



The Blue Unicorn

InstaBook

The Blue Unicorn

Edited by:
Blue Unicorn Editions

Printed by:
InstaBook Maker (tm)

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Copyright © 1995 by Víctor Celorio

InstaBooks are distributed and printed through:

INSTABOOK

For more information write to:

InstaBook Corporation
www.instabook.net

The Blue Unicorn

THE BLUE UNICORN

(OF SIRENS AND UNICORNS)

Víctor Celorio

The Blue Unicorn

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
T. S. Eliot

The Blue Unicorn

ONE

Three weeks before the attack with Molotov bombs against the National Palace during the Workers Parade of May first, Antonio Alarcón had a nightmare.

At least that's what he thought when he woke up, restless and sweating profusely, from the deep sleep in which he had been immersed. He thought everything had been just a bad dream which now, when he opened his eyes to consciousness, laid broken in a thousand pieces dispersed throughout the fog of oblivion.

His disturbed mind tried to recognize where he was, but the curtains were closed and the bedroom was in total darkness. Antonio was able to distinguish nothing that could help him discover where he was. He leaned on his right elbow, clumsily, and hit the edge of a piece of furniture. The pain made him a little bit more aware.

On top of the nightstand Antonio found the faint light of the alarm clock. The numbers flashed the exact time, set for Mexico City; 5:10 A.M. But...of which day? How many hours, or days, had he been there? Where was he?

Beside him, on the bed, he felt a body. It was Jennifer.

When he got up, his stomach was upset and his head was as hard and heavy as a stone. His numbed legs prickled and rebelled against his first steps.

He staggered to the bathroom, and had to kneel down and hold on to the white bowl of the toilet to retch all the contents of his stomach. He remained like that for awhile; too weak to move and coughing whenever he'd smell the stench of what he had thrown up.

Shaken, he got up, turned on the light, and without looking at himself in the mirror, he washed his face with cold water. He threw liquid on himself three or four times, enjoying the fresh sensation running down his neck. Afterwards he took a deep breath and then he confronted his image, which was reflected with exacting and insulting precision in the mirror; his eyelids were swollen, his eyes were red, and a heavy stubble shadowed his face. He tried to smile, but only grimaced. Without shaving, his face lost much of his virile attractiveness and acquired a certain air of vulgarity that had always irritated Jennifer.

"You look like a bandit"; she would say whenever he didn't shave.

Reasonably so, thought Antonio. Whenever he didn't shave his cheekbones stood out, and seemed to reduce the size of his black eyes, turning them into two dark, dangerous lines, which emphasized the Indian part of his genetic make-up. It had been precisely that mixture of Spaniard and Indian blood that attracted Jennifer when they first met at Berkeley, during a congress of the P.E.N. Club, which Antonio had attended as a correspondent, and Jennifer as a student of Liberal Arts. As time went by, that same mixture had become the subject of contention during their arguments: she would charge Antonio's stubbornness to the Indian half of his genes. When she felt like it, Jennifer would use it as a weapon to stop their discussions.

"Your Aztec blood is showing", she'd say, and would refuse to listen to one more word.

Antonio reached for the towel, and he read the letters printed in bright red on the white cloth. **LAS HADAS**, he read, and while he rubbed the thick towel over his face, Antonio remembered some murky images of the bad dream he'd had the night before. The images shook him. He turned towards the room, and felt a cold chill running down his back. Through the half-opened door, the white light of the bathroom cut a slice out of the shadows in the bedroom and illuminated the bed. On it, among the rumpled covers, from the waist up Jennifer's body stood out with brutal intensity. She was lying face down and her soft back was uncovered, coldly showing the skin, the golden skin which Antonio had caressed and kissed so many times.

Paralyzed, Antonio focused his senses trying to hear the sound of Jennifer's breathing. He himself stopped breathing and listened carefully, but the only thing he heard was relentless whisper of the roof ventilator, the beating of his heart and a murmur of voices in his feverish mind. He tried to discover some sign of life in her at the same time that his brain was being filled with fragmented images, screams of driveling idiots, and confusion.

Antonio looked at the long, blonde hair of Jennifer, some of which was draped over her cheek. He also saw the delicate and slender arm that rested on the pillow in an uncomfortable position. It was like so many other times in the past when he would stop writing late at night and would come back to bed to find Jennifer sleeping like that and would cover her with blankets trying to protect her so that nothing could disturb her sleep.

It was the same, everything was the same. Except that on the pillow there was a small pool of blood already coagulated.

II

At almost the same time, but in Moctezuma City, on the outskirts of the Capital, Rubí Toscano was smoking the last cigarette. He was lying on the edge of the bed he shared with his brother and a sister, both younger than he was. Throughout the night, his little sister had leaned against him and the soft warmth of her small body induced him to stay under the blankets. Rubí didn't want to go out into the chill of dawn. Not yet.

He reached out with his hand to tap the ash of the cigarette on the dish, which served as a base for the lighted candle, placed in front of a color photograph of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Rubí flicked the ash and remembered for the thousandth occasion in that long sleepless night the last time he'd seen his grandfather alive, ten days before.

That day, Rubí had gone to visit him at his house in San Pablo Ostotepec, and had found him sick and in a bad mood because grandmother wouldn't let him go out to work. The old man was restless and nervous. He said it was urgent for him to prepare his patch of land in the town's communal fields. He said the rain was coming and he had to get the ground ready before that. Grandma was totally opposed, and the old man pouted and sulked vainly. Rubí saw how skinny the old man was. So skinny that his body seemed just like a wire structure covered by a coat of leather wrinkled in fold over fold. The old man had lost almost all of his teeth since he began to have kidney problems, and his yellowish face was reduced to half of its size.

"Do listen to grandma, pop's. You're sick. Look at you. Your face looks like a squeezed lemon", Rubí kidded his grandfather. They were sitting across from each other at the table in the living room, where grandpa received his visitors by first ceremoniously taking off the old woven hat he'd used for so many years. He would hang it on a nail on the wall behind him and would wait until everybody else was seated before seating himself at the head of the table.

"Damn it, boy. Instead of helping me to get out of here, you also come to bother me. You better get out of here!" growled the old man, pretending to be angry with Rubí, who had always been his favorite grandson. Rubí was aware of that love and loved him back with the same intensity.

"Oh, come on grandpa. You know that you cannot work in the fields any longer."

"Say what? Am I already dead, or what?"

"No, no, God forbid...No. But for how many years have you sowed that land of yours?"

"Hum, let's see...I have collected sixty two crops. Sometimes two per year."

"That is a lot, isn't it? So what's the hurry? Take it easy. You need to rest if you want your health to get better."

"I can't rest. The land doesn't wait."

"When you get better I'll come to help you. If you want, we'll do it on my leave from the factory next month."

"By then it'll be too late."

"Why late? This time last year you were not even thinking of the land. You didn't start sowing until the end of May."

"Well, yes, but that's because each season is different. Two crops are never the same."

"I know, grandpa, but..."

"But what? One day late in the sowing may mean everything in the crop. I've been living fifty years with this stubborn old woman and she doesn't understand it yet", said the old man

pointing with a trembling and crooked finger at his wife, who had come out of the kitchen at that moment, carrying his medicine.

"The doctor said it's not good for you to get mad. Sulking is bad for you, and you know it", said the old woman. Grandfather growled again. Rubí smiled, kissed the hands of both of them, and then went to work, not knowing that he wouldn't see his grandfather alive again. A week later the old man took advantage of his wife's temporary absence and ran out of the house while the first rain of the year was falling. When they found him next morning, the old man was lying in a furrow of his land, with the plow next to him. His body was already rigid and as hard as an oak board.

After the wake, Rubí and his brothers, joined by their cousins and uncles, carried the wooden coffin uphill from the house until they reached the town's cemetery. On the way back, they had to carry their grandmother, since she had fainted after crying that she wanted to die right then and there when the casket was being lowered into the hollow in the ground. But once they were back home, she recovered enough to share the traditional food offered after a death in the family with all the neighbors, relatives, and friends who had come to grieve with her.

Rubí hadn't been able to sleep at all, thinking about the old man. He had loved his grandfather a lot and now he would miss him for the rest of his life. It didn't seem possible that the old man wouldn't be there anymore to give him advice; one day he was there, with his face wreathed in a toothless smile, and the next day, he wasn't. Death was like a tornado, which arrived suddenly, left suddenly, and took something precious in its path.

Rubí smashed his unfiltered cigarette in with the others that filled the candle's dish, and pulled his legs from the covers to sit on the edge of the bed. He turned on the cheap radio and tuned into the station that carried the time. He felt the cold of the ground when he stood up to put on the jeans he had picked up from the chair where he had left them.

*...from the observatory of Mexico City, minute to minute,
the exact time: five thirty...*

He turned off the radio. He would have to hurry to arrive at the factory on time.

He put on a white shirt which had a picture of a soccer ball on the front, and over the shirt, he put on a vest made of artificial leather. He turned on the light and listened to the sleepy murmurs of his brother, Pedro, the snores of his father on the other side of the curtains which divided the room in two, and the soft weeping of Sara, the youngest of his sisters. He looked at himself in the piece of mirror hung from a nail, underneath a naked bulb.

Rubí had long hair, as long as he was allowed to wear it inside the factory, and a hostile look on his square face. His wide shoulders and heavy back gave him an aspect both sinister and powerful. The top of his nose clearly showed the scar where his nasal bone had been broken during a street fight three years earlier. His right eyebrow was split in two for the same reason. The work at the factory and the exercise at the gym had made him stronger, increasing his appearance and his reputation as a mean fighter. But that threatening appearance disappeared when Rubí showed the smile that had earned him his nickname. He had been baptized in the Catholic Church as Roberto, but when his father saw him smile for the first time he'd said that his brown face lit up like a ruby. And that's what they had called him ever since.

That dawn, looking at his face in the mirror, Rubí could barely recognize himself. The reflected image was the same as always, and yet it was different. Something had changed in him. Nervously, he examined the room. He carefully inspected the house that his parents had built slowly throughout the last twenty years on an empty lot that did not belong to them in the first place. His parents had emigrated penniless from San Pablo. Following an old custom which went all the way back to the Aztecs, they had started the long walk towards the highlands, and they had arrived at the Capital, they had installed themselves on the empty land they had found on the outskirts of The Big City, la Ciudad de Mexico, The Capital of The Republic of Mexico, the largest city on earth, the bellybutton of the world -as the Aztecs used to call it. Then, after them, many others arrived, until they

created an immense barrio joined to the city, a barrio lost in anarchy, without running water or any other service. The place was known as Ciudad Moctezuma. In spite of the poverty, Rubí was proud of having grown up in those streets playing soccer, read comic books, watching television in the houses of his friends at the barrio, and listening to rock and cumbias on the radio.

But now Rubí looked around and examined critically the walls that had been raised slowly, brick by brick, and with so much effort by his parents. The house consisted of two large rooms; in one there was the cooking area and the table and a couch for visitors. In the next, divided by a 'wall' made of old sheets, his parents and their seven children. He also saw the floors of gray concrete, the porous bricks of a gray color, the roofing made of sheets of asbestos —also gray— and Rubí decided that the world was gray.

He went out into the morning chill. He walked against the night wind that was sweeping through the Valley of Anáhuac placed at 7500 feet above sea level. It was a dry wind, sweeping down the dark alleys, carrying the loathsome smells of the trash dumps nearby. He walked several blocks making loud noises to scare off the huge rats — as big as rabbits— which ran off to hide by the walls, until he reached a well-lit avenue. He went towards the corner where the bus stopped. A block before he arrived, he passed a wounded man sitting on the ground with his back leaning against a crumbling wall. His hands and his face were bloodied. A skinny, hungry dog was licking the blood.

"Hi there", the wounded man said to Rubí.

"Hi there", answered Rubí, absent minded, and kept on walking. He arrived at the corner at which he caught the bus and waited for awhile blowing hot breath into his hands and thinking that he should have kept a couple of cigarettes for the trip. The bus arrived. It was full of passengers, as always, and he was pushed and insulted when he pushed and insulted to get up the bus. Using his elbows he was able to open a small space on top of the crowded stairs. He fought to get inside of the bus to avoid the danger of ending his days spread against a light post. One day he had witnessed that kind of death. A man was traveling with his body hanging outside the bus; when the bus made a sharp turn, the man had crashed against a light post and

Rubí had never been able to forget that open head through which the brains were coming out. Since then he only traveled in the interior of the bus. The kicks and shoves he had to deal with to get up and into the bus were so routine that he didn't even notice them any more.

He left the bus in Calzada Zaragoza, climbed onto another bus that left him at the entrance of the subway, and then traveled on the orange cars until the end station at Taxqueña. There he hailed a minibus which deposited him across from the entrance of the factory exactly one hour and forty five minutes after he had started his trip. He arrived just in time: the guards were already closing the large gates. On top of the gate a huge sign announced the name of the factory.

TEXMEX, S.A.
(TEXTILES MEXICANOS, SOCIEDAD ANONIMA)

"You can't go in", one of the guards said to Rubí, blocking the entrance with his body.

"It is exactly ten minutes after seven. I am within the tolerance period," said Rubí.

"By your watch. Mine says seven twenty," said the guard with a smile of satisfaction. He was called Sapo, because his bloated face looked like that of a toad.

"Let me go in, Sapo."

"Nope. Tomorrow."

"You don't like me, do you?"

"No."

"Well, all right, then let's settle this as men, outside.

But now let me go in to work."

"I already told you. I will let you in tomorrow", said Sapo, and he rested his right hand on the .38 revolver he carried in a black holster on his belt.

"You are a son of a bitch."

"Fuck you. Get out of here", answered the guard, and made a gesture of pulling his gun out, but a shout stopped him.

"Let him come in!"

"But, Captain-"

"Let him in, I said."

"Yes, Captain", said Sapo rancorously, and he opened the door. Rubí ran inside, thanked the Captain as he passed him, ran to the office, searched for his time card, punched his entrance 7:09 on the factory clock and hurriedly crossed the long corridor inside the immense factory. Behind him another five workers made it too, and they were the last ones to come into the yard.

Inside the locker room Rubí changed his clothes in a minute or two, and at 7:15 he reached his place on the machine. He didn't think at all of Sapo. He knew that they would find each other on the street sooner or later and then they would settle their differences once and for all. At that moment Rubí was still worried by the strange sensation which he had felt when he had looked at himself in the mirror.

A minute later the deafening noise of the machines surrounded him and Rubí concentrated on the daily routine.

-three

Antonio walked into the bedroom trying not to make noise. He knew that Jennifer wouldn't wake up, but the habit created by so many sleepless nights was strong. Sometimes, when the love with her had been great and full of goodness, he felt a powerful strength, an internal fire which pushed him to get up and work at his typewriter until the sun came up, as if moved by an outside force. Other times, when their love wasn't good (as when both drank too much and fought, leaving neither of them able to control the beast of passion) Antonio also got up, wishing to feel that same energy, only to spend hours like an idiot in front of a white page which he wasn't able to fill. Always, when he came back to bed, he would find the body of Jennifer waiting for him.

Now he approached the bed and reached with his trembling hands in the direction of her body, stopping an inch or two before he touched the tanned skin, not daring to touch the woman's back. It was an empty gesture, useless, since nothing could modify what had happened. He barely understood it in his chaotic mind as he breathed in the heavy and sweet smell of the blood spilled on the pillow and the sheets. He understood that his nightmare was a reality, a reality he felt overwhelming him as if it had a specific weight and that weight were crushing him. A dark shadow descended over him. Antonio fell on the white marble floor. He felt a deep coldness and at the same time began to sweat. He lost the control he still had; his muscles trembled, he urinated a spout of yellowish liquid and then the incredulity and the fear turned into an immense fury against the madmen who were celebrating with laughter their triumph over him. He listened to them

more clearly every moment, over the furious screams of Jennifer during their fight of the night before as if it were a continuous cacophony.

"Cannot be, cannot be..." he murmured several times before he got up. He looked at Jennifer and the blood underneath the still body. The evidence was there, the traces of evil floating with the smell of old humidity and of putrid pieces of cloth. The laughter grew. He couldn't stand it and he threw himself against one of the walls with his head first, as a bull would do.

The force of the crash made him fall to the ground, almost unconscious, but the laughter was still there. Antonio wanted to hurl himself at the wall again but he wasn't able to get to his feet. He felt an enormous pressure all over his body, which wouldn't let him breathe freely. He gasped for air with his mouth open, tasting on the dry surface of his tongue the traces of the alcohol and the smog of the cigarettes consumed.

He couldn't think clearly. The ideas and the images and the noise formed a dark curtain as he struggled to regain his rationality. The laughter turned into seductive murmurs and imperious orders that pushed him in opposite directions.

Impulsively he obeyed one of the voices and crawled towards the bathroom, but the another voice shouted that he should escape from there and Antonio went towards the door of the suite. When he reached it, another voice became insistent and he went back and all the way to the other side of the bed. On all fours he passed over the clothes thrown out of the drawers of the rattan dresser and went to search for Jennifer's purse, the same purse she had used the night before. Which one was it? That one, yes, that white purse. He found it lying beside the nightstand. He pulled out a leather wallet. Inside, underneath the driver's license issued by the city of San Francisco to one Jennifer Ann Highland, he found a small square of foil paper.

Antonio obeyed the orders of the crazies and pulled out the square package carefully. He picked up the imported pack of cigarettes from the nightstand, the gold lighter with his initials on it, and got up. He walked back to the bathroom feeling how weak his legs

were. A terrible stinging on his forehead went down his nose and his right eye and then spread towards the back of his head.

He avoided looking at Jennifer. He placed the cigarettes and the small package on the edge of the basin and opened the faucets. In the silence of the room the noise of the gush of water startled him. He washed his hands again; he dried them on a facial cloth and opened the package, trying to control the trembling of his fingers.

The white powder seemed innocent enough, like talcum. He did what somebody -he didn't remember who'd shown him; with his lighter he heated the foil of paper from underneath until a light gray smoke was produced. He stopped for a moment when everything was ready. The chorus of crazy men urged him to go on. He inhaled the white powder. First through one nostril. Then through the other, until he finished with the white powder. He waited for awhile, feeling nothing more than a slight itch inside his nose. He took a cigarette out of the long golden pack and lit it as he sat down heavily on the toilet. It was then that he felt a rush going up to his brain, inside of which there was a turbulence of scrambled voices whispering cabalistic words impossible to understand among the commotion of screams and insults and the jeering laughter of driveling idiots. His thoughts were controlled by echoes of lost words, by images once forgotten and hidden away at the bottom of his memories, by emotions lived long ago which already seemed to have changed their original meaning, where love became hate and hope turned into despair, by ideas and sanity which seemed to have been misplaced in the excrement running through the putrid and endless sewers of Mexico City, that monstrous city, that chaotic city, dirty and stubby, clean and wooded, a schizophrenic entity with multiple personalities and remnants of several lost civilizations drowned in the mud of the underground, under the roots of its past, that past which was Antonio's and everyone else's who had had the misfortune of having been born in that city of ghosts, of black smog and dirty customs, of luxury and misery opposing each other in the asymmetry of millionaire residences sharing the land with the beggars' shacks made out of pasteboard and wood sticks; the opulence and the hunger, extremes of the same polarity which touched each other without shooting sparks...

The memories crisscrossed each other, but one sensation stood out with clarity, imposing itself on everything else, even on that overwhelming headache which had stupefied him while he tried to control the avalanche of images; it was a sensation as desolate and barren as the desert at night.

Nervously he exhaled the smoke from the cigarette and made an effort to wipe out all the images that didn't matter to him anymore. He had to concentrate; had to remember what had happened, but the distraction created by the madmen's voices stopped him. He closed his eyes and confronted the driveling idiots until he made them shut up and then made them go away. To stop the mystical chants he invoked the ocean, three floors below, and was able to listen to the rumor of the waves against the beach. Then the voice of Jennifer began to hover above the waves; it was born as a song out of the deep of that green and blue ocean, in which the plankton shone like stars in the obscure profundity of the warm waters from the Coast of Colima. It was a voice as bubbling and sparkling as champagne, which was emerging slowly to the surface where the full moon gave silver touches to the surge...

