and found oneself in a worse one, but definitely real.

I realized that the simple revenge of rubbing in my sexual behaviour wouldn't satisfy me, it was just the first step. For they never got angry at me, nor cried or yelled or got despaired, not even kicked me out. They were there, in front of the obvious, lineal situation and would simply pretend it didn't exist. And all my sexual authority didn't exist either without the acknowledgement of their looks, without the exclamation of scandal, the humiliation, the offence, the repentance!

I had to start to magnify each accomplishment and the rapid climb followed, the relay race that would raise my phone stories to real levels of profanity.

One night I found myself undoing a man's fly, half-naked, rubbing ourselves against the cold walls of a church. When the sperm squirted onto my stomach I felt the corrupting satisfaction of getting a good story.

Just to witness the same empty faces at breakfast, no distant looks, no tricky questions.



Until the key moment arrived, the picture that appears in the movies with slow music at the back.

I met someone at a party. I don't even remember his features, and his sweaty body gets mixed up in my memory with so many others. He invited me to go with him. He didn't say where, I didn't care either. It was a crooked building in a dark neighbourhood. Under the fluorescent light of the hall he clinked his keys and asked for silence. However, the lights of the tiny flat were on. A man was chewing a lumpy stew in the living room, he waved at us and we went on. We crossed a small hallway with three doors and I caught a glimpse of a couple in a double bed. It had a black headboard and the off-white bodies outlined against the back.

We came into a dim-lit room. First he closed the door and then he turned on a bed lamp. The room was so small we couldn't even undress without touching each other. The only furniture was a mattress on the floor. No sheets. After we started wallowing, I caught sight of some objects piled up in a corner. They were mannequin heads. When we finished up we lay there staring at the ceiling. It was very high and had a fan. It looked like a cell, I remember thinking. It didn't have any windows, just a skylight high in the wall. And no decoration on the white walls. When we left, the rest of the house was in the dark. We said goodbye without even a kiss, for never meeting again. But something of what my mind was incubating when we were lying on the mattress, closely watched by the eyes of the mannequins and the spider-fan, finished to take shape as I was going away in a taxi and received the night air of the *porteño* summer.

What was I doing there?



The blue, shaded-deprived apathy followed. Days looked perversely alike to each other, my office walls to the ones at home, the faces of people among themselves. The names of Perla and Luz got mixed up in my lips until I decided no to refer to them but with pronouns. My body became healed of foreign hands, became immaculate slowly as when I was unhappy in the Pampa. But I found no relief.

My aunt and Luz suspected that things weren't doing fine, but they would pretend, they would continue pretending unaware of the supreme power they exercised in me. At times I would wonder where the mistake was, or if there had never been a mortal sin, a landmark that sealed the future.

I didn't try speaking, either. I considered it but then I contemplated their routine, sterile lives, what could Luz understand, she who came and went from university without rhythm or passion, who kissed her boyfriend on the forehead, sporadically, carelessly. What could my aunt understand, that dried animal preserved by hatred.

The office remained my only touch with reality. Seeing glowing Perla every day inoculated enough energy in me to survive through the next day. And days would drag endlessly until the weekend and then Monday and then Saturday again ad eternum. For one moment I thought nothing would interrupt the thin Moebius strip, but I was wrong. I may try staying still, but the rest of the universe went its own way.



Unexpectedly, Perla fell in love. She turned radiant from one day to the next and no longer belonged to me, although we spoke on the phone, although I had her next to me all day long.

I had been so immersed in my spiteful process that I hadn't paid attention to others' destinies, like Perla's. She was very different to me. She gave herself to men and love affairs with the same confusion than me, but void of revenge and prejudice. And she suffered too, but somehow she found the way to save herself and ended up safe and sound. Safe and in love, on top of it. I wanted to know her secret.

In a night of confidences, one Saturday when Perla's boyfriend was on a trip, we talked about our many experiences. In fact it was an inquiry. Why coming from the same place we ended up in opposite situations?

At first, Perla started to say, I believed in movies and how love and sex go hand in hand. And I got into ridiculous relationships with men with whom I only wanted to go to bed with. I made up feelings, forced things until making them blow, what for? Until I realized I could go to bed without going out with them formally. One night stands, parallel lovers, I gave

myself the freedom to do what I wanted- as undoubtedly they do, I remarked-. And I suddenly met the ideal man.

Perla stopped talking and broke into a silly grin.

And they lived happily ever after- I thought but wouldn't say while I was finishing my coffee.



Luz was next. She came into my room one day and informed me with a bright smile that she was getting married in six months. She had just got her degree as a Geography teacher and already had a position in a marginal secondary school. I congratulated her. And I immediately felt a huge void and anticipated fear for all the anguish that this legalization would cause me.

My aunt was on top of the world. For six months she devoted herself to finish the sculptural work in her daughter's life. The finishing touch was direction and completion of the preparations for the wedding.

I helped Luz from the heart. Something inside me had warned me that hers was a one-way journey, and, what's worse, that she was happy like that. However, I didn't say anything, didn't speak my mind in all those precious moments alone that we had in those months. Then it was too late. The gap between our lives was beyond any human effort.

With Luz's departure the opposition between my aunt and me- that we had postponed for so long- followed. I noticed she was no longer furious with me, she had achieved the odd serenity of fulfilled duty. And it wasn't on purpose, either.

In a short time, Perla moved in with her boyfriend and left me her flat. I settled in and started to live again for almost the fourth time. Indeed it was then when I started to suspect that I wouldn't be Eva any more. I confronted a more lonely destiny, but one which would make more complete. A lifestyle that wasn't pro or against somebody but for and by me. Something totally new.



3-Pandora

Then I phrased the right questions. And there was nobody to see what I did, I didn't have to explain. I was free and confused. Stop acting, react, coincide, oppose? Where was the limit, where the codex? Soon I learnt there wasn't any. It would be what I decided it would be, what I disposed and respected.

For months I was paralyzed by the sense of infinite that surrounded me. The responsibility to choose and choose well. Until the day I opened the wardrobe and a book fell on my head. I felt a stab of burning pain as I leaned to pick it up. It was The adventures of Tom Sawyer. I spent that night rereading it and at the crack of dawn, a foggy Saturday morning, I decided that what always had given me security was the written word. It was my Newton's apple, while I was secretly looking for my story, the story that would come out fresh from my lips.

I didn't happen right away, like in the movies. I needed time to meditate, nourish myself with the forgotten procedures and myths and finally find the voice that struggle to be heard, the ignored whisper that lived in me. The sacred intuition I never heard. An underground stream, a subcutaneous moisture that I had tried to get rid of all my life.



Then I became Pandora, my last and definite metamorphosis.

I found her story by chance. When Perla moved out, she left some of her books so that they would make me company, among them some volumes of mythology. I think that anyway I was already willing to unbind my spirit and my tongue, silenced by foreign voices.

Pandora, the first woman sent by the gods to the earth, adorned to seduce and owner of such curiosity that almost made the world of men get lost. Pandora, the first feminine voice that put a stop to the power of the masculine word.

I got down to write. It was almost noon and I felt light and invincible.

**

The Large Glass

Children, be curious. Nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It's part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. People die when curiosity dies. People have to find out, people have to know. How can there be any true revolution till we know what we're made of?

G. Swift

(venezia)

When I stepped on Venezia, the fog literally swallowed me, as in the final scene of Casablanca. It was the height of summer, but dampness numbed my bones and left me there, staked on the stairs of Santa Lucia station. I had come to hold a wake over a dead one and had the impression that the city wasn't the right place to stay. Neither to conclude or start. It was a passage place, a sign in the road, an arrow pointing another direction.

Immobile on the stairs of the train station, alone, I smell the damp of the water and I stayed still trying to get back my breath. I heard myself panting, trying to take air to my numbed limbs. At that moment, anguish sprang up, as if I had opened a suitcase crammed with worn clothes. Like a liquid it spread all over my body and reached my centre. I repeated to myself that I was far away and alone, that I could, if I fancied, sit right there and burst into tears. Ironically, to know that I had the freedom to do it relaxed me, I could lock up my anguish in its suitcase and reconsider what to do.

I had heard so many stories about Venezia... Abuelo had perfected them throughout my childhood and adolescence until I thought I could see through his eyes. I saw the enchanted city through foreign eyes and now, faced to its three-dimensional reality, covered with scents, sights and people, looked faded and empty of glamour or adventure.

It was still 11 at night and there were no passengers left. Some killed time waiting to be picked up, others got ready to spend the night in the open to take the train in the morning. I wasn't scared, I just had a light layer of indifference, the one which is the product of the weariness of the soul, what remains when you don't want to cry any more. An inner voice, however, insisted on the optimism, and reminded me of the other voice which told me, when I was little and something hurt, that it would go away. I had arrived in the city placing one foot after the other, worrying not about the horizon but about the slow flow from the day to the night.

I stared at the water. Black, oily and thick, it transmitted danger. Sporadically, boats or yachts would cross, shaking the timid waves. I was startled. Everything got a ghostly tint, and rather than the magic city on water described by Abuelo, I seemed to have reached a disheartening limbo, a transit office where, if I was lucky, I would find a clue to follow.

I breathed deeply, gathering strength. My soul shrank, again. A scent of dead flowers impregnated me more and more. Venezia wasn't but a cemetery-city, decorated by a millenary rite. And those dark boats... my meditations were interrupted when seeing a dried man approaching me. I froze, as every time a stranger notices me. That never happened for a good reason. I was one of those women not too fat or too thin, too tall or too short, too dark or too light. That allowed me to wander around the world without being watched and at the same time, to have the ideal position to study the rest. But this man, dark, middle-aged, fat and

sweated spoke to me in an Italian that I half understood. He offered me an *albergo* where to stay. I was so nervous I stammered yes. He signalled to me to follow him and I, obediently, did. At that moment it didn't cross my mind to go in another direction, -but where would I go at that hour in a city that confused me.

I dragged my suitcase along the stairs of the bridge. It was what I had seen from the station, and despite the time, it was crawling with people who, either were trying to go over it loaded with luggage, or were chatting, leaning on the railing. I moved away from the station and started to lose the sense of direction. The man just turned to me when we had to turn a corner, to make sure I was still there. As we walked, people started to disappear. The little streets became narrower and narrower and above all, silent. Once in a while steps could be heard, they got closer and they away. In some cases we got to see who caused them, in others, it was a sound deprived of its corresponding image, like a ghost or a bad omen. All the time, even if I didn't see it, I was aware of the presence of water. Surrounding me, choking me, cornering me and forcing me to follow the steps of a stranger. Perhaps Venetians were amphibian, they would transform into fish at night to prey around the city...

I noticed that the light that lit up the streets was very white and piercing through the fog. The steep walls on each side, covered with rectangular windows meticulously shut, simulated part of a theatre scenery. I wasn't in a real city but in a huge theatre, filled with fake houses and stuntmen in charge of pretending to be its inhabitants displaying their routine lives.

At that point I was exhausted, I could only think about a bed and I pictured a wide, thick mattress, fresh white sheets and a "Don't disturb" notice on the door of my bedroom, so I could sleep till high noon. It was one of the thin benefits of depression. The moment of surrendering to the endless lethargy of sleep, without alarm-clocks or obligations or worried faces popping their heads through the door as time went by.

Finally, my man stopped in front of a tiny door, where a faded notice read: *Albergo Al Sole*. He opened with his own key and led me into a deserted hall, at the back of which a small dimly-lit room stood in for a reception. An aged man dozed in front of the black and white TV. He held a short conversation with my cicerone and handed me a card for me to fill in with my details. Then he led me to my room. My guide went away with a greeting, possibly in search of future victims.

Again I dragged my suitcase to the top of the stairs. There was no lift and the steep stairs led me to the third floor. In the poor light the decoration looked depressing. The wallpaper showed the yellow of the persistent damp, barely disguised by small roses and vines on a creamy tone. The carpet, of a deep maroon, showed sparse spots, product of the use. There was a smell of soup, as if it was a huge kitchen. My room, when opening the door, was tiny. There was more dark carpet, green this time, more flowery wallpaper, maybe bigger this time but on the same tone and oversized furniture. The bed, despite being wide, was single. There was a big wardrobe and a little desk next to the only window, located just below the ceiling.

Once alone, I remembered I hadn't had dinner. I searched my bag and found some cookies left from the train journey. Without taking anything from the suitcase, I undressed and crawled into bed. I covered myself with the sheet, to feel protected, although the heat soon made it stick to my skin. When I finished settling into a comfortable position, I slid my hand under the pillow and found a handkerchief, wrinkled. I threw it away as far as I could and fell asleep. I only woke up at six, hearing the bells of a church that tolled furiously. It was broad daylight, but I didn't even want to see the watch. I buried my head under the pillow and went back to sleep. I didn't want to think, or remember or being aware of my existence. I just wanted a dreamless sleep without images, without past or future.