"You couldn't control yourself, right? You had to ruin everything", said Jennifer as soon as she speeded up the Mercedes. Now that she was alone with him her charming smile of Good Girl, which was also her smile of Lady of High Society and also her smile of BusinessWoman disappeared from her face. Antonio feigned not to have heard. His drunkenness was phenomenal.

"Ugh! I'm glad it's over. I am exhausted", he said with a thick tongue.

"Tired of what? Of drinking tequila?"

Antonio didn't answer. He took a deep breath out of the warm night air trying to dry off the alcohol that was numbing his tongue and his capacity to answer. They were coming back from a party at the house of Fernandez Izárraga, inside the Club Santiago, the most exclusive zone in Manzanillo.

Antonio remembered vaguely the argument inside the car. Jennifer was driving the car too fast and he tried to stop her, but she was furious and didn't want to give up the wheel of the gray Mercedes

that Fernandez had loaned to them to go back to *LAS HADAS*. The speed accentuated Antonio's vertigo and it acquired momentum by itself. Eventually it was nice, that sensation of floating in the night, but Jennifer was accelerating more and more. On the curves, it seemed she was going to lose control. The danger was evident and imposed itself on his drunkenness. He thought he should ask Jennifer to slow down, but what the hell, he thought, a dangerous ride in the night was good, really good. What better way to disappear forever?

"You were tired of what Antonio? Were you tired of playing with little girls?" she asked again with a sweet voice, but as dangerous as the rattle of a snake about to strike.

Antonio looked towards the sky. Large clouds were an omen of a storm. A few hours earlier it had rained slightly, and now it looked like the clouds were about to open again, this time completely.

"No. The little girls were the only fun part of your party. As for everybody else, they seemed to have a moral impediment to thinking. Perhaps it was forbidden by their religion, ha, ha, ha..."

"The rest of us have other things to think about, darling. More important things. And more realistic."

"Oh, yeah? Whose reality, Jennifer?"

"The reality of your drunkenness! That's for real. Look at yourself. Tuck the shirt back in your pants and close your fly! You are losing your class, darling. A little bit more and you'll end up in the street, like those miserable bums."

"*Teporochos*, Jennifer, *teporochos*. That's the right word."

"*Borracho!*" said Jennifer, pronouncing emphatically the word in Spanish. Antonio, in spite of his dizziness, was able to notice an anger and an underlying anguish, which were new and hardened the voice of the woman. Jennifer was spewing out the words.

"You didn't let go of that damn bottle all night long. You were rude and nasty to everybody. I am tired of your insolence."

"Insolence?"

"Oh, Tony. You are a bore that's all. You have only one subject of conversation. And believe me, nobody cares whether Hernán Cortés did or did not kill his first wife" she said. It was then

that he understood that the fight was bigger than he had thought at the beginning. Jennifer had never said anything about the research he was doing for his next book. They paused while the Mercedes passed by the guards at the entrance of Club Santiago, and Antonio saw Jennifer smiling to the police and waving goodbye. As soon as the car came out to the road she wiped off her smile and charged again.

"And the way you attacked that poor man, accusing him of being a thief in front of everybody, was unforgivable."

"I didn't accuse him of anything. I only asked him some questions."

"Does that make you feel important? A big boy? Does that make you feel intelligent, genial, misunderstood?"

"Jennifer, slow down."

"You should accept my offer, you know, and come into business with me. I need you", said Jennifer, slightly lowering her voice. Antonio saw her green eyes, which at that moment had the same cold expression which the old man Highland, Jennifer's grandfather, used to have.

"I am a writer, not a business man"; he murmured and bit his tongue, knowing beforehand that he was leaving himself exposed to her next attack.

"You should forget that novel of yours and dedicate yourself full time to doing business with me. I need you. And you know it."

"Whenever I require your advice I'll ask for it."

"And what's the point of giving it to you? You've never allowed me to advise you. You have never listened to me."

"I listened to you once and it was enough. But that doesn't stop you, right?"

Jennifer shut up. They were driving at that moment along the road beside the *Bahía de Santiago*. It was a road that ran alongside the coast, where the breeze was strong in that zone free of obstacles. The long, blonde hair of Jennifer was agitated by the wind and gave the appearance of a teenager to her classic beauty of straight and soft features. Antonio realized that the weather was perfect; hot,

but not oppressive, with very little humidity and without pollution. Below, a few feet beyond the road, the waves were breaking over the beach, which was lit by the full moon above. Over them, the arch of the sky, full of diamonds, was immense. As Antonio looked, black clouds covered the moon...and then there was a blank in his memory until Jennifer had slowed the car to turn into the entrance of the beach *La Audiencia*, towards *Las Hadas*. The arguments had changed, but the desire to get out of the car had not left Antonio. On the contrary, it had grown stronger with each passing moment.

It wouldn't have been the first occasion on which he did just that. He did it on their first meeting.

Several years before, during a conference in Berkeley given by a group of American writers from the P.E.N. Club, Antonio had been a correspondent covering the event. In the auditorium, full of famous writers, newscasters no less famous, students and the general public, Antonio had discovered the beautiful face of an immobile woman who, at a distance, seemed like a Greek statue. There were only a few minutes left before the conference was to begin. Antonio crossed the auditorium and approached the woman. She became aware of his gaze and smiled. He thought that hers was a friendly smile and told her so.

"Quihubo, güerita."

"What did you say?"

"I said hi. Quihubo means hello in Mexico."

She looked coldly at him.

"So?"

"So nothing. I wanted to meet you. Would you like to show me San Francisco when this is over?"

"I can't. I came here to work", the woman answered dryly. Antonio wanted to insist, but the conference started at that moment and Antonio concentrated on the words of the invited writers. The subject of the conference was WAR.

Antonio didn't forget the woman. In that brief exchange he had been able to guess that something even more interesting than the huge green eyes of the blonde was hidden underneath the heavy hand-

woven cashmere sweater and the old blue jeans she was wearing that day. After thinking about it Antonio decided that the woman possessed a sweet but powerful aroma of elegance and old money which drifted from every pore of her body even though she tried to hide it. Her worn clothes were not enough to hide what she was and Antonio remained intrigued by that slender woman who was more than a natural California beauty.

After four and a half hours, when the last of the speakers finished, the coordinator in charge of public relations for the auditorium approached Antonio with a sly smile on his rubicund and hairless face.

"You Mexicans are always the same. You don't lose time, do you? Somebody wants to meet you."

"Who is it?"

"Come with me."

They crossed the auditorium, and Antonio found himself again facing the Greek statue.

"Miss Highland, this is Mister Alarcón, correspondent from Mexico."

"Nice to meet you, Mister Alarcón."

"You too, Miss Highland."

"My name is Jennifer."

"Mine, Antonio."

"Listen, Antonio, this is the proper way to meet people here in United States. We are not used to improvisation."

"I see."

"I know you are a reporter. I would like you to read what I've written for my school's newspaper."

"I can't. I came here to work"; Antonio answered and turned around, leaving Jennifer openmouthed. Antonio joined the people walking out of the auditorium and once in the street he went toward the university's exit. Jennifer caught him as he was crossing the campus.

"All right. I deserved that. Now we are even."

"Estamos a mano."

"Could you read my work?"

"Sure. After we come back from having dinner."

"Hey, that's blackmail!"

"You don't say."

She smiled.

"All right. I accept."

After that, the relationship developed quickly, and before they could think much about it, she had eloped with Antonio to Mexico.

As it turned out, on their first date Jennifer had arrived at Antonio's hotel in a small green sports car and drove him to a restaurant, which served Italian food. The tables with their checkered cloths stood on a deck suspended over a cliff above the ocean. At a distance, the Golden Gate Bridge was clearly seen showered with lights and hovering majestically at the entrance of San Francisco Bay. They ordered a dish of Manicotti and another of Cannelloni from the smiling owner of the restaurant and agreed to taste the white wine which came out of the vineyards owned by the restaurateur's family in the north of Italy. They liked it, ordered a bottle and installed themselves comfortably to wait for the pasta to arrive.

"What do you write about?" she asked.

"A little of everything."

"Such as love, for example?" Jennifer asked with a seductive smile.

"Such as love. And hate. And goodness. And passion. And history."

"And politics?"

"I don't like politics. The biggest catastrophes of this century have occurred due to politics. In Mexico we live obsessed by it, I believe. Sometimes I think that politics control the entire cultural spectrum of my country."

"That might be because Mexico had never had any coherent politics. It has always navigated between two waters; today to the right, tomorrow to the left."

"Maybe", said Antonio, surprised.

"And the ruling party is so powerful that it drowns everybody else, isn't that true? By treating the people like children, it doesn't let them grow up."

"What is your major? Mexican Political Science?" Antonio asked, intrigued.

"Oh, God, no. I am in Liberal Arts. Let's say I am a dilettante. I just went back to school."

The waiter brought the pasta, and the conversation followed the same themes during dinner. Afterwards they went to finish the night at a quiet bar that the owner of the restaurant recommended in his fractured English. At the bar they continued talking of many things for several hours, but particularly about Mexico. Even though Antonio tried to change the subject, Jennifer insisted on talking about the problems of that nation. When they were going back towards the hotel where he was a guest, Antonio interrupted her.

"Stop telling me the problems of my country."

"Oh, I didn't think it bothered you."

"Of course it does when you only mention the bad things. Why don't you tell me the problems of your own country? What do you know about Mexico? Have you ever been there?"

"Oh yeah. Once. I was there for a week", Jennifer said, parking the car by the sidewalk.

"And you believe that in a week you can know and understand a whole country?"

"Well, no. But my grandmother was Mexican. And my grandfather has some business there."

"Aha! I thought so. You are one of those poor little rich girls who try to pacify their conscience by talking about somebody else's problems."

"I think that what bothers you is that is a woman telling you! You are one of those Mexican machos!"

"And proud of it, *mamacita*", Antonio said, and pulled her towards him to kiss her. She slapped him. Antonio looked at her puzzled. Then, he opened the car's door and got out. He began to walk over the coating of snow that had fallen while they were at dinner. Jennifer asked him to come back to the car, but when he refused, she gave up and left. Antonio waited stoically. When the red lights of her car disappeared in the distance, he allowed an intense shiver to shake him from head to toes.

"*Ah, carajo*", he said. The cold was awful. He had never imagined that the temperature could go down so low in California. He tried to catch a ride but nobody stopped. After two hours, when he was sure he would die, frozen on an empty road, Antonio was able to get a taxi that took him to his hotel. He went up to his room feeling that his clothes were made of ice. As he entered his room, the telephone rang. It was Jennifer.

"I've been calling you every fifteen minutes. I was worried."

"Forget it."

"Listen, I cannot say anything intelligent at this moment. I am exhausted."

There was a pause. Antonio looked out through the window to the sunrise outside.

"But I would like to see you again", said she with an effort.

"So would I."

"How about later today? I'll stop to pick you up at eleven and we'll go to the conference together. Is that all right with you?"

"I'll be here waiting"; Antonio said and hung up the phone. It was urgent for him to get under the hot water of the shower.

That was the first night. The second, third and fourth they spent locked up in the hotel, making love. The fifth, they spent on board Mexicana's flight to Mexico City.

Antonio recalled how Jennifer had stopped the Mercedes at the entrance of *LAS HADAS*. The doorman welcomed them with a

happy smile. Antonio wondered why he was so happy. They both got out of the car. Jennifer delivered the car keys, flashed her always-perfect smile to the doorman and walked into the lobby.

"Oh, my darling...The truth is that I ran away with you because I was blinded by my teenage passion. I had faith in your talent...and I desired you. Has anybody told you that you're very attractive?" she asked without losing her cold smile. She reached out to touch his strong masculine neck.

"The truth is that I have never desired anybody as much as you", Jennifer insisted, and searched for Antonio's hand. The elevator arrived at that moment. As the doors closed behind them Jennifer took Antonio's hand up to her left breast. Underneath the light silk dress she wore nothing. Antonio caressed the hardened nipple and then pulled back his hand. He guessed that the anger Jennifer had felt was still there. Her behavior was a vain attempt to hide it.

"Kiss me, Tony", she said.

"We are almost there", Antonio replied, irritated. The argument in the car had bothered him, but even in his drunken stupor, he was aware that the real issue had not yet surfaced. Jennifer's caresses worked as an excuse; it was always the same; first the insults. Afterwards, Jennifer tried to fix everything through her passion. Her desire would inevitably awaken his, and when their bodies intertwined in bed, sometimes softly, but almost always with a certain restrained violence, she considered everything forgotten. A touch or a kiss was usually enough to kindle the mutual fire. However Antonio knew that before and after lightning that fire she would despise him and hate him for that power he had over her. She would despise him and would let him know it even though afterwards they would love each other again with the same passion and madness, never resolving their differences in a definitive way. When they began to love each other, everything else was forgotten. Incapable of separating from him, she couldn't do anything else but to hate him during the day, and then go back and love him again with that fire which devoured both of them every night.

But Antonio didn't think of that when he was trying to remember the incidents of the night before. He lit another cigarette with the butt of the first and remembered that Jennifer, resentful over

Antonio's rejection in the elevator, restarted the discussion as soon as they were inside the suite. Once there, the argument kept on growing, and the level of their voices raising.

Antonio recalled vaguely the shouts, the accusations of both sides, the insult, and then everything became blurred again. From the bathroom, he saw, resting on the rattan dresser, the suitcase he had begun to pack, preparing to leave for good, and the clothes strewn all over the floor by Jennifer's blows when she refused to let him go. Antonio again felt the scratches on his chest and his back and the bites she had given him on the shoulder and then that immense fury which clouded his reason. From then on his fragments of memory were like pieces of a giant puzzle swirling beyond his reach, as if floating on the agitated waters of a swimming pool.

IV

At eleven in the morning Rubí Toscano felt a maddening emptiness in his stomach and remembered that he hadn't eaten anything since his grandfather's burial, the day before. He turned to see the clock that was placed high on the wall over the central section he was working in. It was one hour short of the time he would be allowed to take his lunch break. He told himself he'd have to buy food since he had forgotten his lunch bag that day.

At eleven thirty the paymaster came pushing his small cart, guarded by two armed men. Rubí received his weekly salary. Five minutes after twelve a relief worker arrived, and Rubí went out to eat. He bought two *tortas* of fried egg from one of the workers who sold food inside of the factory as a compliment to his earnings. Rubí also got a soda and drank it on the bench of the dressing room and kept himself away from the rest of the workers. He wanted to be alone, something which went against his regular habits.

While he was finishing his lunch, the lid of the air conditioning conduit on the roof opened and one by one five workers came out from their secret expedition to the women's showers.

"Hey, that's my man Rubí!" said one of them.

"*Quihubo, Manotas.*" Did you see anything?" asked Rubí.

"Nope. It was empty. Will you come with us tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"All right. See you then."

"See you."

After his lunch, Rubí crossed the central court of the immense factory and passed by the owner's son who was yelling at one of the mechanics from the automotive section of the factory. Under the shining noon sun the figures projected a strong contrast; the young man was tall, and his clothes resplendent of money and a high social position. The mechanic was an old man, wide of shoulders, stubby and fat. His working clothes were dirty with grease and accumulated dust. He had a deformed face, because he had received the full impact of a battery's explosion when he was trying to fix the car owned by the father of the young man standing in front of him. The accident had happened several years before, and now the flesh of his face looked like melted wax. His left eye was missing. All the other workers called him **Monster**, even though the mechanic was a pacific and good man.

"It's not my fault, Mister Meyer. They haven't brought me the parts I need"; Monster was excusing himself looking with his single eye at the floor, trying to avoid the young man's fury.

"I don't want to hear any of your excuses! You always have a reason for not doing the job. You were told to repair that machine ten days ago and the damn thing is still broken!"

"Yes sir, but please understand that if I don't have the parts..."

"Then go get them, stupid old man!"

Rubí stopped when he heard the insult, and approached them.

"Don't insult him," he said impulsively.

"And what is your problem? You go back to work right now if you don't want me to fire you too! Come on! Move!" said the young man snapping his fingers. Rubí came closer to him.

"Just don't insult us. We are workers, not your slaves"; he answered with a low voice, his teeth clenched and his entire body tensed. The young man felt the menace and blushed, which made his nose seem longer, and then gave up. He pretended to ignore Rubí. He looked at the mechanic and gave him an order in a calmer tone of voice.

"I want that machine ready by next week."

"Yes, sir, as soon as they get me the pieces I need" said the mechanic still meekly, but more sure of himself now that he was receiving Rubí's support. The young owner couldn't find anything else to say. He turned around and stalked away.

"Thanks, little brother", said the mechanic.

"Don't let them treat you that way, Monstruo. Go and complain to the union."

"Oh, no, don't say that. Then I would really get fired. Better leave it alone."

"The union should help you, Monstruo. That's what we pay them for."

"No, Rubí. They don't get involved in this kind of things. If I complain, they will black list me and I just can't risk the job. I have eight sons, you know. Thanks, but no thanks. Better to leave it alone. Thanks anyway", said the mechanic and went away walking slowly, his wide back slumped hopelessly.

Rubí shrugged. It was the only thing he could do. He finished crossing the patio and opened the pressurized door of the climatized building where he worked. Immediately he was deafened by the machines' noise. It was like the heavy humming of ten airplane engines and there was no way of diminishing it. Rubí placed balls of cotton into his ears, although they were of little use. The humming persisted as a vibration in his brain.

He went to his post, where he found the supervisor waiting for him with a note of reprimand for having come back late from lunch. Rubí didn't say anything, but suspected that the young Meyer had something to do with the note.

"Sign here", shouted the supervisor, and presented him with some blue papers held on a wooden plaque. Rubí read and signed the note. The supervisor gave him a copy of the reprimand.

"Next time it will be two days of punishment."

"Make it three", answered Rubí, with a challenge.

"As you wish", said the supervisor, accustomed to the way the workers behaved and reacted, and left. Rubí retook his place on the machine. He began to work the strings, and suddenly understood

why he couldn't recognize himself in the mirror that morning; it was because for the first time in his life he didn't see himself only in the present; he also saw himself in the future and what he had seen seemed hopeless. All the rest of his life he would be a worker just as his father had been before him. The difference was that Rubí didn't share the illusion and enthusiasm that the machines had provoked in his father, which had caused him to leave his plow. Rubí didn't like the machines even though he had an uncanny facility to understand them. Some days he even detested them intensely. Like when he thought of his father, who had worked for twenty-five years in the same factory; twenty-five years of effort and daily labor which, in the end, didn't mean a thing. At the end, he had nothing, since the machines hadn't given him anything in exchange. To Rubí being a worker only meant being a part of a process which never ended. He understood then why the death of his grandfather had affected him so much; one-second he was alive, and the next, he was not. Life was leaving him through those machines. And life had to be enjoyed to its fullest because death was lurking, ready to attack at any instant. But how could he enjoy life if he were always closed in the vicious circle of factory-barrio-factory? How, if just the fact that traveling to and from work added four more hours to his daily shift of eight hours a day? How, if he didn't have the money or the time to do anything else?

His friends had resigned themselves. They had adjusted as best they could and had forgotten what they had wished in school. Pichichi had wanted to be a doctor, but now he worked at the factory and drove a taxi afterwards; Martin had wanted to be a lawyer, and he only reached high school. He now had a taco stand outside a movie theater. It seemed that it was forbidden for people like them to make plans for the future. Rubí himself had also dreamed of becoming a lawyer, but his family didn't have the money to feed everybody so Rubí got a job in TEXMEX and had gone straight to hell. Everybody had resigned themselves to seek the money needed to survive, the money needed just to get along. Everybody but one. Isauro Peña still had dreams. Rubí always saw him carrying books that Isauro read with hungry eyes, reading each word as if his life depended on it.