Depression is a desolate country. You can walk for days and days without stopping and not find anybody. Neither nourishment, or a shelter against the cold or the heat. You end up getting used to the insipidity that the whole life begins to seem, the mere fact of continuing existing mysteriously day after day without a reason, or a goal, or a good motive to reach the next day. Actions become mechanical, minimal, utilitarian. Pleasures lose the meaning they once had and you spend the time rummaging in the immensity even more deserted of your own mind, trying to find the lost road, a human trace, an oasis in the distance. At first you wonder how long it will last, as shipwrecked might wonder, in their dinghy, in the middle of the sea. And hope might prevail, hope of believing in those who say time heals all wounds. Then, the question loses its status and becomes rather a statement, or a tired, inconclusive phrase. It is then when the armies of natives appear, the owners of the desert, they take possession of us and our weakness and they convert us to their own and foreign religion. That's the crucial point, when one has the last chance to fit, or you'll be a misfit for the rest of your life.

Without knowing it, my trip to Venezia was a one-way ticket, the initiatory trip I would use to take one way or another. That first night I ingenuously slept like a log, for the first time safe from the looks and hands of those who waited for me at home.

(piazza san marco)

In the morning I woke up abruptly due to the boisterous knocks on the door. I remembered painfully where I was. The knocks had stopped. I was drenched in sweat, but my drowsiness was too strong. And I was possessed by that languor that accompanied my awakenings and had so much to do with the utility or reason of getting out of bed. I thought that covering my head with the pillow would prevent me from deciding what to do, but the knocks resumed and this time, after a creak, the door opened.

-Ad alzarsi!- I heard, in powerful Italian.

I didn't think of disobeying and stuck my head out of the sheets. A woman of large proportions headed speedily to the window and opened the curtains. The rays of the sun finished her task.

- A fare colazione!- she went on- E una bella mattina et é hora di far' colazione!

I heard the bells tolling and thought that maybe it was Sunday and I had to go to church, but I didn't dare ask. While the maid changed towels and emptied dustbins, I got dressed with the first thing I found in my backpack. Shorts, a sleeveless t-shirt and trainers. I tied my hair and when looking at the mirror, I gazed at the reflection of my own face. Pale skin, dark eyes inserted in circles of the same tone, thin lips.

- Scenderá?- hurried me the maid, grinning.

I nodded and went out of the room. I remembered the little hall and the steep stairs. The wallpaper and the colour of the carpet lost part of their gloom in daylight. It smelled of stew, rather than soup, and it got stronger as I went down the stairs. Breakfast, I figured immediately, was served in the cellar, another flight of stairs down from the tiny reception. I settled at a little table in a corner.

-Buon giorno- a waiter, tall and dark, handed me a breadbasket filled with different kinds of sweet bread and offered me some coffee.

The dining room was rectangular, the bricked ceiling in a vault. It looked like a catacomb, matching the city and its air of death. I wondered if the light of day would make me

feel different. As I chewed, I observed the other guests, in general couples or families chatting happily over open maps or guides in which it read “Venezia” in different languages. The place itself was a Babel Tower, and the anonymity that provided me gave me certain safety. I wasn’t still convinced of the steps to take. I had a mission to accomplish. But the feeling of loss that the death of Abuelo had left in me alerted me against future emotional bonds. So I stayed in the room, sipping my coffee and imagining how pleasantly different would have been to be in that same place with him, as we had planned so many times. I had the impulse to go back to my room and hide under the sheets, clean and dry, again. And forget. The other guests had already left, urged as any western tourist to ingest information and make their money worth... a rat race.

I resorted to the dog-eared postcards that Abuelo gave to me as a secret present when I came of age. A passport of his past and my heritage. A pact of blood between both of us. They were truly small and contained photos in black and white. Life in colours sometimes loses the poetry of binary colours. I knew the images by heart, but anyway I remained watching them in detail. “*Dogana di mare*” said one of them. The beginning of my stay would be the *Dogana*, the custom-house, I found amusing the irony of going back to the frontier to start the real journey.

At the reception I seized a folding map that was there on the desk and went out. Out, the narrow, little street left me unmoved. I opened the map to know what to do. Maps always give me a sensation of order, of flat universe, of jungle already colonized by ancient explorers, of a safe place, marked and remarked by generations of neat cartographers. The blue lines indicating the canals didn’t cause me but a distant aftertaste of anguish. Even though the Grand Canal was an area with too much blue, it was necessary to cross it if I wanted to see the Dogana from the point of view of the photo, that is, in front of it. I looked for the signs of bridges. Amazingly, along such a winding river there were only three, and for all of them I had to divert... Ironic, that Abuelo had been a sailor and I, her favourite granddaughter had phobia of water. Maybe I would pluck up enough courage to get on one of the *vaporetti* that crossed the city. Maybe I would wait one day more, to feel more at home.

I dived into the Venetian streets and immediately noticed the number of tourists that appeared and disappeared in each enigmatic turn. The place still made me choke, the streets too narrow, orientated without rhyme or reason, without names or signs. The windows of the houses offered mainly thick bars of black iron. And at any time one ran the risk of ending up in the water, because not necessarily the little bridge was lined up with the street. I stopped on one of the bridges, remembering stories heard, and looked at the walls falling steeply into the brown water, which smelt stagnant. There were no sidewalks, the doors opened onto the canal as if it was made of concrete, and instead of parked cars there were boats or yachts. In spite of the bright colours, orange and yellow, the paint was peeling from the walls due to the damp, leaving brick or wood visible. As a lamb, and seized by the heat and the weariness of having forgotten why I moved, I followed a group of American tourists who, reddish and cheerful, ruined the Italian effect turning Venezia in no man’s land.

I got caught in the human tide at the same time as another group of tourists, Japanese this time, converged from an unexpected corner. At first I felt trapped. I wanted to get out but they didn’t manage to understand me. I’ve never been able to be blunt enough in these situations, I fear enormously the reaction of the others, not to hurt their feelings, even when they are perfect strangers that I will never meet again. So I gave up and followed their route, and somehow, I felt protected as if I was a famous character in the middle of her personal guard.

The water, on the other hand, disturbed me tremendously. It was a sluggish monster, caged among tall, gothic buildings, licking its doors as a trained pet. But it was an animal of illimitable power, which at any moment could rebel and swallow us, tiny humans, from the earth's crust. A city on water, who could think of something like that.

The mob of multiple sounds shifted merrily along the extremely narrow alleys, laughing and expressing their amazement at the maze of passages, the tiny bridges, the countless churches, which seemed to grow wherever one cast a look. Soon, I didn't have any idea of where I was, or to where the Gran Canal was, let alone the hotel. While I was walking inside the eclectic human snake, I got captivated by certain stretched windows, by some wooden doors, by dusty shops, foreign to the notion of tourism. I wondered what it would be like to live on an island. To struggle all the time against the water, the lack of orientation in the streets, the impossibility of getting out of a taxi in front of your door. And what about winter, in a place where humidity made impossible to shelter from the cold and the rain.

I lost the sense of space and time. I didn't have a watch nor dare ask the time. I just knew that the more we went into the island, the more my sensation of weariness went away, and it started to dawn on me how far I was from home, for the first time. I knew the key was to focus on what I saw, the details, the local colour. By then, the sun was high and my stomach, so tight lately, had made way for that old feeling of hunger. Those around me, I noticed, were bolting sandwiches and sipping from bottles of mineral water without even pausing to open the packages. I had to escape, or I would spend the day running around caged, starving and dehydrated.

It wasn't necessary. We reached an area where the alleys were still narrow, but were crammed with shops. Carnival masks, crystal quills, watches, designer clothes. Every little dusty shop displayed what they owned and the busy tourists stopped at last, bewitched by the windows. I found myself free. Free of the marching pace but also of its protection. I headed to a street stall. I bought a huge sandwich and a coke, and I bolted it down right there. The vendor smiled at me as he chanted, "Panini buono, eh?" I nodded and tried to smile without stopping chewing. At last I sighed and got out of the talking zone.

An excessive sloth invaded my body and soul. A pleasant indolence crossed all over me from head to toe. However, I suspected that going back to the hotel for a nap would be so complicated as approaching my destiny. Abuelo, I remembered, had talked to me about the cafés at the Piazza San Marco, where you can have the best coffee in the world. I opened the map, seeing the blue of the water forewarned me. I had almost forgotten about it, the sophisticated watch of the liquid surrounding me, escorting me, preventing me from forgetting my mission. I was so absorbed in the tiny letters of the map that I didn't see the vendor coming to me, grinning. He drew the map near his myopic eyes, made a gesture of understanding and deposited his fat finger on a spot just in the middle of the Grand Canal. I thanked him so he walked away, happy to have helped a tourist in need, but I didn't really understand what he meant. I didn't see the Grand Canal anywhere around me.

For the first time in my life, I let intuition lead me- me, who always followed orders- . In fact, I felt damp more and more powerful, a sign that I was close. I turned a widened street, full of shops and tourists and suddenly saw how the human mass rose like going up a hill. I got closer, hypnotized by what looked like a gigantic but tamed animal, and discovered it was a bridge, which climbed elegantly over the dark waters of the Gran Canal. "The Rialto", I mumbled. I drew near, marvelled at the variety of people and objects that my eyes were gobbling. The atmosphere seemed the one of a Persian market. Buyers, sellers, goods, money, I could sense the metallic smell of banknotes and the delicate moisture of coins as they passed from palm to palm. Some shops had their windows adorned in gold and black, offering the

most expensive watches or ornaments carved in crystal. Most, on the other hand, were on the path that ran through the centre and mixed with the strollers, the vendors inciting them in their clinking dialects, taking advantage of the moment of rapture, the urgency to grasp a small piece of what they saw and take it home, a souvenir of the extreme of Europe, where faces and buildings were no longer so western. Nor were the habits.

On the highest part of the bridge, just where it started to bend, I reached a gate without doors, through which the curious tourists passed and disappeared. I leaned out and saw there was like a parallel street, still part of the bridge, from where you could catch sight of the Grand Canal, zigzagging towards the horizon. A little bothered at the impossibility of avoiding contact with the others, I managed to touch the banister, and placed myself next to the stone parapet that separated the observer from the water. I immediately got dizzy. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes but had to clutch to the border tightly to avoid falling into the still waters. I couldn't figure out how many meters were between my position and the surface. But my perception was of someone that stood at the edge of an insurmountable abyss, to which any irregularity in my heartbeats would cast me head first. I pictured the bridge like a device floating on a void and the awareness of being in that state scared me to death. Quickly, I reached the other side by elbowing and treading on my way. Only my desperation succeeded in making me ignore so many curses.

When I stepped on the other bank, panic vanished, giving way to a glorious sensation of gratitude. I stopped, panting, among the crowd of strangers, and tears started to blur my sight. Self-pity invaded me, I felt vulnerable, fragile and lost. Soon I knew this had been going on all my life, only that the diabolic city-over-water had put it on display, pushing me to a public collapse, the naked shame, from which one can never forget what was seen.

Luckily, the act of breathing is something that was out of my control and after the crying and wheezing followed an unexpected peace. I blew my nose, dried my eyes, took a deep breath of air and noticed that everything continued in the same place, exactly the same as if nothing had shaken me. Tourists kept on walking and chatting, absorbed in their maps and the colourful umbrellas of their guides; vendors went on preying on their next victim; even the water of the canal seemed unmoved, licking the peeled-off walls. Was it true, then, my intuition, was Venezia a cemetery-city, with all its inhabitants dead, souls in torment condemned to pass eternity looking for an exit in that maze, as in a Ray Bradbury's story? Was I dead too?

I forced myself to go on walking. The heat, the noise, the crowds, the closeness of water and the lack of horizon oppressed me and I didn't get used to the cliff that followed my intimacy with depression. For months I had been entrenched in Abuelo's house, pacing up and down his room, his workplace, his corner of memories, the kitchen where we drank *mate* and talked about his journeys. Then it was easy to control the avalanche of feelings that get chained after a loss. The silent depression was just a gloomy hall, a waiting room. What followed was the bitter indifference, an underground tunnel crowned with fluorescent light. Panic, the impossibility of moving a single muscle. The sobs, the intimate happiness of having escaped death, again. And the demolishing weariness that marks the ending and allows the renewal of the damned cycle. It was the moment to get into bed. However, there I was, in the place I had dreamt so many times, ironically wishing I was behind the uterine covers of my bed and not in my way to the Piazza.