Sometimes he loaned the books to Rubí and insisted that he should read them too. But every time Rubí tried it, even though he did

his best to concentrate on his reading, the images just didn't correspond to the reality of his day by day existence. Rubí would wonder whether those who wrote the books were men from outer space, from another world, or were simply mad. That feeling was reinforced by the images which he saw on television, scenes which showed luxurious and attractive places, beautiful places which were so different from his habitual world. The same thing happened with the newspapers, which was why he only read the sports section. He understood and enjoyed that section, with its simple scores and winners and losers. That other reality which existed outside the factory and far away from the barrio, seemed to be in some other dimension which was unreachable to him; so far away, as remote as the moon itself and while Rubí made an effort to keep up the rhythm required by the row of machines he was tending, he remembered the brief vacation which he had taken in Acapulco with his friends some years before. He remembered those days with pleasure and at the same time he resented them because he was aware that those worlds were forbidden to him and to people like him. He knew that he was condemned. He knew that he was never going to be able to get out of the hole because the more he moved, the deeper he would sink. Just like in a swamp.

After a while, Rubí saw that Perfumado was signaling him from across the other side of the corridor that divided the rows of machines. Rubí answered by rising his hand, and Perfumado pointed to the clock on the wall. It was ten after two. Using the signals that they had established to communicate with each other inside the noisy factory, Perfumado indicated that he was not to leave, that Perfumado would wait for him in the locker room. Rubí nodded absentmindedly. He was beginning to feel the first symptoms of the accustomed headache. In a little bit he would feel as if something blunt had hit him, leaving his brain in a thick cloud, dark and heavy, which wouldn't let him think clearly.

At three o'clock, when his shift was over, Rubí bathed himself in the cold water of the showers and then sat in front of his locker. He took the rest of the soda he had begun to drink during lunch, and with that he swallowed three aspirins. Afterwards he began to get dressed.

"Hurry up! The game is about to begin!" said Perfumado getting close. Rubi looked at him from top to bottom. His friend was already completely dressed in a two-piece electric red suit, a tie with white flowers, and black shoes that had been recently shined. Perfumado looked uncomfortable in those clothes.

"Are you really going to the game dressed like that?"

"Sure. Didn't you know that Graciela is going with me?"

Rubí smiled while he pulled on his jeans. His round face acquired an air of playful innocence with his smile of full, white, strong teeth.

"Do you want to impress her?" he asked and tightened his belt to the last hole. This accentuated his square torso, and his muscular arms that seemed to be out of proportion to his skinny legs.

"Yep. This time she won't escape alive", said Perfumado while he combed his rebel hair in front of the small mirror which

Rubí kept on the inside of his locker door, below a poster of a naked mulatta. "She's scorned me too often just to let her go like that."

"I think you are making a big mistake."

"No way. She's almost in the bag."

Isauro arrived running to interrupt them and asked Rubí to wait for him at the corner, saying he would meet him there pretty soon.

"What's going on, little mouse? If the cat is not around, what's your hurry?" said Rubi.

"I've got to go to Personnel. But wait for me."

"Got any problems?"

"None. The thing is, I already quit", said Isauro backing up. "I'll tell you about it later", he said, and left in a hurry.

Rubí finished dressing. After tying his shoelaces, he revised the contents of the canvas bag he kept inside his locker. In the bag he carried his shorts, socks, and football shoes. The bag stunk of sweat and dust.

"Hey, Palomino..." shouted Serafín, and old worker whose face was full of black dots, to a young boy who waited his turn outside

the shower stall. The old man approached Palomino, who looked at him with a silly smile. Rubí and Perfumado listened attentively.

"Hey, Palomino, do you like my watch? Well, I'll give it to you if you make *that* thing get hard", Serafin said, pointing at the huge apparatus which Palomino had between his legs.

"Tch, oh, come on..." said the boy.

"Damn old faggot", said Perfumado to the old man.

"Let him go!" shouted another worker when old Serafin tried to stick his hand between the legs of the young man, who was slow to understand. He laughed stupidly and covered his genitals with both hands.

"It's hard to believe that such a beautiful machine, just doesn't work," said old Serafin, shaking his head amongst the laughter of all the other workers.

"That's because he doesn't like you, asshole. You're too ugly"

"That's a fucking lie. The truth is that he can't get it up.

Palomino's face blushed heavily. As soon as there was an empty space he ran into the showers, still laughing in a stupid way. Serafin went back to his locker ignoring the jokes the other workers called to him.

"Come on. Let's go", said Rubí closing his locker. Carrying his canvas bag, he went out to the central patio. Perfumado followed him. They clocked out at the front office. At the gate, Rubí approached Sapo, the guard.

"I'll wait for you outside", he said, challenging. Sapo didn't answer. He only looked at Rubí with his killer instincts clearly reflected in his black pupils. Rubí stood there, eye to eye. When the guard blinked, Rubí smiled and went out to the street surrounded by the groups formed by the thousands of workers leaving the factory. The large blue gates at the entrance spewed them in growing waves first, and then the waves began to die down.

Joined by Perfumado, Rubí went towards the corner.

"Wanna beer? My treat" said Perfumado, in a good mood.

"Sure."

They crossed the avenue. Crowds of workers gathered around the taco stands covered its central division. They got to the other side and went straight towards a small restaurant around the corner. There they could buy all the beer they wanted without getting in trouble with the police.

-five

Antonio threw the butt of his cigarette into the toilet and flushed it after he urinated a dirty liquid, hot and fetid, which renovated his nausea. He felt dirty, with his breath like the reeking of sewers, and his entire body seemed to be covered with the smell of dead blood, of putrid drains and infected trash filled with dead fish halfway eaten. The bump on his head hurt him intensely now, and his knuckles were skinned. He almost vomited again but he had nothing else to throw up and his stomach contracted in vain. He controlled himself and went into the shower. Under the cold water, he remembered the bullfight he and Jennifer had seen the day before.

The day had begun very early for them. At seven o'clock Carlos Fernandez and his wife Serena Izárraga de Fernandez awakened them. They were not expected, and Jennifer and Antonio were very much surprised when Fernandez called on the phone.

"We're down here in the lobby. We're waiting for you two", said Carlos Fernandez. Jennifer and Antonio hurried to shower and to dress, and when they went down to the lobby they found the Fernandez Izarraga's sitting in a flaming red convertible with its top down. Don Carlos was in an extremely good mood. He was dressed like a cowboy, even to the wide rimmed hat. That day he wanted to show them his 'little ranch ' on the outskirts of Manzanillo. He was very proud of having bought those lands three years before the airport was built in a zone between Manzanillo and Barra de Navidad.

"It was a stroke of luck", shouted Don Carlos so his voice could be overheard above the wind. "Many of us knew that the new

tourist haven of the country would be Manzanillo from the moment when Alejo Peralta chose to build Las Hadas there. But nobody imagined that they would build an International Airport so soon. And it had been harder to imagine the place it would be built in. A friend of mine close to the President passed on the secret information to me. I gambled, bought the lands for a pittance, and bang! three years later a paved road was laid down and the airport was built right on the boundaries of my new ranch. You can imagine how much it went in price", kept explaining Don Carlos, turning his head to watch their expressions.

He turned left towards the airport, and after travelling some distance on the perfectly paved road he entered a dirt road covered with the red clay called *Tezontle*. The road led directly to a large hut painted white with a roof made out of palm leaves. The construction was typical of the coast.

"This is the Casa Grande"; said Serena and she laughed sweetly. The hut consisted of three large, airy rooms, high ceilings and whitewashed walls. It was furnished with a simplicity that required a lot of money. The two couples sat around a set of hand-woven chairs called *equipales*, which were made in the neighboring state of Jalisco, had fresh fruit native to that zone for breakfast and then went out on horseback to survey the land.

They dedicated the entire morning to running through the fields. Where the palms and the trees opened and plenty of sun came through, Jennifer would race her mount, feeling totally self-confident on top of the animal. She had a perfect posture, the product of several years of riding classes when she was a girl, and seemed to be one with the horse itself. When she stopped and returned to Serena's side, Antonio was able to distinguish the differences between the two beautiful women; Serena was modest, gracious and elegant, given to perfumes and make up. She was a woman designed for parties and receptions. Jennifer, on the other hand, was made for sun and water, games and sports. The contrast between the two personalities was impressive.

"How beautiful Jennifer is", said Carlos Fernandez, as if guessing Antonio's thoughts. "Yes, sir, you've got yourself a good reward."

"She's not a reward."

"Oh, I didn't mean to offend you. I sincerely believe that we should reinforce our relationship with our neighbors to the north and, well, sleeping with them seems like a good idea, ha, ha, ha...We should keep them happy, don't you think?"

"I think it is hot out here."

"Yes, indeed", said Carlos Fernandez and an awkward silence developed.

The excursion was long, but it was impossible for them to ride through the entire extension of land in one day. There were more than 10 thousand acres of grasslands, mangroves, palms and swamps, the titles to which were divided among the wife and the five sons of Don Carlos. ("Tax purposes, you know what I mean", he'd said with a wink.) The land was used as a private hunting ground. The group rode for several hours through the idle fields covered with vegetation, in search of wild ducks. Don Carlos wanted to try his brand new hunting rifle equipped with a laser sight. The only thing they found was an alligator that was crossing slowly through the crystal clear waters of a small river. With a single shot Don Carlos quickly killed it.

Afterwards they returned to the Casa Grande, where Serena offered them a nicely chilled drink. They sat on the *equipales* while the servants waited on them. Don Carlos sent one of the servants to get the ranch administrator and the two wranglers who took care of the thirty horses which roamed freely in an enclosure next to the Casa Grande.

At that moment Don Carlos two daughters arrived, and they joined the group with the effervescence of careless rich girls.

When the administrator arrived, Don Carlos spoke to him in a low voice for a long time, and then ordered the wranglers to prepare the horses that his daughters would ride for the Charro contest that same afternoon.

"Again, daddy?" complained Frances, the older of the two daughters. She was nineteen and looked very much like Don Carlos, which made her features plain and without feminine grace.

"Yes. Again."

"With that bunch of dirty and gross Indians?" said Serena, who was fifteen years old.

"The same ones."

"But, Daddy..."

"Daddy nothing. I don't want to hear another single word. Every year it is the same fight. Sometimes I think you all are stupid. I ask you to do it for one simple reason, girls. Once a year these parties are held here in town and once a year we share and drink and party with the townsfolk. Now, I don't care if the next eleven months you spend your entire lives in the discos of the Capital or in Los Angeles. But in April, I want you here, and I want you riding those horses in the Charro contest. Think, damn, it. It's public relations. Sooner or later I'm going to die, and all this will be yours", Don Carlos explained patiently. For the thousandth time, thought Antonio, while he drank his rum and coke drink. He looked at Frances, the oldest, who looked back coquettish and with feigned fastidiousness as she agreed.

"All right, all right."

"I am going to stink for three whole days", said Serena, the youngest daughter. She was named after her mother, but while the older woman really did honor the meaning of her name, the young girl was impatient and rude.

"Serenita! I don't want you to talk like that. The peasants might be uncultured, but they are good people", said the mother.

"They stink", Serenita declared, and the two girls left the room.

"These daughters of mine will be the death of me someday", joked Don Carlos.

"Nothing of the sort, Don Carlos. Your daughters are a couple of darling little girls", said Jennifer. Antonio was the only one who caught her fine irony.

"Serene is too impatient", said the mother, excusing her by accusing her.

"Serenita is a beautiful teenager" insisted Jennifer, emphasizing each syllable of 'teenager'.

"Cheers", said Antonio.

"Cheers", said Don Carlos Fernandez.

At two o'clock sharp the Fernandez couple left for the airport. They expected a special guest would arrive on that afternoon's flight. The guest was a lawyer named Hector Trujillo. He was the government representative for Labor Relations. Jennifer and Antonio returned to their hotel room to shower and change clothes. Five minutes after four o'clock they arrived at the Plaza de Toros of Santiago. The rodeo party was starting as they climbed up the cement steps. The ring, made of stone and concrete, was full and there were hats of all types and styles in the bleachers. It was very hot and the dust was fine and it stuck in their throats. There were no empty spaces. Many barefooted children ran up and down the bleachers selling cold beers that they carried in plastic buckets. The public, thought Antonio, seemed to be a touch too happy. Don Carlos and his wife Serena occupied the seats of honor beside the government representative and the beauty queens from Santiago, Manzanillo, and Salahuá, another nearby town. As Jennifer and he were introduced, Antonio noticed the low and lecherous look with which Trujillo viewed Jennifer. There was a vile look in the eyes of the man which irritated Antonio immediately. Trujillo was short, and had a huge stomach so that he couldn't close his dirty deerskin jacket. His entire face was shiny, as if he had rubbed grease on it, and his porcupine moustache dripped sweat. He looked sideways, with his eyes halfway closed, and he breathed heavily, as if he were a pig under the sun.

"I am honored, Lady" he said, making an effort to get up and hold Jennifer's hand. He looked at Antonio sideways, with suspicion. "Glad to meet you, friend", he murmured. Antonio didn't answer and felt a soft and sweaty hand hold his for a second.

"Antonio, sit over here", requested Serena the elder, pointing to a place between herself and her daughter, Frances, who was made up as an Adelita, with a green dress, and who was getting

ready to go down to meet her sister and the rest of the Charro party for the riding exhibition. Antonio took the place that Serena offered him, and Jennifer sat between the fat man and Don Carlos, who was full of pride inside his Charro suit. It was a suit of black cloth, with silver buttons. Don Carlos held himself straight and tall so as to wear the attire with the distinction it deserved.

"This was my grandfather's suit", he explained proudly. With his physical presence and white hair, Don Carlos was the living image of a 19th century Hacienda owner. "It fits perfectly, isn't that the truth?" he bragged.

"Yes, dear", said Serena.

"After her riding exhibition Frances came back to sit beside Antonio.

"Did you like it?" Frances asked with an insinuating smile.

Antonio nodded.

"You have no idea of how difficult it is. That wrangler of ours doesn't know how to train horses. Look, I broke a fingernail", said Frances. While Antonio listened to the tireless and empty chitchat of the girl, he was amazed to hear the bubbling laughter of Jennifer. The fat man was saying something; peering at her sideways, and she laughed along with Don Carlos. Antonio felt the need for a drink.

"Oh, look at the devil!" screamed Frances and grabbed Antonio's arm with both hands to attract his attention. A man dressed as a red devil had jumped into the ring. Behind him was another man dressed as Cantinflas, the comedian. The two of them clowned around, jumping over a Brahma bull, before going into the bleachers to collect tips. That was the signal for the beginning of the taming of the wild bulls. About every five minutes, a bull came through the ring's side doors, mounted by young cowboys. The animal lunged out, kicking, jumping, making sharp turns, and rearing back trying to throw off the cowboy. The winner of the contest was the wrangler who lasted the longest on the animal. Most of the riders lasted only a few seconds before falling onto the ground. Then other cowboys entered into the action; riding their horses, they would lasso the bull with their ropes to tow it outside the ring.

That part of the show was slow and the public paid little attention. The noise in the bleachers was phenomenal and Antonio realized that, as always, most of the people were there just to have a good time with their friends rather than for the show itself. Frances kept on talking about her Imported clothes, her fluorescent lipstick, and her sports car, and Antonio concentrated his attention on the three young bullfighters that were coming out to face the huge Brahma bulls. The three were correctly dressed as bullfighters, even though their costumes were old and covered with patches. They, along with the cowboys, came out to risk their lives just to try to please the indifferent public, noisy and drunk, which woke from its festive drowsiness only when some blood was spilled, as when one of the cowboys was hit heavily by the bull he was riding. The rider was a teenager with strong legs, who for a moment seemed to be firmly mounted on the bull. But the animal made a sudden movement with its head and a horn reached the young man, who fell beneath the hooves of the bull. The cowboy was carried out, half dead, and only then did the public pay any attention. Five minutes later he was completely forgotten.

Antonio felt intrigued. Without receiving money for their labor, without the possibility of reaching fame, without even applause for their efforts, what motivated these young cowboys and bullfighters to risk their lives in that way? Which intimate pleasure did they all receive from challenging death for no reason at all? One of the bullfighters, dressed in red and silver, was very small and extremely skinny. When his turn came up he approached the bull, and the animal's head was well above the level of the man's eyes. To call its attention the bullfighter raised his cape as if it were a curtain. Antonio realized that something was about to happen. He got up and approached the barrier in front of him. He didn't want anything to block the view.

The Brahma bull reared and kicked in the air before running toward the yellow cape which the bullfighter dragged. The Brahma bull obviously was not the proper type of bull for the fight, but the tiny bullfighter, dressed in red and silver, withstood courageously the attack. He was able to avoid three quarters of the animal's body before he was hit by the bull's hip. The blow threw him

violently four or five meters away and the bull immediately tried to butt him with its horns. It really couldn't hurt the man with them, as they were twisted and bent backwards, but on the ground the bullfighter seemed so tiny and fragile that Antonio felt a deep pity; the bull's head alone seemed bigger and heavier than the little man who had fallen on the sand. The bull, which weighed ten times more than the bullfighter, hit him, stepped on him, kicked him, and threw him around as savagely as if he were a broken toy until one of the cowboys inside of the ring was able to lasso it and, with the help of the other two bullfighters, pull the bull away from him.

The bullfighter dressed in red and silver got up from the sand, obviously hurt but rejecting everyone's help. Limping and staggering as if he were about to faint, he went to pick up his cape. He demanded that the animal be released and that they be let alone. He approached the animal again, and he called him with his cape once, twice, three times, and when the Brahma bull didn't move, the bullfighter in red and silver knelt down on the sand half a meter away from the bull's head and then threw down his cape. Nobody applauded except Antonio. The people were already looking with indifference at the next rider who had come into the ring. Ten seconds later he too fell to the ground amidst the people's apathy.

Antonio saw how the man dressed in red and silver went limping back to the barrier where his friends waited, gave them the cape and asked for a cigarette. He received it and smoked it right there, leaning against the boards of the barrier. He breathed the humid and hot air of the coast with difficulty. His meager chest expanded visibly every time he pulled air into his lungs. The man wore a grimace of pain and fright in his face. All of his bones must be bruised, thought Antonio, and he possibly had a broken rib or two, but the little man seemed to be satisfied and proud, almost happy. Why happy? Antonio asked of himself without being able to provide an answer.

"Poor stupid little man, right?" said Frances with her sharp voice, girlish and empty. She had been standing beside Antonio all of the time, talking non-stop.

Antonio spat on the sand. And spat in the shower the day after, as the water was carrying away the last traces of the rotten metal taste he had in his mouth. Then he realized that the chorus of furious and driveling crazies had reappeared in his mind and were ordering him, shouting for him to do contradictory things. He leaned against the wall of the shower stall so as not to fall, and kept his head under the gush of cold water.

VI

Rubí opened his beer with the metal opener hanging on at the restaurant. The bottle was green and the liquid dark. On the label there were two XX's. In one swig he swallowed half a bottle. Besides being thirsty he also hoped the beer would make his headache disappear. Thanks to the aspirins, the hammering in his brain had diminished; with the beer, Rubí expected it to go away completely. He was lifting the bottle again when Isauro Peña arrived. Isauro stood over Rubí and Perfumado with his height of six feet. Tall and slender, Isauro had a tranquil face of sharp features, emphasized by a hawkish nose and deep black eyes. Under certain types of light his face acquired an extraordinary likeness to the faces carved on the Mayan Stellas of Palenque and Chichen-Itza.

"Get me a beer", said Isauro to the boy who worked behind the counter. The place had a wooden bar painted green, with glass cases placed on top. The boy prepared the food with agile hands. There were hot tortes made out of ham, white cheese, steak, pork, or a combination of these.

"What's going on? What's your problem?" Rubí said to Isauro.

"None. Not anymore. My problem was that factory. But not anymore. I am leaving. I quit already", said Isauro Peña, making a vague gesture with his hands. His height, his slender and flexible body, combined with his way of dressing, gave him a certain authority and a natural elegance that distinguished him easily from the rest of the workers.

"And what are you going to do?" Perfumado asked. He grabbed the beer that the boy placed for Isauro on the counter glass, cleaned the bottleneck with his sleeve in a chivalrous gesture, and gave it to Isauro. Rubí realized that Isauro's personality always inspired this type of actions, even if it was made in a joking manner as Perfumado had done. Isauro inspired a very special respect. He is truly elegant, thought Rubí. Perfumado, on the other hand, looked out of place inside of his electric red suit.