Finally, I discovered some signs, carelessly placed on some corners that, with a cryptic arrow, showed how to get to San Marco. I didn't know how I was going to go back yet, but thinking about a place to sit and collect my thoughts encouraged me to go on. I crawled like a slow insect, and sweated till I felt that my clothes and my skin were just one layer. Likewise I

felt my soul. Tiny and damp. When I try to remember what I saw in those streets before flowing into the Piazza, I can't recognize anything. Just the yellowish light of the blinding sun and the urgent necessity to reach destiny. The truth was I had no idea how to put an end to pain. I remembered Abuelo recommended I concentrated on the outside. And that I tried. By then, the human tide and I flowed into the Piazza San Marco. At least, an enormous rectangle of open sky. I dived fully and fluttered around the people, the doves and the spires that limited the perimeter of the sky.

I looked for the *Florian* café, settled down at a table in the shadow, in the middle of the piazza, and gave in to my senses. The orchestra at one side was starting to play a melodic version of *As time goes by*. I pictured Abuelo, young and brave, in love with Carla the very Veneziana donna he came across just come ashore. In each place I cast my eyes I saw a postcard, in fact, I recognized a postcard of the ones Abuelo treasured in his corner. Those were in black and white, colour enhanced them but took away the romanticism that also accompanied his stories, that, now I realized, lacked nostalgic idealism. And slowly I started to feel at home, or at least, in a familiar place, somewhere known, as if I was Alice and had gone into the postcard instead of the looking-glass. Actually, I was so confused as her by the rules of this side of the world, so different from the ones zealously kept at home.

The waiter interrupted my purring of uprooting and I asked for a cappuccino. At last my mind gave me some peace and entered carefully in one of those moments where sensations occurred in slow motion, adapting to the heartbeats of a slow heart. In this way, ejected into the world without nothing but old stories of a sailor in love, I found myself in situation to devour all the knowledge, all the experience that showed up, because it dawned on me that for 21 years I had lived in a cavern, my nose literally buried in books, believing that they would be good handbooks for life. How surprised and offended I felt at proving my mistake... my cappuccino arrived in a china cup with a golden rim, foamy and sprinkled with powerful cinnamon aroma. I sipped it like that, bitter and hot, closing my eyes to preserve the instant in the files of my memory. Delicious.

In the euphoria of the discovery, added to the energy of caffeine, I believed everything was solved, and besides accomplishing my mission, I would become an adventurer as my grandfather. I stretched on my chair and observed my surroundings. The piazza, a huge rectangle covered with tourists and pigeons, was framed by low buildings, crammed with pillars, and with a gallery that allowed to watch windows in the shadow. The *campanile* towered over me, a pointed, opaque bishop, plain in comparison with the gothic architecture of the church, which completed the scenery. Almost reaching the basilica, I saw the blue and golden clock, with the symbolic lion of Venezia on its dome. And of course, what most caught my sight were the colossal towers of the church, the Basilica of San Marco, unexpected invasion of Orient, its rounded domes and its golden mosaics made me think about *The thousand and one nights*. Thus, once more I reacted to my three-dimensional being inside one of the postcards of the corner of memories. I had spent my life going over them in detail and now, as in a fantastic story, I watched things from the inside. Leaning on my chair with a preferential view, I dozed off considering how things can turn out in such a magical way as to unfold what one believed simple into infinite communicating vessels. I didn't think much about the future, what kind of life I would lead or how I would spend my time. Working in the family business and taking care of Abuelo had taken all my time. Now that Abuelo had died and my family seemed to do without me, I found myself suddenly free and hopelessly alone.

Eventually I started to feel the weariness of such physical and mental ride and I stopped to glance at the photo of the postcard. I walked among the people and the pigeons, the music and the golden domes, and I leaned out of the pillars that marked the limit of the

Piazzetta with the Canal. I remained stiff before the image of the *gondole*, black and mortuary, rocking slowly by the shore. The day trips seemed to have finished, although the sun had just started to go down. The *gondolieri*, in hat and striped t-shirt, chatted and laughed, smoking on the stairs that led to the water. They climbed every single day onto those tiny coffins to slide on the avid water of the canals, armed with only a pole. Despite all my rediscovered courage, I still didn't dare defy the innocent waves.

From the edge of the Piazza, I finally made it to the Dogana di Mare. Gleaming under the rays of the sunset, daring the sea with its sharp point incrustated in the liquid, it looked like a flag waving triumph. I wondered what Abuelo might have seen when he got the postcard. I took it out of the backpack. There was no inscription on the back. Maybe- just maybe- I shouldn't get obstinate to discover the secrets of his passage in that land, but just undergo my experience, so that a distant descendent of mine, in turn, would come to uncover mine. What secrets I would sow, if until now I considered myself the most transparent person on earth. I sighed. I couldn't answer all the questions in one day. And I started my return.

(tucci's)

I had treasured the years passed with Abuelo, he, fixing rickety toys in his little room on the terrace, I, watching him, or frequently handing him tools, like a nurse or a conscientious surgeon. His persona irradiated that kind of serenity it was impossible to find in the rest of the family. At that point I started to become aware of that power- or curse- that made me feel as the others within centimeters. Inexplicably I would sink in unexpected, abrupt moods, for which I wasn't generally prepared. And like after an injection or a potion, the sensation spread all over my body and there was nothing I could do to get out of it until I was out of the influence zone. Abuelo was the only one to discover that ability and also to teach me tricks to learn to survive and even take advantage of it. One day I understood I had inherited that trait from him, and that we were the only ones in our extensive family that possessed it. Hence he would feel in part responsible for communicating to me how he had succeeded in dealing with it.

That helped me understand the myth that revolved around his voluntary isolation. I knew, product of endless family stories, he had refused to work in the family business at 16 and had escaped in a freighter to travel around the world. That he met a woman in Venezia that seduced him and forced him to stay with her for a year. That for some unknown reason he had come back to Buenos Aires prematurely aged, with the skin dark and leathery of sailors and a look that remained vacant for ever. He had agreed to marry but soon after the birth of his first-born, my father, the love affairs had started, resulting in a family scandal. The story then gets muddy, apparently Abuelo and Abuela had rows and made up in endless occasions. Abuelo always kept himself apart from the restaurant, for annoyance and anger of the rest. He devoted himself to fixing toys. It was this, and not his dark adventures, what drew me to him and led me to stay for hours at his side, watching at the beginning and helping then.