"I am leaving for the other side of the river", said Isauro after swallowing some of his beer.

"Are you going to work in the cotton fields?"

"I am going to work in whatever I can find."

"I have a cousin over there. Picking cotton", said Perfumado, turning towards the street to watch the factory gates. "In his letters he says that he's doing great, but that he just cannot stand the gringos anymore."

"And what about your family?" said Rubí.

"My brothers will take care of my mother. I've already talked to them. As soon as I get a job over there I will send them money."

"How long are you gonna work at the factory?"

"Today was my last day."

"Well then, salud, brother, and I wish you well. You know we'll be here if you need us. Don't forget your friends."

"Come on...That'll never happen, my Rubí. Cheers."

"Salud."

"Here she comes", said Perfumado interrupting the toast by poking Rubí with his elbow. The three of them looked outside to the street. On the other side of the sunny avenue, Graciela Bernal was walking on the sidewalk in the company of Juana Alonso, her friend and confidant. Rubí thought it was funny how the two girls were walking under the blinding sun, keeping themselves very near to the high white washed wall, covered with political propaganda painted in black letters:

VOTA ASI

VOTA ASI

VOTA ASI

PRI

PRI

PRI

read the propaganda spread on the wall, but a secret hand had modified the letters in some of the signs, and they looked like:

VOTA ASI

VOTA ASI

VOTA ASI

PAN

PRD

PRT

Juana Alonso was of medium height and plump, while Graciela Bernal was a bit taller and well proportioned. Graciela stood out noticeably because of her generous bosom, but it was her way of walking which made Rubí smile. The girl wanted to put a lot of effect into her walking, but the only thing she achieved was to look awkward. She looks constipated, thought Rubí. However he didn't make any joke about it due to the respect he had for his friend. She's pretty, that's the truth, but not so much that Perfumado has to go nuts every time he looks at her, thought Rubí, watching his friend. Perfumado had become nervous and was forgetting everything. He started to leave the restaurant without saying a word.

"Hey pay for the beer, you jerk. It was your treat", said Rubí.

"Shit, compadre, don't make a fuss. You take care of it. I'll wait for you over there", Perfumado answered already outside. Graciela Bernal seemed to have a special power over him. Perfumado only had to look at her for his mind to become empty. He acted hypnotized, like a zombie, whenever Graciela Bernal showed up. Rubí and Isauro followed him to the door of the restaurant.

"Has she bewitched him?" whispered Rubí.

"I think she may have given him Toloache", nodded Isauro Peña, perplexed himself because of the sudden transformation of Perfumado.

"He's fucked up", added Rubí. Resigned, he paid for the beers. He knew that against the Toloache love potion he could do nothing without the consent of the bewitched one. If Perfumado still had a bit of will, Rubí would be ready to take him to a shaman he knew and have her cleanse him with camphor and pine leaves. But the love potion was notable precisely because it took away the will of whoever swallowed it and the victim was left like a puppet without a soul. The victim was left exactly as Perfumado was; like a toy tied to Graciela Bernal. Rubí crossed himself and prayed to the Virgen de Guadalupe so that nothing of the sort ever happened to him. He kissed the rosary blessed with holy water that he carried around his neck as a protection against any evil.

He went into the sunlight. Isauro followed. Perfumado was already at the corner, standing by the newspaper rack waiting for Graciela to arrive. He had bought the sports paper and was pretending to read it leaning against a light post as he faked indifference. But his hands shook and he had to hold the newspaper so far away from his eyes that it was impossible to read. The two girls reached the corner at the same time as Rubí and his tall companion, Isauro. Rubí examined Graciela Bernal with attention, and her black sweater made of an open knit that allowed her white bra to show. She was overly made up. Yes, confirmed Rubí, she's pretty. But nothing to go crazy about.

"Do you like soccer, Chelita?" asked Perfumado.

"Some", said she with displeasure.

"The boys on the team would be really happy to have you as their trophy presenter. We've never had anyone prettier than yourself."

"Liar", said Graciela Bernal satisfied by the praise.

"I swear it, Chelita. What's more, everybody knows you're my queen. The only one in my heart."

"The only one who believes it, right?" said Graciela, while she flirted, but with Isauro.

"You are my queen, period. Believe me, please. I would give my life for you. I swear it", insisted Perfumado unashamed of showing his passionate anguish in front of everybody.

"Really?" she challenged him.

"Try me."

"Oh, come on, let's go"; said Rubí truly bothered by the shameless public purring of Perfumado.

"Here comes a minibús."

"Oh, are we going on the bus?" complained Graciela. Rubí ignored her. He raised his hand to stop the green and white minibús, but the car was full and didn't even slow down.

"You see? We'd better go in a taxi. Right now the buses are too full", said Graciela.

"As you wish, Chelita", said Perfumado and he hurried to search for one. He ran up and down along the avenue. He stopped a taxi, but the driver looked the workers over, refused and left. Perfumado ran after another taxi. Rubí thought that his friend looked ridiculous, running like a child along the street. A big man, forty years old, dressed in an electric red suit, with a canvas bag hanging from his shoulder. When he ran, Perfumado showed his white socks.

"I think I won't be able to go with you", said Juana Alonso, opening her mouth for the first time. Up to that moment she had limited herself to smile in support of her friend Graciela Bernal. Her round and pretty face inspired tenderness in Rubí, and made him think of the fresh water from the river, and the smell of the ground just wet by the rain. Juana Alonso had her hair wet and smelled clean.

"Why, Juanita?"

"One of my children is sick. And since I am alone, well..."

"Join us for a while at least. The soccer field is very near your house, isn't it?" said Rubí.

"Yes, but around there everything is so isolated that I get scared."

"I'll go with you at halftime", said Rubí.

"No. I'll do it, You have to play", said Isauro, willing to help.

"But my children are all alone", said Juana Alonso, doubtful.

"Oh, come on, fatso. Don't make them beg. You are dying to go anyway", said Graciela rudely, pulling out a piece of chewing gum from her purse. She put it into her mouth.

"It's just one hour", said Isauro.

"Oh, I don't know..."

"Oh, come on! I don't think your kid is going to die because of a cold", said Graciela Bernal.

"All right. But we have a deal, Rubí. You will take me home, don't forget it."

"Don't worry, Juanita. I'll go with you."

Perfumado arrived riding in a large taxi painted coral and white. Rubí got in the front, with the driver, and behind him sat Graciela, Perfumado, Juana Alonso, and Isauro.

The soccer field was about ten minutes away from the factory and during that time the only thing that Rubí heard from the back seat were some passionate whispers from Perfumado and pops from the gum Graciela was chewing. Usually Rubí got to the soccer field by jogging all the way. The place was a large empty lot that had been adapted as a soccer field by the simple procedure of planting two wooden posts with ropes for crossbars on each end of a square outlined in lime. It was a plain dusty field. By running back and forth kicking the ball the players had killed all the vegetation so that there was only a fine, dry dust left on the ground. On the sides, off the court, there were some benches made out of rough wood placed on stones. These were the seats for the followers of each team. That day, especially, there were many fans for both teams who were competing for the championship. They were both good and of equal strength, which gave extra interest to the match. There wasn't a clear favorite, and Rubí was anticipating a very tough game.

Rubí guided his friends over to the bench reserved for the presenters and special guests. The spectators whistled when they saw the girls and made some jokes about the way Graciela Bernal walked. The jokes bothered Perfumado. He stopped to complain, but Rubí pulled him by the sleeve and asked his four friends to sit on the bench while he changed his clothes behind them. At one end of the bench were the shiny awards to be given away that day. One of them measured almost a meter tall and was topped with the figure of a player kicking the ball.

"Look, over there! It's the Delegate", said Graciela with obvious interest, pointing with her red fingernail towards the other side of the court. Beside the wooden hut in which beer and sodas were being sold, there was a tall, heavily built man dressed in a thick leather jacket with big and flashy rings on his fingers. On his wrist he wore a fat gold chain which shone in the sunlight. It was a famous gold chain. All the workers knew that it had the initials of the leader and of his union in diamonds. There were six letters: L.H.G., above, and below, in larger letters: C.O.N. It all stood for Lorenzo Hernandez Gomez, and Confederación de Obreros Mexicanos. The six letters were inlaid into a wide gold plate. The General Secretary of the C.O.M. raised his hand to push back his thick glasses and the heavy chain danced on his wrist.

"How much do you think that chain cost?" asked Graciela.

"A lot", said Juana Alonso.

"And such a miracle that he came to the game?" asked Isauro.

"He bought the trophies", said Perfumado.

"Did he buy them?" said Graciela, softly caressing the trophies with her eyes. There were three, shiny and golden and she looked at them as if they were made out of gold.

"Yes. They are for the champion, the finalist, and the best player of the tournament", explained Rubí from behind. He was sitting on a stone putting on his white soccer shoes.

"Ooooh, how splendid", said Graciela.

"He is very splendid...with our money", added Rubí.

"It's only the second time I've ever seen him", said Graciela, thoughtfully.

"Would you like to meet him, Chelita?"

"Yes!"

"Well, let's go to say hello to him", said Perfumado.

"Really?"

"Yes, sure. He's my friend."

"Are you coming, Rubí?" Graciela wanted to know.

"No way. I don't have any reason to kiss up to him. Last time he charged me a full week salary for getting a job for my brother, and then he didn't do anything when they fired him during his first month", said Rubí.

"Well, I am going. He is my friend", said Perfumado, bragging. Rubí guessed that he was still trying to impress Graciela. "Besides, I have to introduce him to the presenter for the game. I mean, he is the Godfather of the game, isn't he? Chelita is the prettiest presenter we've had and the two of them will be in charge of delivering the trophies."

"Yes, let's go", said Graciela Bernal.

"I am going too. I want him to give me a letter of recommendation", said Isauro.

"If you show a recommendation from that fellow, everybody is going to believe that you are a thief just like he is", said Rubí. Graciela Bernal grabbed Perfumado's hand to get up, and then let it go immediately. The three of them walked towards the place where the Delegate was surrounded by a group of workers. Rubí and Juana Alonso were left alone, but not for long. While Rubí finished changing clothes some other members of the team already dressed in white approached him. The natural charisma of Rubí, along with his imposing physique and his fame for being hard on his enemies had earned him many friends in the factory. Rubí knew that he was a kind of a protecting angel for them and he liked that role.

"Will you be playing today, Rubí?"

"Later. First let the goofy ones play", he joked.

"Come on, don't back out."

"Well, then don't push me."

"Who is your favorite?"

"Whoever wins."

"Come on..."

"Come on yourself, Panchito. Do you really think they can beat us?"

"Ah, well, no. But it is going to be a really hard game."

"That's why I have come to play."

Rubí was finishing tying his shoelaces when the referee whistled for the captains to approach the center. Rubí followed his fellow players, but the team trainer -a very old worker who labored in the Publishing section stopped Rubí before he went onto the field.

"You'll go during the second half, Rubí."

"Why?"

"Because we don't want them to hurt you at the beginning."

"They can't do anything to me, Don Teofilito", bragged Rubí. "They are just a bunch of idiots."

"You can call them whatever you want. But we are going after the Championship and you are the best player we have. If they hurt you during the first half, they will beat us. You'd better wait."

"All right. I'll do whatever you say."

Rubí started to warm up in the series of exercises he had learn at the boxing gym he used to go regularly. Regardless of what the trainer had said, he wanted to be ready. He jumped and threw quick blows at his shadow and then he touched the tip of his toes to relax his muscles. His headache was now only a soft pressure on his brain.

The referee finished giving his instructions to the captains and the players spread over the field. Those who played for TEXMEX played in white, and their adversaries were in dark blue uniforms. There were two players on the blue team who didn't have the full uniform and that produced an argument among the captains and the

referee, but the problem was solved and after several minutes the referee came back. He was a short man, with legs as heavy and as thick as tree trunks, which was correctly dressed with shorts and a shirt, both black. On his shirt he proudly showed the shield of the Referees Federation. He whistled again. The captains went to the center of the field. The referee threw a coin up in the air. It fell heads up, and the white team received the ball. The captain kicked the ball to start the game: immediately he send it to one of the pointers who ran with it, feinted past the blue player who tried to take it away and then kicked it back, provoking a very noisy catcall from the blue fans. The defense kicked it all the way to the other side of the court. A white player received the ball, endured the attack of a blue one, avoided him and sent the ball to a white pointer. The referee signaled out of the bounds and the fans insulted his mother immediately.

Rubí waited for about fifteen minutes. While he closely followed the development of the game he completed the series of exercises needed to loosen up his muscles. When he finished he was sweating nicely and was anxious to get into the action.

In those fifteen minutes he realized that the trainer was right; the blue team was playing very hard and the attacks were not to the ball properly: they were attacks to the legs of the players. The referee seemed to loose his authority over the game on the field, and the festive ambiance on the bleachers was turning more hostile each time the referee made a wrong call. It was turning into a game of force and not of ability.

Rubí went back to the bench and found Juana Alonso talking seriously with Isauro. She seemed sad and neither of the two was paying any attention to the game. Rubí looked around for Perfumado, but he only saw Graciela Bernal and the union Delegate. The two of them were leaning against the luxurious car of the Delegate and they were very close to each other, talking in an intimate way.

"And Perfumado? Where is he?"

"The Delegate sent him to buy a bottle or two of tequila to celebrate when the game is over", answered Isauro. Rubí made a gesture of displeasure.

"On top of bewitched, stupid' he murmured.

What?

"Nothing. Let's go, Juanita. Let's go before this gets bloody, said Rubí. Juana Alonso obeyed him instantly. She picked up her bag and got up.

"Will you be long?" said Isauro.

"No. Her house is near here. I will be back before the first half is over", said Rubí, irritated by the way his teammates were being attacked.

"I'll be back in a little bit", he repeated.

"Okay.

"I wish you well, Isauro. Write to us"

"Sure, Juanita. I hope your child gets better."

"Thanks. Bye.

"So long. "

Juanita Alonso and Rubí Toscano left the dusty court, crossed a ravine filled with trash and flies, went around a small cornfield with newly planted seeds and followed the winding road under high tension light towers. As they walked Rubi was practicing his shadow boxing to protect his muscles from getting cold.

"Do you like boxing, Juanita?

"I don't have a television, she said.

"One of these days I'll take you to the Arena Mexico so you can watch a fight. They are really good.

"Do you like to fight, Rubí?"

"Me? Yeah. I do. But I am too old for that."

"Old? How old are you?"

"Twenty seven."

"You are just a boy. I am thirty."

"Sure. But for boxing I am too old", said Rubí listening to the humming produced by the electricity in the thick cables hanging between the posts.

In a few minutes they came to a street, walked two more blocks and arrived at the neighborhood where Juana Alonso lived. Only then did Rubí cease doing exercises.

The building was a rectangular construction of a single floor, some thirty meters long by twelve wide. The rooms of the building were aligned along the central patio. When Rubí and Juana went in, they could smell the aroma of just cooked food. All the way at the end of the patio were the baths and laundry stalls. The couple walked by a group of children who were playing with marbles in the center of the narrow patio. The fifth door on the right side, painted green a long time before, was Juana Alonso's. When she opened the door, two kids younger than ten jumped out of the solitary bed which dominated the space in the room and ran to embrace Juana Alonso's legs.

"Mommy, mommy, its so good you came home!"

"I did behave well, mommy, I swear it!" said the oldest of the kids.

"How's your little brother?" asked Juana Alonso, looking nervously towards the bed.

"Same."

"I didn't break the candle, mommy said the youngest child.

"No? Who did it?

Silence.

"It wasn't me", said the oldest.

"Me neither", said the youngest.

"Well, it must have broke by itself. Now you may go out to play in the patio", said Juana Alonso, and the two kids pushed past Rubí to get out, screaming with happiness. On the bed was a third kid, immobile. Rubí came in behind Juana Alonso and as his eyes got used to the darkness of the windowless room he was able to see the child. The pale face was covered by sweat that meant he was feverish, and his little eyes were sad and wet. He made no sign of acknowledgment to his mother. Juana Alonso sat herself on the bed beside the child. The bed creaked. The boy moaned softly. Juana caressed his hair, fussing with it and touched his forehead and cheeks. The child smiled

weakly. Juana Alonso gave him a kiss on the head and another on the tip of the nose.

"How are you feeling, darling?"

The child, who was about six years old, just looked at her and didn't answer.

"You're still sick, but you'll get better, right?"

The child nodded.

"What did the doctor say?" asked Rubí. He was standing at the edge of the bed, looking at the scene.

"He sent those capsules. He says it is not bad, that it is just his tonsils "

Rubí examined the medicine placed on the table where Juana Alonso cooked on a hot plate. He made a serious face even though he didn't have the slightest idea of what he was reading on the white labels. Juana Alonso got up. Clutching her hands she went to Rubí.

"I don't know what I will do if my son doesn't get better", she said.

"Don't worry, Juanita. We all get tonsillitis."

"But my child has had a temperature for two weeks already. And he doesn't get any better."

"Calm down, princess. Everything will be all right, you'll see. In a little bit your kid will be playing with all the other kids. You'll see."

"It's just that I am tired of praying all day and night. I pray to God to make him better, but nothing happens. It seems that he doesn't hear me, Rubí. I must have been very bad for God to punish me so much", said Juana Alonso and unable to hold her anguish any longer she started to cry hiding her face between her hands. Rubí held her in his arms. He felt awkwardly useless as he tried to console Juana Alonso.

"Keep on praying, Juanita."

"No, not anymore. God doesn't love me, God doesn't love me..."

"Keep on praying and you'll see how your son will get better."

"Really?"

"For sure."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise. Look, put this on. It's blessed. I bought it at the Villa de Guadalupe", Rubí took the rosary from his neck and put it in Juana Alonso's hand. She took it and she leaned against Rubí's body, but not in a provocative way. Rubí guessed that Juana Alonso was looking only for a little bit of tenderness and comprehension. He kept her in his arms while she slowly got control of herself. Her tears diminished, but the closed and intimate ambiance of the room, the clean smell of Juana Alonso's hair and her voluptuous body combined to provoke a powerful erection in Rubí which he found difficult to hide in his uniform shorts. He turned sideways so that she would not feel it. He tried to think of other things, he tried to say something that would serve to comfort the woman, but at that moment and under those circumstances he discovered just how difficult it was to make someone feel better. He merely gave her a strong embrace with his muscular arms, but that made it worse; her breast pushed against his side and his penis reacted by threatening to break through the shorts. He swallowed hard, controlling the temptation to grab whatever was at hand. Then he accepted the kiss she impulsively gave him on the cheek.

"Thanks, Rubí."

"Thanks for what? I didn't do anything."

"It's just that...I feel so lonesome. That's why I accepted your invitation to the game. I was afraid of coming back alone."

"And you are not afraid anymore?" said Rubí. He pulled apart from Juana Alonso and discretely rearranged his shorts to make his predicament less obvious.

"No", said Juana Alonso, shaking her head.

"Good. Now I've got to go, Princess. If you have any trouble, just call me. We'll see what we can do", said Rubí, thinking only of Juanita's thighs, her bosom, and her small waist...

"When my son gets better...Will you have dinner with us?", asked Juana Alonso, and she kissed Rubí's rosary.

"Whenever you want me to, Princess. Just call me. But now I really have to go. I'll see you at the factory", said Rubi and smiled, his face lighting up.

"All right", said Juana Alonso and smiled too. Her round face softened. The tears had made her make up run down her plump cheeks and Rubí thought tenderly that Juana Alonso looked like a kid's balloon painted in different colors.

-seven

Antonio washed himself with soap six or seven times trying to get rid of the putrid stench, but it was useless. The foul odor persisted. He turned off the faucet, came out of the shower stall, shook off the excess of water, and rubbed himself vigorously with the towel. When he was dry he dropped it on the floor. Through the open door he saw again Jennifer's body. At first he only glanced at her, but then he looked at her again because it seemed that her body had changed position slightly.

He crossed in large strides the room. He got at the window and with a tug, pulled open the heavy curtains that were blocking the daylight. Antonio blinked, blinded by the bright sunlight. Without realizing it, several hours had gone by. Manzanillo Bay spread out in front of him with its green and blue waters covering the entire horizon of the Pacific Ocean. The sun was high, and on the golden beach below, beside the marina chockfull of sailboats, the swimmers ran and played in the waves.

Antonio went back to the bedside and bent over Jennifer's body without getting his hopes up. He didn't dare touch her yet, but he lowered his ear to the freckled back and he was able to perceive an almost inaudible breathing. Jennifer was alive! He quickly turned her body over, saw the tumescent face close up and closed his eyes. He didn't want to see her. He couldn't. Before, in the darkness, everything had had an unreal character, like a nightmare. Now, with the sunlight coming through the windows, the reality was colder and harder. Merciless. The irrationality could not be justified in broad daylight. Madness belonged to the night, the shadows, the dust and the

spiderwebs not to the bright sun of clean waters and of quietude. With the natural light Antonio understood more, and accepted less, the consequences of the anger and the shouts, of the fury and the incoherence of madness.

The important thing now was that Jennifer, by the sound of her breathing, seemed to be seriously hurt but she was still alive. That's what was important. Antonio had to concentrate, had to control himself. Nervously, he dialed on the phone the front desk number.

"Can I help you? answered a sweet feminine voice.

"I need a doctor!"

"What's wrong?"

"None of your business", barked Antonio "Look, just get me a doctor. There is somebody injured in my room. It's urgent. Just send the doctor over to my room."

"Give me a second. Don't hang up."

Antonio waited with his body tensed up.

"Yes, tell me", answered an authoritarian voice. Antonio realized it was the hotel manager.

"Damn it! I need a doctor. Don't you understand? It is urgent, *carajo!* Send him up right away!"

"Easy, easy...The doctor is in Manzanillo at this very moment and will delay some fifteen or twenty minutes to drive back. How urgent it is?"

"Life or death."

"Then it might be better to take the wounded person directly to the emergency hospital."

"How far is it?"

"Ten or fifteen minutes away from here."

Antonio debated. There wasn't much difference.

"No. I don't want to move her. It could be worse. Call the doctor back."

"Immediately", said the voice and the line was broken. Fifteen or twenty minutes! It would be a very long wait, but he

couldn't do anything else. He made sure that Jennifer was still breathing and carefully slid her over the clean side of the bed. She murmured something when he lifted her arm. Something was probably broken. Or worse. Antonio covered her with the sheet up to her chin, but he didn't like the way her swollen face stood out so he lowered the sheet a little bit.

He wondered what else could he do. He took away the bloody pillow and threw it on the floor. He thought about trying to wake up Jennifer, but decided not to. That could be more damaging. Besides which, the madmen chorus in his head was difficult to control and at any moment they might try to dominate him again. He decided to wait.

He picked up his cigarettes from the bathroom, put on his swimming trunks and went out onto the terrace. He breathed deeply. The breeze coming from the sea in front of him was fresh and sweet. Antonio sat on the white plastic lounge. He lit up a cigarette, covering the flame of the lighter with his hands to keep the wind from blowing it out. Distractedly, he watched a freighter that was coming in slowly from the other side of the Bay towards the port of Manzanillo.

He looked at his swollen knuckles. And if Jennifer died? The doctor would take too long. Maybe he had made a mistake. Maybe he should have taken her directly to the hospital, as the man on the telephone had suggested.

Our father, who art...he began to pray but he stopped because he thought it was hypocritical on his part. He knew that He wouldn't listen because Antonio had turned away from him earlier. Antonio had never prayed in his life, except in his childhood nights. Then he had truly prayed with all of his boyhood faith and had asked for his brothers and for his mother's health, for his mother particularly so she wouldn't suffer, but she had kept on suffering and he had ceased to pray and now it was hypocritical on his part to do it only during these moments of need. He felt that it was hypocritical to spend his entire life denying God and to need Him in that moment. But...what if Jennifer died? No, no... The best thing had been not to move her anymore. If just by moving her a few inches on the bed he had hurt her, the trip in the car would have been lethal. Yes, better to have the

doctor examine her here. But why does he have to take so long, oh Lord? God. God again. Always God. ***Our father who Art in heaven.***

He looked up to the sky. Groups of dark clouds were moving towards the sun. In the distance, a bright orange hot air balloon was rising quickly, pulling up two men who were hanging from the mooring rope by their feet. The wind was getting stronger, and below, the ocean was very agitated. Antonio could see the waves hitting the reefs, on the beach and against the freighter; that huge black ship that was coming into the Bay slowly and which, at a distance, seemed like a toy.

Seven years earlier, Antonio had also been waiting on a terrace, but it had been a terrace in a hotel in Acapulco and Antonio had been waiting for Jennifer to come out of the bathroom so that they could go eat on the beach. When they had arrived in Mexico from California, they had gone directly to Acapulco and had partied for fifteen days; they visited some restaurants and nightclubs, especially one where there was a Dixieland group playing, but mainly they dedicated themselves to making love. They made it on the beach, among the waves, in the swimming pool, in bed, in the bathtub and under the shower, in the closet, in their car parked behind a beach patrol car, inside a boat, on top of the room service cart of the hotel and in the long and solitary hallways. By discovering each other they also discovered the world around them and their passion and happiness was reflected in the way everybody else smiled at them. They were a couple of lovers and the world saw in their smiling faces the love which strengthened them and renewed them. On one of the beaches of La Cuesta they met a huge old sailor whose beard was gray and long. His clothes were loose and the seashell necklaces he wore gave him a certain likeness to Neptune, the god of the seas. The old sailor had learned to carve figures from the potatoes eaten on board the freighters in which he had traveled several times around the world. Tired of traveling, the old man made his living selling small carvings of ironwood on the beach. With a voice like a thunder and laughter like a waterfall, Old Neptune showed them all the pieces that he kept in his palm hut. Each carved piece was extraordinary, but none was more than an enormous piece in lapis lazuli, which was resting on a stone pedestal in the center of the hut.

"A unicorn..." said both Jennifer and Antonio at the same time.

"I think that the unicorn was a rhinoceros," said Jennifer.

"Or a narwhal", said Antonio.

"An alchemist's dream."

"A medieval legend."

"A children's story."

"It never existed."

"How much?"

"That one is not for sale, Lady."

"Why not?"

The old man sighted.

"Because that animal has chased me for fifty years of my life", said the carver. His vibrant voice denoted his fascination. "I have never seen it, but like the Chinese, I hope to meet it face to face before I die."

"You talk as if the unicorn really existed", said Antonio. The old sailor smiled enigmatically.

"The Kings of France used the dust from the unicorn's horn to clean the poison out of their foods, young man. If Kings did that, do you believe that a poor sailor like me would dare to deny it? Besides, wherever I went throughout the seven seas, the unicorn was already known; it had been there already; I found it in Greece and Japan, in India and in China, in Scandinavia and the Baltic Oceans. Wherever I got off the ship, there was that animal waiting for me, laughing at my efforts to catch it, hiding away all the time..."

"One thing I am sure of is that its horn was an aphrodisiac", whispered Jennifer with malice. Antonio turned to look at her; standing beside the door against the sunlight, her body was clearly visible beneath her thin white dress.

They hurried back to their hotel, where they could hide from the indiscrete gazes of passersby. When the fifteen days of vacation were over, the couple went back to Mexico City. Neither of them thought that their relationship would be something more than a

passing fancy, but when seven months had gone by and both kept on loving each other with the same intensity, they began to suspect that their love was a serious one. On the terrace of Manzanillo Antonio remembered Jennifer's magnificent good mood at the beginning. Thanks to her sense of humor, she had adapted without many problems to the peculiarities of the largest city in the world. She accepted the constant scarcity of gas, the deficient electrical wiring and the rudeness of the police and other bureaucrats. She enjoyed going to the Public Market, where she learned the art of bartering and from where she used to come back loaded in excess with fresh fruits and flowers. She also learned to wear a shield against the siege of the street wolves that would chase after her as soon as she stepped into the street, showering her with ingenious flatteries. Every day at twelve she would have lunch ready for Antonio. He would try to come back early from the newspaper and they would make love and eat and spend the rest of the afternoon visiting the city. They went to all the museums and frequented the shops in the Pink Zone, were Jennifer became an aficionada of the cafe con leche and the pastries. They would visit the shops around the Zócalo, or walk along Insurgentes Sur watching the people and window-shopping. They went to Bellas Artes and Chapultepec Park, where they played with the kids who had skipped school to go rowing on the Big Lake, or talked with the old men who spent their time playing chess or dominoes on the tables beside the Minor Lake.

Antonio wanted to share with Jennifer all the things and places he loved with a passion. One Sunday after a party, he woke up early with an idea and hurried to awake Jennifer.

"What's happening?" she said, half asleep.

"Let's go. It's getting late."

"Where to?"

"To the pyramids."

"The pyramids? What strange ideas you have", she answered and covered her face with the blankets again. Antonio uncovered her.

"Come on. You've got to see them."

"Today? It's seven in the morning, for God's sake. Besides, why would I want to see a bunch of stones?"

"They belong to you."

"To me? I am not an Aztec."

"They belong to the entire of humanity. Come on, let's go. You'll like them."

"I don't want to, I don't want to, and I don't want to. Let me sleep!"

After an hour Antonio finally convinced her and she reluctantly went into the shower. When they came out of the apartment Antonio drove to Pachuca. On the outskirts of the city, after a tollbooth, they saw a green and white sign that said **TEOTIHUACAN**, and Antonio followed it. In a few minutes, they arrived at an extended plain from which they saw in the distance the Pyramids of Teotihuacán, mingled with the brownish hills that closed in the valley. Then the pyramids were out of sight until they arrived at the entrance of the archaeological zone. They followed the signs that led to the Pyramid of the Sun. They parked the car in a dusty, stony field and walked between the small stands of handicrafts and souvenirs towards the pyramid which stood impressive and overpowering, with a weighty solemnity. There was nothing light or happy in that heavy and solid mass which projected in its majesty a powerful religious and spiritual dignity.

"This is one of the most important archaeological zones in the world", said Antonio proudly, while he guided Jennifer to the front steps of the pyramid.

"There's almost nobody here", said Jennifer, looking distractedly through her dark glasses towards the main avenue.

"It was built with volcanic stones more than fifteen hundred years ago", said Antonio. Jennifer growled something.

They went up the steep frontal steps, carefully, holding onto the steps with their hands as they climbed to the first platform. They rested for a few seconds and then went up to the next. There were surrounded by a group of excursionists who were joking happily and

were loaded with picnic baskets and cameras. They joined them for the climb up and the final flight of stairs.

Once on the top, Antonio noticed the wind that he had begun to feel down at the base. It was a dry and cold wind that was blowing freely. On the open platform there was a mound which, long ago, had been the Temple of Prayers and Sacrifices, and was now occupied by people selling souvenirs made of obsidian and brochures with color photographs of the archaeological zone. With his hair ruffled by the wind, Antonio contemplated the entire view of Teotihuacán from the highest point of the old City of the Gods. Directly ahead of them lay the main road, the Avenue of the Dead Ones, a straight line ending at the front of the steps of the Pyramid of the Moon. On the south side there was the partially ruined Pyramid of Quetzalcóatl. The wind blew constantly from different directions, but mainly from the east, where the sun rose on the cold mornings of the valley. Antonio tried to enliven Jennifer's scarce interest by telling her what he knew about the place; he told her that Teotihuacán had been a place of veneration long before the Aztec Empire came to be, and that there, among those black and reddish stones, they had created the basis for a military and religious empire which had been able to dominate all the tribes from there all the way down to Guatemala; he pointed at the ruined pyramid dedicated to Quetzalcóatl, and he told her the legend of the man-god who had been defeated and exiled by Tezcatlipoca; he pointed towards the Avenue of the Dead Ones, and the Pyramid of the Moon, and he explained the position of the buildings and what it all meant, but Jennifer didn't show much interest.

"What else is here?"

"Besides the Pyramids?"

"Yes."

"Nothing. Don't you think is enough?"

"Well, yes, but if somebody had brought in some mechanical games or things like that, this place would also make tons of money."

"And turn this into a kind of archaeological Disneyland, right?"

"Yes! Something like that!"

"Jennifer, please..."

"Well, don't look at me like that. I think it is a good idea. Your country needs lots of money to develop."

"You think too much about money, Jennifer."

"And you think too little. Oh, there's a lot of wind. Let's get out of here", said Jennifer. They came down one level and walked around the platform in search of a place where they could protect themselves from the wind and get away from the noisy excursionists who somehow were tarnishing the splendid place and diminishing it with their cans of beer and their endless jokes and wisecracks.

"Do you know what Hernán Cortés said to Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor?" said one.

"No."

"That his political life was over."

"Why?"

"Because he was too burnt out."

Antonio smiled and shook his head as he listened to the joke while they walked around the platform to sit on a small patch of grass growing between the stones.

"How curious. The sun is really bright, but it is not hot", murmured Jennifer as she leaned against Antonio. It was true. It wasn't hot even though the sunlight was hard to bear. It was a dry sun which didn't make them sweat, but which scorched their skins and burned them in spite of the cold wind which whirled about them; it was a sun which scorched without heat, and without fire.

Antonio wanted to look at it directly, but it was difficult. Its still bright light searched endlessly, whitening everything in its path like bones. Even the grass seemed tired of enduring the sunlight and had acquired a golden color, as that of the old gold, and the trees of the plantations which surrounded The City of Gods were brownish and their tops were bent, defeated by the punishment of the sun. Antonio examined the city; his eyes followed the extraordinarily straight and long lines of the streets, headed by the main avenue crossing in front

of the Pyramid of the Sun and finishing at the steps of the Pyramid of the Moon; he was able to perceive still the layout of the area where there once had been the houses, the public market and the priests' schools. The layout of the city was open, disseminated along the length and with of the, and Antonio was able to contemplate without obstacles beyond the archaeological zone. Far away, the new buildings stood out clearly with their white washed walls, as did the towers and cupolas of the churches.

Jennifer, lying by his side, was completely asleep. She wasn't interested in seeing what Antonio was seeing, and she was bored by the stories he was telling her. Antonio understood that the place was important only to him. It was important because whether he wanted or not, Teotihuacán was an important part of the collective memories which he, as a Mexican, carried in his blood.

Jennifer gathered her legs up and folded them, adopting a fetal position as her sleep deepened, without letting the grandiosity of the place affect her, without having any idea of the triumph for the entire human race that these men, who didn't use the wheel as a means of transportation, had built that celestial observatory while Europe was falling into the Dark Ages of decadence, sickness and dirt. Antonio thought that while Europe crumbled apart, here, the 'Indians' had built temples to watch the sun and the moon so they could measure the time by designing solar calendars to make precise astronomical calculations with the use of just three or four symbols. They had discovered the positional value of mathematics and the value of zero, and they had also built splendid cities, as big and important as those that could usually be found only in the heart of the Roman Empire. Over there, one empire. Over here, another.

Saint Augustine had described the terrestrial empires as passing empires. And were they not? In historical terms hadn't the Roman Empire been ridiculously temporal? So much so, that in disappearing, it disappeared completely. It had happened here too. The Aztecs had also had an empire, and they had disappeared just like the Romans had; both evaporated almost entirely leaving behind a few ruins over there, and a few pyramids over here; just a few references, and a faint memory which lived under the dust accumulating in the libraries and museums. Other than that nothing remained. Nothing!

Not even a language to damn destiny. Not even a prayer to bless that sun which was burning their skins; barely a poem by Netzahualcóyotl which spoke precisely of the passing nature of man on earth.

Antonio turned to see Jennifer and caressed her blonde hair and her waist and legs and didn't want to wake her up from her dream. He would give her a little bit more of time. He again looked at the Pyramid of the Moon. Who were the men who had built that extraordinary place he asked himself without being able to give an answer. He saw the reddish and black stones and thought about those other men who now seemed so removed and remote from this time and place; what did they believe in and how did they believe it? Did they believe in love? Did they believe in harmony, in beauty, in all of those things? Antonio wanted to go back in time and put himself in the place of one of those men six hundred years earlier. He had a few facts to work from; for example, he knew that they venerated their gods. One of them was the sun. He tried to contemplate the yellow and blinding circle of the sun, that merciless sun whose light stung into his body like something physical. God was the sun. The sun was God. And God hid himself during the nighttime, fighting against the obscurity and leaving a bloody trace of the battle behind. The Lord Sun would fight the entire night only to reappear at dawn after losing much blood. Now, the sun was sinking at that moment on the horizon and Antonio Iztlaxihuátl asked himself what that bloody sky meant. Should he interpret it as a warning? I, Netzahualcóyotl Alarcón, Supreme Lord of Texcoco, should I think that this sky full of blood is a sign? Perhaps a pleading from my sun-god, who is asking me for blood so as not to die, so as not to get weaker, so as not to lose the battle and thus avoid all men on this earth disappearing?

"I'm cold", murmured Jennifer. Antonio took off his sweater and covered her and kept on thinking about the past. What had they felt when they had lost everything? Their customs, their cities, their legends, their languages and even their gods. Everything. Absolutely everything. They, the most powerful warriors, what had they felt when everything, absolutely everything changed? What had they felt when they found themselves abandoned by their gods in spite of the prayers and sacrifices?

They had to contemplate the destruction of the universe, as it was known up to that moment. The Greater Desolation. Not very different from a nuclear explosion which could destroy everything in sight. Then, too, there would remain only the stones.

And him? Who was he? He wasn't an Aztec, Náhuatl, or Maya, but neither was he a Spaniard. And yet he was one of them. He was the conqueror and the conquered. He was equidistant from Rome and Teotihuacán, just as close to both, but just as far. Yet he wasn't like them; if he were to meet on the street they would stare at each other with wonder and mistrust; they would not recognize the similarities, nor would they understand one another. Time had opened a wound impossible to heal. They had been his at a moment in time. Now they were not his anymore; now they were just distant points of a past which he made an effort to comprehend. The conqueror and the conquered; nor the conqueror, nor the conquered. Now, the children played with the loose stones of the empire, and the ants, which were digging in the walls, were finishing the destructive labor of time, and the day would arrive in which not even these remnants would survive. All powerful civilizations, Rome and Teotihuacán; he was at equal distance from those lost empires, which had been erased leaving but a trace of their grandeur and splendid strength. It had happened in Rome. It had happened here.

Antonio turned to watch Jennifer. He saw her sleeping placidly, enjoying her dreams with full confidence of herself, and enjoying those images in her mind quietly and without fear. Her clothes stood out, and didn't fit the place where she was lying, that same place which long ago joined with the sun and the moon and the universe.

Antonio concentrated on the wind. In the silence of the ruins, there was only Ecáhtl, the incessant God-of-the Wind that stirred the treetops and, little by little, was wearing down those huge constructions, those remnants of what once was. The wind carried Teotihuacán away in the dust.

During those first months Antonio learned that making love to Jennifer was always surprising and disconcerting. He had discovered that the first night they spent together in San Francisco and

confirmed it later in Mexico. Something emanated from her, something which came from very deep within the woman named Jennifer Highland; it was like a hoarse, strong vibration born in all the fibers of her body; a vibration which momentarily sounded as if it were the muffled growling of a tiger, or the purring of a huge and powerful cat which was living inside of Jennifer. It was like the roaring of a beast, which was restrained by one single thing; will power. To love Jennifer was like an unknown adventure and a discovery; it was as simple as giving a firm step forwards to fall into a bottomless well; as simple as jumping into a swimming pool and coming up to the surface in the middle of a hurricane in the Atlantic Ocean; as simple as going up a step, to find himself floating in the space of an endless cosmos. Jennifer had powers, which Antonio hadn't even suspected existed and by loving her he felt that Jennifer's body and Jennifer's passion turned him inside out and inward again.