The little room on the terrace was the area of the house- and maybe of the world- where all the categories of space and time seemed to be suspended. The tic tac of the clock wasn't heard and one might believe to inhabit any part of the planet- or even the cosmos. It was barely a narrow, tall rectangle, with walls covered with shelves that sheltered a thousand and one boxes, jars, brushes and tools. It was a workshop crammed with mingled elements, whose possibilities of combination were endless. Once lost my initial shyness and adapted to

the rules of the micro-environment, I started to let my imagination fly and created all kinds of monstrous artifacts from the contents of the boxes. Besides what was necessary to sew, paint, fix and mend, there were glass eyes of different sizes and colours,

[...]

**

3.

Sublime love

He was sensual, dark and provocative. He whispered things in my ears and kissed my nape. What could I do? I believed everything. I was barely eighteen, and against my will, alien to the kind of life my classmates led. I was gullible and inexperienced and eager for action.

No, I hadn't read novels or seen movies. I had worked hard since I was fourteen, helping in the family business. I had had only two boyfriends who would take me for walks and fondled me in every corner. I had two brothers, hefty and older than me, who had prevented these relationships from going on. At last they got married and minded their own business and I was rid of them to do and undo at will.

M. went into the shop one spring afternoon and asked me to go dancing with him, staring at me with those dark eyes I could never say no to. I opened my mouth just to let out the word I would repeat after every one of his requests. From the disco we went to bed and I was not able to escape his lips, his arms, his feverish body ever again.

In the sticky nights of the summer in Buenos Aires, I wasn't able to sleep, recalling our love scenes at length. And I would toss and turn in the damp sheets, without him, sleepless and spiritless.

Was it the result of my perpetual state of agony, my physical dependency on his sex, my white nights? The day he came to tell me he was leaving to Europe, I simply clung to his neck and begged him to take me. Two weeks later we were on a plane, crossing the Atlantic; - me, I was shaking out of vertigo, plotted lies, uncertain future.



The few days we spent happily in Paris remained in me as the dream of a dream. We walked along the streets, suffered the bitter cold of the European winter, visited monuments and museums that made me yawn. M. had swapped our acts of love for art lectures. Soon he had Parisian friends, met educated women who showed him around the Louvre reciting lectures that I heard without really listening. Soon he disappeared, leaving me alone in the room of a mediocre hotel, penniless and unable to speak French.

I didn't despair. I'd been raised as a resourceful person and I set off to find an occupation. I knew I couldn't go back to Buenos Aires, vanquished and alone, even though I could afford it. I should stay and succeed, in my own way.

For two days I wandered around the city, going through the neighbourhoods crawling with tourists speaking in tongues. Worn out, I came into a bleak *brasserie* for a glass of water. I sat at the bar and noticed immediately the figure of a woman sliding out from the toilette. She sat beside me and asked for *absinthe* in delicate French. I examined her from the corner of my eyes. Her skin was extremely white and wore her hair in a pony tail. She was dressed in elegant clothes in pastels. Her face was so beautiful it left me out of breath.

Mechanically, she pulled out her wallet to pay for her drink and I got to see an Argentinean banknote coming out carelessly. I didn't waste a second. I leant, almost touching her ear, and announced in Spanish that we were from the same country. She looked at me, unmoved by my words. With a sign, she indicated a table nearby. I followed her, obediently. We talked till it got dark. Actually, she asked and I answered. All my life, my failed love story, and my lies and the excessive punishment of exile. She wanted to know if I liked Paris. I said no, at the moment I hated everything that reminded me of M. and the consequences of my flight.

In turn, she said she lived in Montparnasse, in a large flat, Baroque-style, and that she needed someone for the position of maid, and occasionally, secretary. A slave- I thought, but the idea took hold of me and I said yes before she even finished her proposal. She paid the bill and we left. I felt proud and docile walking at her side along the glittering streets of Paris, the same that I had despised hours ago.



She took me to a fancy flat in a lonely neighbourhood. Light beamed through the French windows and was devoured subtly by the beige carpet and the chalky walls. It had a large living-room, kitchen, two bathrooms and three stylish rooms. One was her bedroom. A four-poster bed and wardrobes. Nothing, not a sock or a handkerchief, was out of place. The next door belonged to her studio. A classic desk and walls covered with books. I was satisfied when noticing a certain taste for chaos. She apologized for the mess and claimed that she had worked till late. The third room should be mine. Austere, decorated in the same style as the rest of the house. It had a cupboard and a wooden bed. A table of the same material, a chair and an ochre armchair. On the walls hang pictures of bucolic landscapes, which reminded me of my summer holidays at the beach.

She left me alone so I would settle down. It was late night in Paris and I felt a strange mixture of relief and exile. I was certain I wouldn't see M. or *mi Buenos Aires (querido)* ever again. I sat on the edge of my bed and wept for the first time since the beginning of my misfortunes. I didn't know if the tears were a product of my distress or of my overwhelming joy.

When I calmed down, I rushed into the kitchen and made dinner. I found an array of delicacies in the fridge and cupboard. Lucila, that was the name of my mistress, was impressed with the dishes I took to the table and praised each mouthful she took.

At night, in my room, I considered the chapter of my miseries about to end.



I started my job full of enthusiasm. My hands grew rough as never before. But I had no regrets. I got used to enjoying the cold evenings with Lucila. From a corner in the kitchen, I watched her eat, alone in the large, dimly-lit living-room. Not for one moment did she think about treating me like her equal. She didn't hesitate to ask whatever she needed no matter the time. I was pleased to get up in the middle of the night when hearing the bell set up next to my bed. I knew that insignificant button linked our headboards and it was as if we shared our dreams.

Also I didn't stop fantasizing about saving her life. I imagined a burglar breaking into through the window- an unlikely event considering the floor we lived on- or a heart attack, she, stretching delicately or scratching the wall to reach the saving bell.

Soon I learnt her routine. Her discipline and aloofness helped. During the week she taught literature at the Sorbonne- how I liked listening to her reciting poems in French, without her noticing- . She left early, came back for lunch and then, at dusk. She had dinner early and sought refuge in her study. At midnight sharp she went to bed. Usually, I didn't know of her till the next day. But when she had trouble sleeping, she woke me up so I took her tea or aspirins. I knew deep down that she wanted my company. Then I volunteered to do her hair or stretch the sheets . She would sit up and let me plump up the pillows and tuck her in. I

could smell the penetrating scent of her perfume, a mix of fragrance and her own odour which left me drowsy.

At the weekend Lucila had guests or went out with friends. When the gatherings were at home, I did my best to please the guests with exotic dishes or individual treats. At first they didn't notice me, I was just another maid. They were generally scholars, connected to the university. They came from different countries. After dinner they would lounge in the sofas and stayed till the deep of the night speaking about philosophy and reciting poems. Lucila and I had created a code. When she got bored and wanted to be alone, she made a sign and I started to turn down the lights. Unfailingly, the guests started to leave within half an hour. Except, of course, for those who had drunk in excess. They would fall asleep on the couches and had to be given black coffee to wake them up.

My reward, when eventually Lucila and I had dragged the last one to the street and locked the door, was her smile filled with sheer relief. After these excesses, she would give me the day off.

The empty nights were those when Lucila went out. Nothing would content me then, neither the TV nor the books- she had given me permission to borrow any book from her abundant library. I ended up by walking around the house, snooping around until I heard the noise of the front door opening. Then I slid into the kitchen and prepared one last cup of tea.



One night, after Lucila had gone to bed, I went to my room ready to fall sleep within minutes. To my surprise, the bedside lamp was on. The white bedspread with blue trims –a gift from Lucila- became inviting.

I collapsed on the soft blanket and felt immediately something hard sticking in my back. I sat up to discover it was a book. It seemed to have been left there on purpose so I would see it. It was a novel by Charlotte Bronte. To me, a simple amateur reader, the name didn't mean anything. However, only Lucila could have put it there, that certainly had a reason. I opened it and found her neat name stamped on the first page. I examined with delight the tidy characters of her handwriting. Then I pressed my nose against the yellowish pages and imagined her perfume.

Slowly, very slowly, I settled into a comfortable position and started the first chapter.



Winter in Paris was tough. However, I lived in between two worlds perfectly limited. The outside, the hostile, dirty streets, and what I considered 'home', always warm and uniform. I became the housekeeper, Lucila was the mistress and I played the role of landlady, as the ones in the novels she lent me. I conquered more and more territory, answered the phone, arranged her appointments and chose her outfits for the day.

At first she wouldn't let me clean her study and supervised my every movement in the kitchen and my choices of wardrobe. As weeks went by, her surveillance loosened up and I took charge of everything. I was charmed with her increasing trust and I bent over backwards to please her, even in the slightest details. Every Thursday I would get up earlier and cross the frozen city to get her fresh flowers. I changed the colours according to Lucila's moods. She was thankful but preferred red roses or jasmines. I found them disgusting, their smell of porous damp made me allergic.

One night, Lucila was having dinner on her own in the living-room. As usual, I spied on her from the kitchen. Her slender face reflected on the mirrors in the room, detailing each movements of her features. When I approached to pick up the plates, she held my wrist. I stood still.

-Don't be afraid- she said, her voice tinkling. -I just wanted to know if you liked literature.

I answered that I didn't have the habit of reading.

- One day I want to hear the story of your life before you came to Paris- at saying that she let go of me and I had to exercise all my self-control to prevent my hands from shaking.

That same night I woke up at 3 in the morning because of the bell. I got up in a hurry and slipped into my robe to see what Lucila needed. I found her in bed, the hair disheveled, the bed in a mess, the bedside lamp on. She asked me to comb her hair. Then, she handed me a book. It was poetry. She wanted me to read them aloud. I started with a broken voice. Then, I gained speed and rhythm. When I looked up after a while, I saw her fast asleep. I turned off the light and walked away, carefully. I couldn't help yielding to the temptation to give her a chaste kiss on the forehead.



Winter was coming to an end and softly, I foresaw the dawn of a different summer and a different city. Lucila continued with my silent education by leaving books on my bed. She didn't ask me directly about them, but during dinner, when I picked up the dishes, she inquired if I was reading something. Then I allowed myself to stop work for some minutes and summed up briefly my opinions about the novels I consumed. I noticed that she scorned the obliging commentaries, she preferred a rigorous criticism.

Little by little I felt that a passion for reading contaminated me, like a poison or a disease. I couldn't do without my night reading and often I would devour novels within days. I took hours from my sleep, of course, then I made up for them by curling up on the sofa after Lucila had left for university. I started to look tired, dark circles forming under my eyes. She, guessing maybe the cause, shortened my tasks as much as she could.

One afternoon I got tainted with the carnal passion I read in extensive descriptions during the night and while I made her bed, I got inside to smell the sheets. The soft texture and the residual scent of Lucila's body got me drunk and I fell in deep sleep. Luckily, I woke up before she arrived. I didn't want to think what would have happened if she found me in that situation. I couldn't either bear the thought of leaving her side.

In spite of all her attention, I didn't know how much she cared about me until what happened precisely at the beginning of the holidays. She had organized an extravagant dinner party for his intellectual friends before they spread out to spend the summer in different beach resorts. As usual, I had tried my best with the menu and the tableware. After dinner, during which I was much praised, everyone moved to the lounge, where I served them whisky and spirits. One of the guests, whom I had seen drunk in many occasions, soon showed he wasn't controlling himself. He followed me into the kitchen and cornered me. He started to feel me while spilling obscenities. I was revolted but didn't want to shout to avoid ruining the party. I thought that if I didn't correspond him, he would calm down. But he didn't and soon he pushed me over the table and began struggling to undress me. It was then when Lucila, tired of calling me, came in person and discovered what was going on. For a moment, I saw her doubt. However, I asked her for help, and she, with a firm grip, took him by the lapel and dragged

him to the street. Then she came back to the kitchen, took me in her arms and caressed my hair. Suddenly she let go of me and ordered me to make more coffee. At last I was able to raise hopes.



I was wrong. The next morning she announced me happily that she was going to the beach for a week. With whom? I inquired, as neutral as I could. With some friends, she answered casually. I leave you in charge of the house, I heard from the hall. She walked away, with her flowery bag and her sunglasses.

It was hot but the city didn't seem kinder than when I had arrived. Crawling with tourists penetrating indecently in every nook and cranny, overflowing with odours and sweat, I preferred the inexplicable silence of the flat. The first days I developed a routine and followed it bravely. I cleaned the house as if she was with me, I read at night as many novels in Spanish as I found in her library. At random, I acquired voices and details from hundred of different consciences. I did the shopping and cooked for pleasure.

But nothing tasted the same. Mechanically, I baked bigger portions than what I could eat. And the house was immaculate, in less than a week I only needed to dust the furniture. I went away and came back, only to find everything exactly as I had left it. It seemed that the objects had their own capacity for movement and returned to their places even when I tried to displace them.