They had their first arguments, always because of money, and Antonio also learned that loving Jennifer could make him miserable. She never refused him her body, but turned it off and Antonio would lose the battle no matter how many efforts he made to turn it on. That situation lasted until the day that he understood that the sparks occurred only when Jennifer decided to let go of the passion that she controlled so carefully. One night, after a huge argument, Jennifer bolted the bedroom door. Antonio broke in by force and threw Jennifer on the bed. He laid on her and furiously started to dig and stir into her lock with his key until he succeeded in opening it completely. Jennifer felt instantly what Antonio wanted to do and, scared, opened her eyes and tried to slip away from his embrace, but Antonio wouldn't let her leave.

"What are you doing? No! Don't do it! Stop!" she screamed.

"Shhhhh...!"

"No! Don't do that! Its mine, its mine!"

"Let it be ours."

"I don't want to! Please! I don't want to, I don't want to..." said Jennifer, but it was too late; Antonio had gotten all the way to the back of her cage and he was already taming the beast of her passion;

he was breaking the chains even as Jennifer wanted to keep them locked. She let loose a deep cry of rage and love, she scratched him and bit him but Antonio didn't stop until she had completely lost all of her control and she shook madly underneath his body and then fainted. It was from that night on that she started to hate him. Since the power wasn't hers alone anymore, it became a power shared by the two of them and their love turned into a permanent fight and a constant battle to gain control of the beast, while at the same time it was a continuous exploration through the uncertain limits of pleasure.

As time went by, Jennifer started to show some signs of restlessness that she wasn't able to entirely control. Sometimes Antonio would find her euphoric without any apparent reason and she was a whirlwind of laughter, jokes and endless mischief. Other times, Jennifer would simply wake up in a bad mood and her face would wear a dark shadow that seemed to obscure everything around her. She changed her hairdo twelve times and then rearranged the furniture in the apartment; she began with the living room, followed with the bedroom and finished with Antonio's study. One week later, unsatisfied with the results, she again changed the entire distribution and from then on, rearranging Antonio's apartment became an obsessive habit. Each day, she would add or remove something. Then she looked at the walls and decided that it was the color that bothered her, so when Antonio came back from the newspaper, the apartment was already painted in bright colors. Afterwards, there were pastel colors soft and light. Then she used a combination of the two, with stripes and strange rainbows, but Jennifer was never entirely satisfied with her work and she would start all over again.

One afternoon, exactly eleven months after their elopement, Antonio found her going through some papers. Among them were a telegram and two airplane tickets to San Francisco. Jennifer's grandfather had sent them. The telegram simply said:

I want to meet your new boyfriend.

Randolph B. Highland

"Do it for me", said Jennifer, when Antonio refused to go. "After my father died during the war, my grandfather took care of my mother and me. I was very little and he replaced my father, as you can imagine. My mother and he are all I've got in the world. And now you, of course, but I would like to have the three of you together."

"I don't want to go Jennifer." -

"Oh, Tony, don't be like that. What have you got to lose?"

"Don't call me Tony."

"Antonio, what have you got to lose"

"I could lose you." "

"Darling - darling, that will never happen."

"And why did he phrase the telegram in that manner?"

"That's his character."

"I don't like it. 'I want to meet your new boyfriend.' What is this? A parade of your conquests? I don't understand."

"He did it on purpose, knowing that this would offend you", said Jennifer, and she launched off on a long explanation about her grandfather's character. When she finished, the only thing that Antonio had gotten out of it was that the old man was used to competing for everything and he liked to play against a good opponent. Antonio listened attentively to her reasons for going, but kept on refusing. She became obstinate. First, she refused to talk to him. When that didn't work, she tried to intimidate him by breaking things in the kitchen and by hitting the walls and doors in sudden attacks of fury. That didn't work. Then she tried praising him and softening him up by cooking special dishes for him and by being particularly loving. Antonio didn't budge. She tried a few discrete threats, but even she didn't like them so she stopped immediately. Antonio didn't want to give in. Even though he never had told Jennifer, when he had read the telegram he had been filled with foreboding. There was no reason why he should meet Jennifer's grandfather. And yet, when she gave up trying heroic actions, forgot

her threats, and finally reverted to her tears, Antonio agreed to go to San Francisco. And that was my first mistake thought Antonio, on the terrace of *Las Hadas*, while relieved, in a few scarce minutes what he had lived with Jennifer all throughout the seven years of their relationship. He settled himself on the lounge and closed his eyes against the glare of the sun. He was tired, very tired...The sensation of the sun's rays tanning his skin was pleasing. He thought about calling Jennifer, but he realized that he could not call her and he took refuge in the past again.

When they arrived at San Francisco's International Airport, a long black limousine was waiting for them. As soon as they cleared customs and left the airport through the automatic doors, a woman came out of the limousine to welcome them. It was Elizabeth King, Randolph B. Highland's secretary. Elizabeth was an elegant woman of fifty or sixty years with a quick smile. A smile, however, that she administered carefully. Her long hair had been blonde once and now it was almost entirely white.

"Hi, Jennifer. Welcome home."

"Hi, Liz. Thanks for coming. How are you?"

"Fine, fine...you are Tony, obviously."

"Antonio Alarcón. Pleased to meet you."

The chauffeur, of Mexican ancestry, greeted Jennifer respectfully and inclined his head ironically towards Antonio.

"Is that all of your luggage?" asked the chauffeur, when he had placed their only valise into the trunk of the car.

"Yes. We are only going to stay for a few days", answered Antonio defensively. Elizabeth smiled.

"We'll see about that", she said mysteriously.

They got into the limousine and the chauffeur drove off. Elizabeth and Jennifer had ample time to talk between themselves in reserved whispers, since the Highland mansion was one hour from the airport. Jennifer talked with enthusiasm about some of her adventures in Mexico and Elizabeth listened to her while she discretely inspected Antonio. Several times, he caught the piercing gaze of Elizabeth on him, but each time he turned to see her, she averted her eyes. The

chauffeur also didn't cease watching him slyly in the rearview mirror. Each time Antonio said something, an awkward and malicious tension was created inside the car, which Jennifer hurried to dissipate with some superfluous comment.

A short time before they arrived at the mansion, Elizabeth became suddenly serious.

"Jennifer, Tony is very nice", she said as if he were not present/. "But I am afraid that won't make any difference to your grandfather. Your mother asked me to warn you about something: Mister Randolph won't allow this relationship."

"We know that", said Jennifer, in a scared murmur and held Antonio's hand. She seemed pale. "Thanks for the warning, Liz."

"I love you, dear. Good luck", answered Elizabeth, as the limousine entered the gates of the Highland mansion.

They drove up a long, winding road laid among the carefully tended gardens that surrounded the residence. The house itself was built on the highest point of a small hill. It was a gloomy construction, not very ostentatious on the outside. Six bay windows, typical of San Francisco, showed up on the facade. Through any of them, Antonio would later find out, a splendid view of the bay itself could be had. In front of the main entrance, three cars were parked: two white limousines and a red porcine.

Jennifer's mother came out the door to welcome them and she embraced her daughter with a restrained gaiety. Four men who acted mysteriously came out from different parts of the house holding walkie-talkies and wearing poorly concealed weapons under their custom-made suits. As the bodyguards opened the door of one of the limousines, an immensely fat man with a pipe in his mouth came out a side door. He climbed into the limousine and left. Going into the house, Antonio saw other guards, distributed strategically. All of them examined him closely.

Jennifer's mother guided them to their bedrooms. He was sent to the one farthest along the corridor of the second floor, against Jennifer's protests, but her mother, a slender woman with hair as blond as Jennifer's, but longer, asked both of them to forgive her for keeping them apart.

"Let's get used to it, dear", she said. Together, embracing, as they were at that moment, they seemed to be sisters. "You understand, don't you, Mister Alarcón? After all, you kids aren't married yet", added Ada Highland, with gracious irony, and she pinched her daughter's nose.

"Well. Now, if you'll excuse us, I have many things to talk about with this little devil whom I haven't seen in months."

"I'll see you later", offered Jennifer. She was leaving the bedroom when she stopped and returned to kiss Antonio's mouth.

"Thanks", she whispered, and left.

Antonio placed all of his clothes in a drawer of the dresser and then came out to inspect the house. Along the corridor, he found several guards with cold eyes and hard features. At the beginning, he was disconcerted at finding them all over, but then he got used to being watched and ended by ignoring their silent presence.

The interior decor of the house was elaborate. It was a sumptuous and conceited luxury, but with strangely mixed tastes; there were tables held by atlases cast in bronze beside Japanese dressers lacquered in shiny black; chairs of oak and gilded leather from Jalisco around small tables of Italian marble; jars of almost transparent porcelain painted with Chinese landscapes placed on top of a Louis XV dining room table. From the walls hung paintings of American and European artists. The Americans were contemporary while the Europeans were from the modern period. Antonio was able to recognize a Chagall, a Van Gogh --a couple deformed landscapes--, a multiple serigraph of Warhol, and over the mantle, placed right in the center of it, was a Diego Rivera.

This was a small painting that powerfully attracted his attention with its flower of bright colors and the round faces of brown kids. The entire house smelled too old, too enclosed, too much of mothballs; it was as silent as the catacombs, and had a certain air of oblivion to it. It was as if all the money invested in furnishing it could not replace the strength and the warmth of laughter. It seemed like a museum built with excessive amount of money and scarce good taste and watched by jealous guardians through television cameras, rather than the home of a family.

Antonio had the rest of the afternoon to get used to than lonesome ambiance. When the last limousine left, Jennifer was called in by her grandfather and remained with him behind the closed doors of his study until eight at night. When she came out Jennifer was crying and ran to lock herself in her bedroom. Antonio followed her and was at her bedroom door, trying to get in, when Elizabeth approached him. Antonio was getting impatient because he could hear the muffled sobbing behind the door; Jennifer was trying to silence her crying with a pillow.

"Tony, I believe that Mister Highland can receive you now", the secretary announced pompously. Somehow, she seemed to be pleased.

"Go to hell", said Antonio.

"I think it would be better if you follow me. Mister Highland doesn't like to wait."

"I don't care. Jennifer, open this door."

The door opened and Jennifer came out.

"I'm all right. Please, go talk to him."

"I told you it was a stupid idea to come here. Let's go."

"Yes, we'll leave, but first I would like it if you talked to him. Please. I am all right. I swear it. Go and talk to him", insisted Jennifer.

Antonio made a decision and furiously he followed the secretary. Randolph B. Highland's study was on the lower level of the house, behind the living room. Antonio erupted angrily into the peaceful and empty office made with an abundance of fine woods and with lampshades designed to create many strategically placed shadows. The decoration of the study was similar to the rest of the house, except that in front of the chimney there was a table made with Parota wood carved in Michoacán with a chess set specially illuminated by a spotlight in the ceiling. Antonio walked impatiently from one side to the other until his attention was captured by the chess set. It was an extraordinary set carved in ivory. On the battle field Spanish soldiers fought against Aztec warriors. Antonio examined it carefully while he waited. He had never seen anything like it; the

pieces had been carved with so much virtuosity that each one of the thirty-two minisculptures was a work of art. Antonio admired the precision of the crowns and the clothes of the kings, the armor of the pawns, the feather ornaments of the high-priests and the hats of the bishops, but he specially liked the solution which the artist had to the problem which existed due to the absence of horses in the Americas of XVI century; instead of horses, the artist had carved giant ocelots for the Aztec army, while the rooks were Mayan pyramids.

"Do you play chess?" asked a dry and age-broken voice. Startled, Antonio looked into the shadows of the study, understanding that he had fallen into a trap; somebody had been watching him all the time.

"Do...you...play...chess?" insisted slowly the voice. A lamp lit all the way to the back of the large study and Antonio found himself facing Jennifer's grandfather the legendary Randolph B. Highland, the powerful, multimillionaire, and willful Mister Highland. Without knowing why Antonio felt disappointed. At first, when he saw the old man sitting immobile behind the large desk, Antonio thought about the mummies of Guanajuato. The old man had the same dry and stretched skin, with bulging eyes over a pointed and bony nose, eagle-like, with a few locks of hair scattered over his bald round head, and no lips. Just like a mummy. A mummy which drummed his fingers on the desk, requiring an answer.

"Don't you speak English? I asked you-"

"Yes, yes, I play chess."

"Good. Afterwards we'll play. Now I would like to ask you some questions", said the old man gesturing to the chair placed in front of the desk. As Antonio sat down he realized that the legs of the chair had been cut progressively so that the old man could always be higher than his visitors could. It was an old trick used by all men obsessed by authority, their own and everybody else's. Antonio made a point of bending over to examine the short legs. Age had shrunk Randolph B. Highland so much, that in a little while he would need to leave the chair without legs so as to be able to keep on enjoying of his 'superior' stand. Antonio smiled because that chair gave him a clue; he

remembered that nothing irritated the authoritarians more than passive and happy rebellion.

He looked directly at Jennifer's grandfather and the old man started at him without any expression in his green eyes which combined the noncommittal look of a poker player and the cold and patient wait of a vulture watching its prey.

The interrogation began immediately. The old man was like a machine gun shooting questions; Antonio hadn't finished answering the first one, when the second was on its way already. Antonio answered truthfully, guessing that the old man had investigated him exhaustively and that the information was contained in the open dossier resting on the desk. And probably there was a tape recorder functioning somewhere, registering each sound, each word, each answer Antonio gave. It was all part of the same kind of mentality.

"Full name?"

"Antonio Alarcón Villareal."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I am a writer."

"How much do you earn?"

"Enough."

"For what? My granddaughter is used to having money, you know."

"I am very sorry."

"Do you expect to continue being a reporter all of your life?"

Antonio shook his head. What could he answer a question like that?

"No. I write only to pass the time, until Mexico finishes developing its space program. The truth is that I want to be an astronaut."

The old man paused. He started the motor of his electric wheelchair, went around the desk and approached Antonio so that he could look at him directly from a few inches away.

"That's stupid."

"Of course it is. I am glad you've realized it."

"Don't try to outsmart me."

"Look, I'm here because Jennifer asked me, but I really don't find any reason to accept this interrogation. I am not a criminal."

"I'll tell you why you have to accept it. Because it will depend on me whether this relationship of your goes ahead."

"We will decide that."

"No, you are wrong. I will decide that. If she disobeys me, she will never see me again."

"That would be your choice", said Antonio and stood up. The old man made his wheelchair go back to his place behind the desk.

"I believe you liked my chess set."

Antonio didn't answer.

It was a personal gift from Don Plutarco Elias Calles. He was a good friend of mine. This chess set was carved by a Chinese artist who used to live in northern Mexico before he was killed by the Cristeros."

Antonio kept quiet.

The mummy pushed a button on his desk and the heavy curtains behind him opened, revealing the scenery that his window offered. The Golden Gate Bridge was clearly visible in the distance, standing out in the midst of the fog covering the entrance to San Francisco's Bay.

The old man made his chair spin so he faced the window.

"Come back later. We'll play a game of chess and talk some more. I'll keep my opinion of you till then. I'll be waiting for you in an hour. After dinner."

Antonio walked out of the study, leaving behind him an old man surrounded by an immense solitude.

...sun, sun and whispers from the ocean, sun and ocean, incessant waves with the rhythm of a woman's caresses, woman, there was a lost scream of a woman who played with her lover down

there on the beach, a seagull, the sun and a toy ship coming into the bay, my body molding itself to the lounge...

That evening, Antonio had dinner by himself. Or almost. Jennifer and Ada were also seated at the table, but Jennifer was distracted, and her mind was someplace else. Ada was trying to cheer up her daughter and talked to her softly while the waiters served them in silence.

"Don't worry, darling. Your grandfather adores you and would give everything to make you happy", whispered Ada as if it were a prayer.

"Sure. As long as my happiness is just like his. As long as I do whatever he wants me to do. And I am not going to do it, mother, I am not going to do it."

"Try to understand him, baby. He is a lonesome man, with more solitude than years left. I am here, yes, but it is as if I were not, since I'm not of his blood. You are the only one who carries his blood and it is natural that he would want to have you always near. I am sure that he would accept everything if you were willing to live here..."

"Jennifer, I am going back to Mexico on Monday", Antonio said immediately.

She looked at him in silence and nodded.

It was Saturday night.

After dinner, Antonio went back to the old man's study. He found it in darkness, except for the spot on the ceiling that illuminated the chess set. Highland was waiting for him right there. They didn't talk much. What for? Randolph B. Highland had chosen the left side; he had reserved the Spanish soldiers for himself and Antonio was to play with, naturally, the Aztec warriors. Antonio sat on the chair with the short legs. The chess set was as high as his chest and this placed him at a disadvantage by not allowing him an aerial view of the positions of the enemy forces. Antonio quickly grabbed a heavy, blue volume that was on a small table. It was The New Columbia Encyclopedia. He placed it on the chair, sat on it, and that leveled him. The old man didn't say a thing.

A coin decided who would open the match. The old man won and he rubbed his hands and conservatively moved the king's pawn. Antonio followed the lead and answered with the same move. For awhile, he would have to keep himself on the defensive. The mummy had the advantage of a move and that allowed him (and in a way, forced him) to attack. Antonio concentrated on his pieces; he knew that the game of chess is a game not only of smart combinations; it is also a psychological game. Many times, the winner is not the one who plays the best, but the one who psychologically dominates his adversary. The old man was perfectly aware of this and that was why he would use all the possible tricks to intimidate his opponent; because life itself was, for him, a gigantic game of chess.

Antonio knew that Randolph B. Highland didn't smoke which was why he pulled out a cigarette, lit it up and blew the smoke forwards in an open provocation. The old man didn't move a single muscle on his face, like the good player he was, but when he coldly looked up, his pupils became smaller and smaller and Antonio knew he had found a hole through which he could slip. He also remembered some other tricks he had learned with the habitual players on the tables of Chapultepec Lake. If the old man had his short-legged chair, bodyguards with earphones, tape recorders, power and influence, Antonio would have the recourse of the smoke curtains and the street fighting.

The old man displayed his light artillery; he sent out his horses. Antonio answered with his ocelots. Up to that moment, there was a symmetry and a perfect equilibrium on the battlefield. Harmony, thought Antonio, is a fundamental part of chess; it is choreography where the winner would not be the stronger, but he who knew better how to take advantage of the enemy's weaknesses. The old man moved out the queen's pawn, in an open offer to start measuring strengths, but Antonio didn't take the hook; rather, he waited a minute before he answered. He analyzed the play; the old man's objective was to control the middle squares; then Antonio had to move his own armies to the flanks in a wrapping movement. Surprise was always the most important strategy, said Antonio to himself. He considered that it was time to snatch the initiative in the battle and to do that, he made use of the guerrilla tactic of Pancho Villa; shoot and hide your head. Don't

ever let them see you; distract them on one side while you pursue your true objective. He moved out his high priest, threatened the horse of the Spanish queen and, at the same time, he placed himself in a position to castle his king. The mummy didn't believe that Antonio was to exchange a bishop for a horse and moved the rook's pawn to scare him away. Antonio took the horse. Highland took the high priest with a pawn. Antonio proceeded to take the king's pawn with his ocelot and lost his own pawn. He then gave another surprise to the old man by utilizing a practice initiated by the Aztecs: the sacrifice. With his ocelot, and without any protection, Antonio took the king's bishop pawn and, for the first and only time during the game, Highland frowned slightly, disconcerted at that apparently innocent gift. Antonio watched how he carefully analyzed the battlefield and, for a moment, Antonio was afraid that the old man was not going to bite the hook, but when Highland didn't find any danger, he took the ocelot with his king. Obviously, the old man didn't know that the sacrifice of the horse was really a play more than three hundred years old. It even had a name; it was called "*Fegatello*", a name which the habitual players of Chapultepec Park had transformed into "*Friégatelo*", which meant something like "stick it to him". Highland didn't lose any pieces; what he had lost was the control of the central squares, his initiative on the attack, and the possibility to castle his king.

Antonio concentrated even more, without considering victory yet. Now, the true game began, he thought, but when he saw the disbanded structure of the Spanish army, Antonio realized he was in a good position and he congratulated himself.