Finally I surrendered myself to languor. I had read so much that I felt as if I had entered the minds of the others and been fired out before I could even react. At any time of the day I would find myself snooping in Lucila's belongings. I started with her papers and books. I went on with her clothes. I opened drawer after drawer to recover her perfume. I slept in her bed. I buried my face in her underwear, white and lacy.

The afternoon she was due back, I cleaned furiously, as I did in my first day. I bought red roses with long stems and cooked her favourite dish. I waited till midnight, my internal organs out of tune and my mind shooting hundred of hypothesis per second. Finally, at five past twelve, I heard the rattle of the key at the front door. I was saved.



She took me in her arms, held me tight, covered me with gifts and talked to me about the beauty of the sea while we had tea in the most glorious night of my life. When we went to bed, exhausted by the excitement, dawn was breaking.

In a few hours I was up again, with more energy than ever. And it was then that the telephone rang and I heard, at the other end of the line, his masculine, overwhelming voice asking for Lucila. I hung up. I leaned on a shelf to recover my breath and saw Lucila coming to me, with an insolent smile on her face. The phone rang again. Without giving me time, she threw herself over the phone. The exuberance of her happiness expanded until I choked. I sought refuge in the kitchen, understanding it all. My innocent comprehension of the facts, ridiculed in the tone of his voice, eloquent and French until the intolerable.

That same night she announced her engagement. J., her fiancé, would come to Paris to visit her the following week to finish off the details of the wedding. With wild and excessive pleasure, I spent the night writing my name on the front page of her favourite novels. She would have to see me even if she didn't want to. For the first time, I considered the possibility of going back. Buenos Aires and hard work would make me forget... Then I conceived a

punishment. I would stay, to stare at Lucila at every meal, breakfast, party, with my eyes full of pain and reproach. She wouldn't dare fire me.

J. arrived as it was foreseen. A French from the South, lanky and cultivated, polite until surfeit, wise until inclement boredom. He may never have understood my attitude, my words dyed in irony – messages coded for other ears-, my looks that eviscerated him inch by inch, the neglect with which I washed and ironed his clothes.

They slept in the same room. The bell didn't ring again asking for my services. I still believed she would get up during the night to continue our ritual. In vain. It was as if our half year of increasing communion had never existed.

Her sheets gave off the smell of half-made, reluctant sex, her perfume mixed with J.'s. and I couldn't help crying morning after morning on her pillow, the only means of being in contact with her skin...



Our incongruent threesome continued in this way. One morning, however, close the date of the wedding, Lucila came in the kitchen secretly while I made breakfast. I remember clearly the pale glow of the morning, her fresh complexion and her silk robe, as white and delicate that you couldn't tell where the skin ended and the fabric began. She asked me for tea and toast and she sat at the large wooden table in the middle of the room. I put the steaming cup in front of her, avoiding her eyes, fixed on me like flames. Then she asked me to sit next to her and shared her breakfast. Obediently, I did what she asked, trembling on the inside but harsh on the outside.

We sipped our beverages at the same time. She barely ate half a toast and I saw her toying with the spoon. At last she started to talk. She tried literature, the weather, even our home country, which we had always denied. I didn't help her. I answered with monosyllables or mortifying silences. Finally she shut up and with her fingers she grazed mine. As if by magic, J. opened the kitchen door. Lucila stood up nervously and dragged him to the living room, leaving me alone and wretched. She didn't try approaching me for several weeks.



The unfortunate day drew near. At Lucila's request, J. had moved to a hotel to spend the week previous to the wedding. I had softened my harsh look, but went to pieces having dark thoughts when I was alone. I saw Lucila busy with the preparations, I saw her trying on the white dress, I saw her writing the invitations, I saw her absent-minded with a book forgotten in her hands.

One night, the night before the wedding, I woke up startled by an strident noise. In a few seconds I understood it was the bell, the secret button that linked our dreams. I woke up and crossed the hall in my nightgown. Lucila was sitting on her bed, her pajama unbuttoned showing her chest glistening with sweat. She took my hand and led me to the edge of the bed. I confronted her face, agitated by the despair of her inner struggle. She caressed my hair, my cheeks, finally she threw herself in my unstable arms and we fell, interwoven, among the sheets.

We didn't make love. We stayed still, chained to each other and panting, gazing at the ceiling that spinned at its whim. Then Lucila straightened up, leaned on the pillows without letting go of me, and announced she was going to tell me the story of her life.

She talked about the books she read as a child. In them the great geniuses and writers of the world gathered in Paris, as a baptism of fire. She mentioned her elitist family. First she thought that her origin was a privilege, then she discovered that it was a cheap cover to hide what wasn't said. She didn't go to school, she had tutors, at home. She learnt needlework, Latin, ballet, French, drawing. Her parents didn't let her play with her neighbours, they said they were vulgar. She spoke about literature as her only refuge. Her father had an endless library. Lucila sank in the deep sofas and devoured what she found. She learnt French from the age of six. Her mother talked to her in French for practice, but there were so many things she couldn't say for lack of vocabulary that she ended up studying the dictionary. Word per word, it took her years, and when she was full of meanings, her mother died and she couldn't say anything else to her. The classic ending, her father became gloomy, lifeless. He didn't argue any more and Lucila took advantage of the situation to flee. She arrived in Paris a teenager, alone, and that's how the rest of her life was built. Motherless, friendless, loveless.

She made a halt. Darkness devoured us and her body pounded wildly, but her mouth seemed so far away.

- I guess you destroyed my shallow idea of happiness. That's why I need J. now. You are here in an initiation trip and you are ready to go back and be whatever you want to be.

I didn't answer. I didn't understand anything of what she was saying, but I wasn't willing to push or beg or ask or explain. We spoke two different languages, impossible to be translated. I had to settle for the fugacity of what we had had. Besides her elaborated speech, I could only hear her tremulous skin, her well-read bones that were chanting: "I cannot give you more".

We finally fell asleep as we were, dressed and chained. In the morning I got rid of her arms, tucked her in and went to the kitchen to make breakfast. Opposite the kettle getting warm on the furnace and the light of dawn that flooded my sleepy eyes, I mentally went through what had happened since my arrival to Paris. Lucila's life, so delicately programmed and mine, an uncertain blur. Maybe she was right. It was high time for me to go back. There was nothing else for me in Paris, the city that had never belonged to me. I imagined the face of my brothers if I ever told them the true story and tried a smile. They might lock me up in a convent.