With the next move, the old man understood what had happened during the earlier slaughter. Antonio did castle his king and Highland had to resign himself to placing his king between the bishop and the rook. Antonio moved his queen's pawn forwards and Highland had to swallow it, at the same time, losing his own pawn to the jaws of the Aztec princess. The control of the battlefield was in Antonio's hands. From then on, Antonio kept pressing with his guerrilla strategy of hunt-and-hide and, two hours later, he had the old man completely surrounded. Without any possibility of winning left, Highland repeatedly used his queen in wasteful maneuvers trying to table the

game, until the queen finally fell. The old man grunted and surrendered his king.

"Good game", said Highland, dryly. He activated his wheelchair and, without saying goodbye, went to hide in the shadows of his study.

Antonio guessed that the defeat had hurt the old man, but he had a chance to corroborate his suspicion the next afternoon when Jennifer and he came back from having lunch at Fisherman's Wharf.

Randolph B. Highland called him into his study, where he was anxiously waiting. When Antonio came in, the old man invited him cordially for a drink, showing that he could be jovial and effusive. As if they were best friends, Highland talked about his tastes in painting and literature. He served another shot to Antonio, and talked of his memories of Mexico, where he had visited for the first time at the end of the hostilities of the Revolution of 1910.

It had been then that he met personally with some of the main figures of the fighting.

"Don Plutarco Elias Calles became a good friend of mine", said Highland. "When the ungrateful Cárdenas exiled him from Mexico in that shoddy way, Don Plutarco honored me by spending some time as my guest. He brought that chessboard with him as a present for me and we used to spend the entire evening playing. He was very generous, did you know?" remembered the old man, and he poured more whisky in Antonio's glass. Antonio was on guard, disconcerted by the friendly attitude of the old man. Randolph B. Highland was behaving with a sudden kindness that was suspicious because it was so unexpected. As Highland talked, Antonio started to understand little by little what this was all about. The old man was burning with a desire to avenge the insult he had suffered the night before by losing and with his superfluous chat, he expected that Antonio would become relaxed and maybe that he would drink a little too much before he invited him to play again. The old man was waiting for an opportunity, and with ability, he avoided drinking himself. Though his desire to play was so intense that it actually sent out vibrations and silent messages, Antonio feigned not to notice and

didn't pay attention to the persistent looks that the old man directed at the chessboard.

"I imagine that you know my late wife was Mexican", said Highland.

"Jennifer said something about it, yes."

"She was a magnificent woman", said Highland, pensively.

Suddenly, he activated his wheelchair, approached a dresser and pulled out a picture from the bottom drawer. With it in his hand, he went back to his desk and threw it on it. The photograph was dated 1929. It was gray with time, and showed a bold football player running with the ball between two enemy defenses.

"That was me", said Highland, with pride. He coughed somewhat to clear his voice and drank a shot of whisky.

"When they took that photo, I was captain of my college team. I had just been accepted to Harvard Law School, my family was very well respected and I was popular with many, many friends...Soon afterwards, I fell sick. One afternoon, when I came back from training, I felt as if I had caught a cold. I went early to bed and forgot about it. But three or four weeks later, I suddenly lost all of my strength as I was coming out of the shower. I fell to the floor. I couldn't raise myself and by the time the doctor arrived, my paralysis was already reaching my hands. I was barely able to move my fingers. The doctors made me go through many tests and finally they reached an agreement at the hospital. They told me that I was never to walk again.

Antonio looked at him in wonder.

"Jennifer told me that your paralysis was due to an accident."

"I know what Jennifer said. That happened many years later. It's another story."

"All right. Then what happened?"

"During those first months I spent in the hospital, my life became pure hell. Mainly because I was unable to accept what had happened to me."

The old man paused again.

"One day I had everything a man could wish for: health, wealth, popularity, a promising future as a lawyer...and the next day, nothing remained of that and I was human waste. I'll be damned if lying on that bed and looking all the time at an awful lamp that they never turned off I was able to think about something else besides death. Day and night, I despaired, searching for some convenient way to die, but there is very little a paralytic can do to take his own life, you know? I stopped eating and I lost a lot of weight. Soon, I was a sack of bones. My family refused to let me die and they sent me to the summerhouse in Mexico. They thought that there it would be easier for me to improve. It didn't work, and day after day, I got worse, until someone suggested that a shaman should examine me. They brought him over. He was a skinny man with long, black hair and a vehement expression in his dark eyes. He was dressed with a long cotton shirt and he arrived with his entire family. Without saying a word, they lifted me and carried me to a nearby river, where they submerged me after doing a rite that mixed Catholic prayers with Indian traditions. Then, that man who was called El Niño operated on me with a piece of broken glass and then gave me a mixture of herbs which only he knew, to drink. I didn't feel anything, but when they brought me back home, my legs began to prickle. During the following six months, the shaman and his daughters visited me each day. One of the girls had huge black eyes and long braids of hair. She was called Corina. She barely talked, but had a very special way of helping me; she was like a protective blanket that served me without saying a word. Thanks to her and her father, I recovered the control of my body."

The old man coughed again.

"I didn't know that such a beautiful woman could treat a man like that and I ended up falling in love with Corina..."

"And then?"

Highland was suddenly quiet and looked impatiently at the chessboard. Antonio saw him fight against the nostalgia.

"Enough of the memories. Now, let's play", said Randolph B. Highland, with shiny eyes.

"No", said Antonio.

"What?"

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"What are you saying?"

"That I don't feel like playing."

"But you've got to play! You cannot refuse!"

"Why not?"

The old man shut up. He tightened his jaws and hated Antonio with passion from that instant on.

"Very well", said the old man coldly after awhile. Antonio knew that the old man would not say one single word more and decided that it was already time to go to sleep. He placed his glass on the desk and left the office. On his bony face shone a smile.

...his eyes were closing against his will, The heat and tiredness were overpowering, defeating him, he didn't like defeat because everything in life w-s a game, a game, damned if you won, damned if you lost. Anyway, the old mummy had to hate; had to find a reason to hate because he didn't have any reason to love and hate was his only motivation in life. Life, he could; leave them in peace, he could not, he could not, never could, no, never, never, never will he leave us in peace, no, until his life is over...Jennifer was his and he had to possess her by any means because she was another one of his possessions and had to force her to value the same things he did, to destroy the same things he did, to love the same as he, to hate the same as he did, hate, love, did, he, she...

The next morning, Randolph B. Highland sent a guard to call Antonio very early. It was Monday. The old man was seated by the chessboard, waiting for him. He had placed his wheelchair behind his Spanish troops. With a gesture, he indicated for Antonio to have a seat. His bulging eyes, like those of a well-educated toad, watched Antonio for a long while, in a deceptive way. He seemed to want to destroy Antonio before he talked. The Mexican had his Aztec warriors in front of him and, mentally, he caressed the fine pieces, congratulating them on the earlier battle. Antonio waited in silence.

"I don't like you", said the old man with a reptilian look. Antonio knew that his sentence had arrived finally with those four words.

"I believe my granddaughter has made a very grave mistake."

"That is Jennifer's problem, don't you think? Hers and mine."

"I agree, but if she insists on her relationship with you, she will remain outside the family. Forever. In all matters related to me she will have died. Of course, there will be no money."

"Of course."

Silence.

Antonio was trying to keep his face as cold as the old man's, without moving a single muscle. The old man seemed to want to destroy him with his gaze. The wheelchair was quite a bit higher than the short-legged chair, so Antonio had to look up. The blue encyclopedia wasn't anywhere in sight. Antonio thought about getting to his feet, but for some unknown reason he decided to wait awhile.

"You are a loser, Antonio. You are just like those bum who cross the border at night. Ever since you crossed that door for the first time, I noticed it. You didn't realize that I had made Jennifer cry on purpose so that I could measure your reactions. When you came in through that door, you were really very angry, willing to fight with me. Then you calmed down and were contented with verbal sparring. You are a loser at heart. You carry in you that destructive virus which so many Mexicans carry within them without even knowing it. They don't consider it as such, since you all have built a temple to defeat. You all adore the defeated; you venerate that Indian who lost against Cortés and forget about the other Indian who defeated the Spaniards on the *Noche Triste*, as you call it. You would rather remember Villa and Zapata, two losers, and ignore Obregón and Calles, two exceptional men. I had the honor of knowing Calles, as I have told you. Through him, I learned that Obregón was indisputably a military genius as few in the history of the world have been, while Calles himself created the most perfect political system in the occidental world. Villa was a glorified bandit and Zapata was just a stubborn man who never learned how to negotiate. The two of them were big losers, but they are venerated as gods in Mexico. You all have created a morbid taste

for death, which is the greatest defeat, and enjoy fighting amongst yourselves in your daily life. You like to lose. That's all."

"Is that what you think of me?"

"Yes. Yesterday, you won the battle, but you lost the war. You refused to give me a rematch out of fear and that makes you a loser. You don't deserve my granddaughter. I don't know what she sees in you, but I am sure of one thing; she doesn't love you. She is *using you to* rebel against me. That's all. She doesn't love you."

"Are you finished?"

The old man paused.

"Last night, I commented on a part of my private life. It was a weakness on my part. But I didn't tell you the entire story. I told you that I loved Corina and it's true. I never loved anyone as much as I loved her, even though Corina had a grave problem; she was weak in spirit. She never learned how to be a lady. In the depth of her soul, she always remained a poor shaman's daughter and acted as such in spite of the fact that I offered her jewels and luxuries of all kinds. Corina didn't have dignity", said the old man, provocatively, and waited to see Antonio's reaction. The Mexican's brown face didn't show anything.

"The more I asked of her, the more she gave me, without asking anything in return. For a long time, we lived in Mexico. The revolution had turned out to be a gold mine. The country was in ruins and the opportunities to make money were abundant. When it seemed impossible, Corina got pregnant. When my son was born, I decided to come back to San Francisco. Here, Corina's problem was accentuated. It got to the point where we couldn't leave and go anywhere out of fear of the foolishness with which insisted on serving everybody else. Those were the worst years of my life with her. Every so often, I had to change-maids because, inevitably, the time would come in which they would be the ones who screamed at Corina. I decided to teach my son to be strong, to be a winner...and when he was twenty-five years old, he was truly a magnificent example of manhood. Unfortunately, he died during the war. Corina had opposed his going off to fight, but I insisted. That was the only time during all of those years in which she opposes a decision of mine. And when we received the news of William's death, she blamed me. The day we were to receive his body,

on the way to the airport, she and I had a fierce argument inside the car. I lost control and we crashed into a bus. Corina died and I was left paralyzed once more. Again, I had to lose all of what was important in my life, except for the fact that my son had left behind my granddaughter, Jennifer."

Antonio got up and walked to the window. The old man didn't seem to notice the movement and kept on talking vehemently.

"I thought that once Corina had died, nothing could prevent my granddaughter from becoming a woman who could heighten the fame of the Highland character. I taught her to always triumph. I educated her to be a queen. I taught her how to win. I taught her to be strong; I taught her to prevail over everything, including over me..."

"Did you ever ask Jennifer if she wanted to become that?" asked Antonio, but the old man didn't seem to hear.

"...that has to be the reason why she insists on this absurd relationship. She is rebelling against me. As a Mexican, you believe that love is enough to fix everything and you claim her for yourself. You are making a mistake. Time will prove me right, but there is no need for it to come to that. I am asking you to leave Jennifer. We can still avoid this unfortunate mistake. I assure you that your sacrifice won't be in vain", said the old man, and from his pocket he pulled out a folded check. He extended it on the table.

"With this, you can get yourself a pretty señorita who would make you happy."

Antonio laughed openly.

"Come on, that is a gesture from a third rate movie. I don't want your money."

"Oh, well. I know." The old man tried a smile, but the grimace was awful. "But I had to try it. I also know that you haven't listened to a single word of what I've said, but I will tell you the same thing I told Jennifer: if she persists in this stupid relationship of yours, she will lose me forever."

"That is something she will have to decide on her own", said Antonio, walking towards the door of the study.

"Are you sure you won't accept this?" said the old man, waving the check. "This is more than one of your silly books could ever make."

"I am completely sure."

"As I said. You are a loser. With this, you could have brought an entire publishing house, if you so wished."

Antonio opened the door and was about to leave when, obeying an impulse, he came back to the chessboard and opened the game with his king's ocelot. Highland watched him with sleepy eyes, without any interest whatsoever.

"What's this?"

"Last time, you played whites. Now, it is my turn to open the game", said Antonio.

"I don't want to play."

"Why? Are you afraid to lose?"

The old man didn't answer. *Touché* thought Antonio. When he looked into the toadlike eyes of the old millionaire, Antonio thought for a moment that the old man wouldn't fall into the trap. But he did. Randolph B. Highland slowly turned his eyes and examined Antonio's opening move and, not being able to use his king's pawn without risking losing it; he imitated Antonio and moved out his horse.

Antonio did his job in a clean and pitiless way and, in fourteen moves, he checkmated the old man. Without saying a word, Antonio left the studio and the life of Randolph B. Highland forever. When he closed the door, he listened to the noise created by the chess set being thrown to the floor.

That same night, Jennifer and Antonio went back to Mexico. When they arrived at his apartment, Antonio surprised Jennifer by telling her that he had to go solve an urgent problem.

"Today? It has to be today?"

"Yes. I won't be long."

"Can it not wait till tomorrow?"

"No. It would be too late", answered Antonio enigmatically and left immediately.

When he came back, an hour later, he was joined by a mariachi band he had hired in Plaza Garibaldi. The musicians began to play, standing in a semicircle around Antonio. Jennifer came to the window and clapped enthusiastically.

*"Despierta, dulce amor de mi vida/
Despierta, si te encuentras dormida/
Escucha mi voz vibrar bajo tu ventana/
En esta cancion, te vengo a entregar el alma/
perdona que interrumpa tu sueño,
pero no pude mas y esta noche te vine a decir, te
quiero.../"¹*

"Oh, darling. I've always dreamed of a serenade. Why did it take you so long?" shouted Jennifer. The mariachis, experts in all matters relating to lovers, kept on playing.

*"Deja que salga la luna, deja que se mete el sol/
Deja que caiga la noche, pare que empiece nuestro amor/
Deja que las estrellitas me llenen de inspiración/
para decirte cositas muy bonitas, corazón/
Yo se que no hay en el mundo, amor como el que me das/
y sé que noche con noche va creciendo más y más..."*

2

Jennifer wanted to hear Antonio's singing and he made an effort to please her, but the only success he had with his voice was in waking up all the neighbors.

1 *.DESPIERTA (Ruiz, Luna de la Fuente)*

2 *CUANDO SALE LA LUNA (Jose Alfredo Jimenez)*

"Darling, this is beautiful", laughed_Jenifer at the same time she was trying to contain the tears up in her huge green eyes.

The neighbors opened their windows in the building and the old widow who rented the apartments came out from the bottom floor. The mariachi band stopped playing.

"Let us sleep, you bums!" shouted one of the neighbors.

"Shut up, you sissy! Keep on playing, boys!", answered the old widow and she smiled before she remembered that she didn't have her dentures in.

"Play it louder, maestro!", ordered Antonio.

"Por el día que llegaste a mi vida, paloma querida, me puse a brindar/

y al sentirme un poquito tomado, pensando en tus labios, me dio por cantar/

Me senti superior a cualquiera y un puño de estrellas te quise bajar/

Y al mirar que ninguna alcanzaba, me dio tanta rabia que quise llorar/"³

"Now you really are all mine", said Jennifer that night after making love. They were just about to go to sleep, shortly before the sun rose.

"Not yet. One of our traditions in Mexico is for the girl to petition for the boy."

"Really?"

"I am afraid you will have to talk with my family."

"I will. They won't deny me your hand."

"I imagine they will agree on your having my hand."

"And your body too."

"No. Only my hand."

3 ***PALOMA QUERIDA (Jose Alfredo Jiménez)***

"All right then. I will take it and you won't be able to write ever again."

"Oh, oh. Then I take back what I said. You don't have to talk to my family."

"Together till death do us apart; you with me, and I with you. "

"To serve and adore me..."

"It doesn't say that! It says 'to care for each other for better or for worse..."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"How awful!"

"I am sorry, but that's the way it is even if you don't like it."

"I love you, Jennifer."

"And I love you, too, and I desire you with my entire soul,
Antonio Alarcón'

"Good night, Jennifer Highland de Alarcón."

"Don't ever leave me, my love."

"I won't. Good night."

"Good night." Silence.

"Sounds impressive."

"What?"

"Jennifer Highland de Alarcón."

"Very impressive. Good night."

Silence.

"I like that, you know?"

"What?"

"The fact that in Mexico the woman doesn't lose her maiden
name."

"Hmmm. Interesting. Sleep well."

"You, too."

Silence.

"You don't understand hints, do you?"

"Jennifer, it's just one hour before sunrise."

"Oh, all right. I'll prove to you that I can be a good girl and I won't bother you again. Good night, my love."

"Good night"

Silence.

"You see how good I can be? I haven't said a thing."

"I am already sleep."

"I love you, Antonio."

"I love you too, Jennifer."

From that moment on, everything began to change quickly in Antonio's life. The news of his relationship with Jennifer wasn't well received in the newspaper where he worked. It happened that the Editor in Chief, having learned of Antonio's love life, began to make him the butt of his jokes. Don Sergio Gallardo was a full-time deep thinker who hated with a religious passion everything related to 'Big Money'. A rubicund man, fat and funny, who was liked by everyone, Don Sergio was intellectually brilliant and liked to consider himself a sort of an ideological heir to Karl Marx. In certain seasons he would let his beard grow so as to accentuate his likeness to the German philosopher, but the likeness was limited to his physical appearance. Not because he lacked ideas, though. Don Sergio was ebullient with ideas; his debates in the bar near the newspaper were epic since he, alone, was enough to mop up the floor with five or ten opponents. Usually he would lean on his elbow on the bar, place his huge head on his hand and easily, using his fine irony, would dissect his opponents while he slowly drank his dark beer. When he talked, he would have been able to convince Rockefeller himself that the World Revolution was just around the corner. His vehemence and his ideals inspired all the contributors of the newspaper to think, talk, and write in cataclysmic tones. At the beginning, Antonio admired him. He was

amazed at the intellectual capacity which Don Sergio showed at the least provocation and admired him for the security with which he would predict that The Revolution was about to break out all over the world in any instant. He used to write dates on his calendar and would say that the revolution wouldn't begin later than that. His predictions always failed, but Don Sergio would always blame the mistakes in his predictions on a new maneuver of the Imperialists and would renew his analysis with an absolute security in the precision of his knowledge. That confidence, however, made him intolerant and arrogant and he couldn't stand anybody who contradicted him. Since he liked to think that he was a latent revolutionary, Don Sergio was convinced that at the office of the Secretary of Interior there was an open dossier with his name on it, and he always behaved in a highly mysterious way...until one day Antonio accidentally discovered that Don Sergio behaved in such an enigmatic way due to a more puerile reason. The truth was that Don Sergio had a second wife and he was afraid that the first one would find out about her.

Then, when Don Sergio learned about Jennifer, he furiously criticized Antonio. He almost went so far as to call him a traitor.

"Why with a gringa? Why don't you get yourself a Mexican woman who would give you kids?" asked Don Sergio, shouting from inside his office.

"Those are private matters, Don Sergio", answered Antonio.

"Private my ass. You are a decadent, *compañero*", said Don Sergio, prompting the laughter of everybody in the newsroom. But one day, Jennifer went to the newspaper looking for Antonio. Don Sergio stammered when he saw her, his face turned redder than usual, he dropped some papers from his desk onto the floor as he stood up to receive Jennifer, and caressed his thick beard as he recognized her beauty.

The opposition and the open criticism from Don Sergio made the rest of the staff look upon Antonio slyly. The jokes and the laughter became constant, until one day everything exploded when one of the reporters slapped Antonio's back in an apparently friendly gesture and asked aloud;

"How's the adopted son of Lane Wilson?" ⁴

The answer Antonio gave him brought them to blows inside the newspaper office.

On the other hand, as soon as Jennifer left San Francisco, her grandfather reacted in a strange way; he broke all of his ties with the factory in Mexico. From his lonesome mausoleum he sent a letter to the Board of Directors, informing them in no uncertain terms that from that moment on Jennifer was responsible for all matters related to the business. Immediately, Jennifer found herself in the theoretical possession of forty-nine per cent of all the stock of TEXMEX, S.A. The other fifty-one per cent was in the hands of Mexicans, as was required by the law of foreign investments, but Highland owned largest and most important group of shares and that made Jennifer's presence indispensable at the Board of Directors meetings.

"It's a trap", said Antonio, refusing to hear anything about it.

"Antonio, don't be paranoid. After all, it is my inheritance."

"Oh, yeah? Then why does he give it to you now?"

"I don't know. But why is that important?"

"It is important because you know nothing about managing a factory."

"Nobody can grow up with Randolph B. Highland and not know something about business. My grandfather taught me many things. Besides, the factory is part of the inheritance that my grandmother left for me.

"I thought your grandfather hated us."

"He might dislike you, but you can bet he doesn't hate me."

"I don't know, Jennifer. Let me think about it."

4 Henry Lane Wilson. Ambassador of United States in México in 1911. Together with the traitor General Victoriano Huerta he plotted the overthrow and murder of Francisco I. Madero, Constitutional President of Mexico in 1911.

Jennifer didn't mention it again while Antonio was making up his mind, but Antonio also had other things to think about even though he had decided not to talk to Jennifer about the pressures that had been accumulating in his life. His love for her inspired him to show her only the best and the more pleasing aspects of all the things that surrounded them. That was the reason he avoided talking to her about his articles on the labor problems, or about the poverty that existed in the Misery Belts around the city, or about the intolerable corruption of some members of the government. He did his best to talk only about literature and history, and to take her only to those places in which he knew Jennifer would feel comfortable, and the rest he kept hidden because it hurt him and made him feel guilty as if he were responsible for all that misery and that abandon.

It shamed him too, as if it were a matter of introducing to society the ugly and dumb member of the family. Instead he would take Jennifer to the best places and would buy her everything she desired without realizing that day after day he sank deeper and deeper in debt. And if he knew he didn't care; by seeing her happy Antonio felt happy himself and Jennifer's caresses and her words of approval when he pleased her filled him with joy. On the contrary, when he didn't see her smile he would worry and be afraid she was missing the luxurious surroundings of the Highland Mansion. He'd managed to obtain the same machines and the same comforts that she used to have in the mansion because he was afraid of losing her. He was afraid of waking up one morning only to find his bed empty. His worst nightmare was of losing her because she considered he wasn't capable of giving her the way of life she was used to. Only once did he try to control the expenses, but the look of disgust and contempt he received from her humiliated him so much that he never mentioned it again and she kept on buying things; some useful, some expensive, some others which she would throw away the next day and others, the very few, that were absolutely necessary. Antonio didn't say a word; He didn't want to run the risk of ruining the passion that moved them just because of a stupid detail like money.

Meanwhile the telegrams from the Board of Directors kept on arriving. When they had created a pile on top of the kitchen

counter, Antonio didn't have any more excuses and gave in to Jennifer's whims.

The first thing they did was to go to a Board meeting. The imposing building where TEXMEX, S.A. had its executive offices was a monument of forty floors of steel, concrete and crystal built on the West side of the city, in the most exclusive section of Las Lomas. The couple went up to the Penthouse and coming out of the elevator, found themselves immediately surrounded by a secretary and three bodyguards. Jennifer showed them her cold neutral smile.

"I am Jennifer Highland", she said proudly. The secretary reacted with surprise and went to pick up the phone on the desk.

"Don Carlos, there is a lady here who says she's Jennifer Highland."

She hadn't finished talking when the mahogany doors of the meeting room opened and the four Mexican partners came out to welcome her.

"Miss Jennifer Highland?"

"That's right", said Jennifer, amused.

"Miss Highland, it is a pleasure to meet you. You have finally agreed to honor us with your presence", said mellifluously a man dressed in sports clothes. Around his neck and on his hands he wore very heavy jewelry. His name was Luis Meyer.

"It is a surprise, really, even though we have been expecting you", said a tall man with careful courtesy. He was slender and strongly built. His white hair, his meticulously trimmed moustache and his spectacles gave him an air of distinction that the other three partners didn't have.

"I am Carlos Fernandez", he said, warmly taking Jennifer's hand between his own. "I first met you when you were just a baby. But come on in, please, come into the meeting room. Would you like some coffee? A brandy?"

The group entered to the spacious and elegant meeting room and once there, they finished doing the round of introductions. Carlos Fernandez was the most important shareholder after the Highlands. Then there was Luis Meyer, the one with the jewels.

After them, came the Architect Ricardo Gonzalez, a norteco with a large moustache, harsh voice and frank laughter. Finally there was Salvador Urrieta, an Attorney-at-Law, the last of the shareholders. Urrieta was a small man, paunchy and nervous who rarely talked; he had the genuflected attitude of a bureaucrat and always seemed to be on the verge of fainting.

With great ceremony they welcomed Jennifer and they all sat around a huge oval table. On its waxed surface Antonio saw the reflection of the lamps above which blinded him *just as the sun of Manzanillo blinded him every time he tried to open his eyes. The sun, the miraculous sun, the reflection on the table, four men so different among themselves, chosen carefully as partners due to their conflicting personalities, tendencies, characters: one was careful, another greedy, another aggressive, another fearful...four men always in disagreement with each other, always divided, which in itself was a guarantee that the control of the factory would never be theirs...The miraculous sun, the sun, the miracle, four salesmen of miracles, how easy it was to cheat those who wanted to be cheated, what a simple work it was to sell miracles to the blind, the paralytic, the lepers, the cancer stricken, the ambitious...*

Antonio tried to keep himself away from Jennifer's business, but she insisted he should go with her to the Board meetings.

"I don't know the Mexican customs, Antonio. I need your advice, darling", she had said with anguish when Antonio first refused. He felt her so fragile, so forsaken, that he had to give in once more. And he began to hate her because of it.

The factory was like a siphon that sucked them in. During the following months, they dedicated themselves to getting to know how the factory functioned, the things it produced, how it produced and to whom they sold the hundreds of different products which were manufactured inside the immense buildings. One day, when both of them were watching the path which the raw materials followed and the separate processes those materials went through in their transformation to final product, Jennifer expressed her fascination with the technology which made all of that possible.

"It's just like a magician's laboratory, isn't it? The knowledge of countless alchemists had to be accumulated throughout entire centuries to be able to produce a simple pencil. It's incredible!" she said with a vibrant voice and a luminous look as if she actually were before the philosopher's stone which transformed lead into gold. Antonio listened to her while he watched with a strange perturbation the efforts of a worker to keep a machine working. The face of the man was awfully deformed, with his skin like melted wax. His horrific aspect emphasized the anguish he felt every time the machine stopped working; the fear showed in his asymmetrical eye and the grimace of his crooked mouth. The mechanic doubled his efforts while his uniform grew wet with his sweat. Antonio perceived his fear and his anguish and for an instant he wished that the machine would stop completely so the mechanic could rest. But the man kept on fighting and when he finally got the machine to work properly, in his horrible face showed for a moment an expression of infinite joy, almost infantile in its purity, before his attention was caught by another machine in trouble.

Jennifer and Antonio began to visit the factory every day. This increased Antonio's expenses. They were still living off what he earned since Jennifer could not cash her company shares. His debt kept on growing, unstoppable. Antonio turned the borrowing into an art and he mastered perfectly the tricks of the trade; he would ask a friend to lend him money to pay somebody else, solicited from a third to pay the credit cards, he mortgaged land which he had received as an inheritance to cover the loan from the bank... Sometimes, his salary from the newspaper was barely enough to pay just the interest on what

he owed. Antonio finally had to talk to Jennifer when she became stubborn in her desire to buy an impressive gold chain.

"But you don't need more jewels, Jennifer."

"Of course I don't need it. But that little necklace would make me very happy. And you want to see me happy, don't you darling?"

"That chain is too...ostentatious."

"Ostentatious? Darling, we obviously have different ideas about things. That chain is barely elegant. Don't tell me you don't like it."

"It's not that, Jennifer. The chain is beautiful, I agree, but, well, if you could wait a little longer..."

"Don't ever ask me to wait, Antonio. It is out of the question. If you don't want to please me, say it and that's it. I'll manage."

"Don't say that, Jennifer. Of course I want to make you happy, but...well, if you want the chain that much...but tell me, why can't you wait a month or two?"

"Because I don't want to live like my grandfather, that's why", shouted Jennifer sitting up in bed. "Oh, yes, in appearance he lives surrounded by luxury and wealth, but do you know why? Because those objects help him to pay less taxes. That's why. All of his life he has been unable to buy himself a new suit. In the bottom of his hart he is still a puritan; he hates pleasure, his own or anyone else's. He saves everything for tomorrow, but tomorrow never arrives. Do you know what he used to give me, his granddaughter, each Christmas? A dollar. One miserable dollar. If my mother hadn't been there, I wouldn't have received education, nor would I have had all the things of which teenage girls' dreams. No, sir. I don't want to save anything for tomorrow, Antonio, nor do I want to leave anything behind me when I die. I want everything now, while I am alive. I'll never postpone a pleasure, nor will I save anything for tomorrow. I want it now, at this moment, while I am young and beautiful."

"Well, I am very sorry, but you are gonna have to wait."

"Until when?"

"Until I have more money!"

Jennifer took a deep breath.

"Ah, is that what this is all about? Why didn't you say so before?" said Jennifer and Antonio felt her contempt like a slap on his face. He bit his tongue, but it was too late. He had said it already. Jennifer jumped out of bed and began to brush her blonde hair before the full-length mirror. Antonio watched her. Naked as she was, she seemed so distant that an urgent desire to hold her in his arms and make love to her invaded him. In those eternally long instants, while Jennifer brushed her hair in silence and Antonio was feeling that he was losing her forever, his desire grew in his lower abdomen as a deep and obscure pain. He had never desired her so much as at that moment.

"How bad is your financial situation?"

"Not so bad...It..It's just a matter of time."

"I don't have any cash, you know that."

"I know. I am not asking you anything, except time."

"I am a poor little rich girl, really. I have many shares, but not a cent in cash."

"I know, I know, don't worry. I can manage."

"However...I might be able to get something at the factory", said Jennifer and turned to look straight at him. The lights and shadows in the bedroom accentuated the perfection of her body. Antonio was left breathless and he ceased thinking about money. He got up from bed and walked to Jennifer. She smiled seductively, confident of her power over Antonio.

"I have an idea. Would you like to work for me? That way you would have more time to write."

Antonio didn't answer. The exigency of his body could not be delayed. He embraced her and possessed her on the carpet while Jennifer caressed the nape of his neck, moaning softly.

"Tony, my lovely Tony..." she said once and again.

...counselor, counsel, council-house...a group of children were playing and singing someplace and the sound of their voices

erupted in Antonio's consciousness like the sound of water...his consciousness, my consciousness, our consciousness, the cognoscente...I love you too, matarili, fire, ion. What do you want, matarile, fire, ion? I want to come in, matarile, fire, lon...Like the snake, like the snake of the sea, through here I want to pass, those who are ahead run too much, and those in the back will be left behind, hind, hind...One elephant was swinging from side to side on the cobweb of a spider, / once he found it resisted he went to call another elephant. Two elephants were swinging from side to side on the cobweb of a spider. Once they found it resisted they went to call another elephant. Three elephants were swinging from side to side on the cobweb of a spider. Once they found it...

Distracted, Antonio came out to the street. He had delivered his collaboration to the newspaper editor and now, not paying attention, he started walking by Bucareli Street in direction of the parking lot. He almost stumbled into Fernando Ramirez, the reporter with whom he had fought about Jennifer. Antonio tried to avoid him, but Fernando stopped him.

"Friends?" said the reporter extending his hand.

"Friends", answered Antonio.

"What's going on with you? We barely see you around here anymore."

"I am...I am working on a book", lied Antonio. Each day he had more and more problems concentrating on his writing. Something was going terribly wrong and he didn't know how to stop it. In a short time his life had been modified entirely and now he couldn't think about anything else besides Jennifer and money. He was trapped by an obsession and he knew it, but he wasn't willing to sacrifice the intense pleasure that that obsession created in him. However, he was aware that the price he was paying just to please his lover each day grew bigger.

"Come on, let's have a beer. Don Sergio is at The Office. You know. By the way, we've found a new nickname for him", said Fernando as he grabbed Antonio's arm. They walked to the bar visited frequently by all the newspapermen on the staff.

"Another? Which one?"

"Don Stoplight."

"Why?"

"Because it's as if he were a broken traffic light. He's always in red."

Antonio smiled, although his thoughts were someplace else. He went with Fernando into the bar and after drinking three or four beers their conversation became friendlier. Antonio began to feel relaxed, almost happy. He hadn't felt like that for a long time. He had almost forgotten the simple pleasure that superfluous talk with friends gave him, along with the plays on words, the double entendres and the constant search of funny nicknames for Sergio Gallardo.

"I want you to forgive me, brother", said Fernando suddenly.

"What for?"

"I want you to forget what I said that day. The truth is that I didn't think she was so important in your life."

"Forgotten", said Antonio attentively watching Fernando's face. He seemed sincere. A huge black moustache covered his entire lip and his playful eyes showed the curiosity that was itching him, but Fernando avoided pursuing the subject. After another beer, Antonio impulsively wanted to unburden himself, but there was no way of expressing his predicament. And worse, at the table beside theirs was a middle-aged man, elegantly dressed, who was moaning about the bad luck of his love life and crying incoherently. The scene was devastating.

Antonio and Fernando kept on drinking beer and telling jokes to each other to avoid any personal subjects in their conversation.

Sergio Gallardo didn't delay long in his triumphal entrance into the bar. Surrounded by friends he went from table to table answering salutations with an open hand, as a bullfighter would do, until he got to where they were seated. Antonio and Fernando began to laugh as soon as Don Sergio sat on a chair before them.

"What do you laugh at, you pair of madmen" he asked, frowning, raising his booming voice and pretending to be angry.

"Watermelon Blondie, ha, ha, ha..." laughed Antonio, recalling another nickname that Fernando had invented.

"Don't be an asshole", warned Fernando, and hit him with his elbow.

"I don't know what the hell is wrong with you, partner, but I am glad that you are in such a good mood because I am going to say something to you", said don Sergio. The waiter placed on the table the special glass that the owners of the bar reserved specially for don Sergio.

"Are we going to begin again, don Sergio?"

"This is the last time I interfere in your business, Antonio. I only want you to remember that you have a social duty. Don't you forget it."

"I don't, don Sergio. But I don't understand what one thing has got to do with another. My personal life had nothing to do with my social duty."

"Don't play the fool. We know who your wife is. We know the real conditions of the workers in her factory. Or have you forgotten about them?"

Antonio thought about ten different answers, but he wasn't in the mood to fight his editor. After all, they used to be friends.

"It is a situation that has got to be resolved. Talk to your wife. Don't keep quiet."

"Are we still friends, don Sergio?"

Don't be stupid. Of course we are friends."

"Then let's say cheers..."

"Salud!" Fernando Ramirez hurried to say. Don Sergio shook his head, exasperated, but he finished by raising his glass good-naturedly. When they restarted their conversation, Fernando quickly guided it to the recently released films in town. Don Sergio was a fanatic about Italian films and long before, in his youth, he had dreamed of becoming a film director. Now, with his white hair, he became as enthusiastic as a child when he recalled his favorite movies and his huge rubicund face began to blur in Antonio's visual field.

Busily getting to know personally the most important clients and contractors of the factory, the couple had to go to business meetings almost every night. During those meetings, one way or another the subject of conversation was always to complain about Mexico. Millionaires, proud of being self-made men, felt comfortable before Jennifer, and would complain about the things the country offered them even though they had built their fortunes based on the things they complained about. The millionaire businessmen would complain so much that even Jennifer got tired of listening to them.

"What's wrong with these men? Don't they have any gratefulness for their own country? No love for it?"

"Somebody said once that the best part of being Mexican is to complain about being one."

"God. These people make me sick. They think that by despising their own country they become very chic and cosmopolitan. They don't understand how ridiculous they sound."

"Obviously not."

Antonio realized that Jennifer had been drinking too much. Antonio himself was bored and tired that night, after having come back from a long dinner at San Angel Inn.

"Every time I hear them complain and make absurd comparisons I feel the urge to slap them in the face. They think that by dedicating their prayers to the Pentagon I'll trust them more. Imbeciles! Once a traitor, always a traitor. To badmouth your country is like insulting your own mother", said Jennifer, furiously. "I am getting tired of playing the role of analyst to these bastards. Let them go complain some other place. Business appointments are strictly for business."

"You could refuse to go to those meetings."

"That could be worse. It would mean losing them as clients."

"Let the public relations people handle them. They are used to that."

"Not yet, not yet. To control the factory I have to know every aspect, every detail."

"What are you talking about?"

"Those fools have allowed the factory to deteriorate. We need to modernize it, we need to produce more, to sell more, to grow more....

"Jennifer, what are you talking about?"

Jennifer looked at him as if waking up from a dream.

"I? Nothing, darling, nothing. Is just an idea that I have."

"What idea?", asked Antonio disconcerted. Jennifer was sitting on the stool in front of the dressing table, taking off her clothes and her jewels, letting them fall on to the floor, breaking her careful habit of folding and arranging everything before she went to shower.

"Nothing, darling, nothing. It's just a small surprise that I had for you. But I thought about it and I don't think you are interested. After all, you don't seem to be very interested in me."

"Don't be foolish, Jennifer."

"Don't look at me like that. I don't know if you are with me, or against me."

"You've had too much to drink."

"I am not drunk! I demand you tell me whether you are with me, or against me."

"Tomorrow, when you are sober."

"Tomorrow, tomorrow...I've forgotten that we are in the land of tomorrow, the land of 'in a little bit', 'in just a moment'.. "

"Shut up."

"Why does my question bother you? What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing. But this is not the moment to argue about it, Jennifer. We are too tired."

"Yes, I am very tired of living like this, Antonio. Every day I wake up and I ask myself if you love me or nor."

"You know I do."

"Then tell me why I'm still your lover, tell me why we are not married, Tony; tell me why. I am tired of insinuating it. I am tired

of waiting and you haven't asked me..." said Jennifer, and she covered her face. Her crying shook Antonio, but when he approached her, Jennifer avoided him.

"Don't touch me! I hate you, you damn bastard! I hate you with all of my soul!" she screamed.

"Shut up!"

"Nobody shuts me up! And least of all a bastard like..."

Antonio slapped her. Jennifer looked at him in surprise and tried to slap him in return, but Antonio took her in his arms. Jennifer fought, trying to get away.

"Don't touch me; don't touch me..." she shouted, but when Antonio tried to get away from her, Jennifer held onto him with all of her strength.

"No! Don't let me go. Hold me, Antonio, hold me tight. Tell me you love me, tell me you love me..."

"Calm down, Jennifer. It's all right now...easy..."

"Tell me you love me, tell me you love me!"

"Yes, yes, I do love you, but calm down. That's it. Lie down. Sleep for awhile."

"No! I don't want to sleep, Tony. I want, I want you to love me."

"Jennifer, I do love you."

Antonio covered her with the blankets. Jennifer began to shake and she made an effort not to vomit.

"Don't leave, please, don't leave me alone!"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Tell me the truth, Tony. Don't you love me?"

"You know damn well I do."

"Then tell me why we are not married, tell me, tell me why..."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"No! Not tomorrow. Tell me now. Tell me now. You don't think I am good enough for you, that's it! Don't you think that I am

better than other women are? Tell me, tell me why don't you want to marry me Antonio...I am cold. I am very cold. Tony, love me, Tony. Come, make love to me, I need your body, I need your warmth, come, make me feel alive again, darling, come, come..."

"...it was a never-ending game, right, Jennifer? it doesn't matter who started it, nor who loved, nor who hated, because we lived locked up in the ring of passion and love and hate where the walls which we couldn't see in our blindness stopped us and imprisoned us. What could we do, you and I, but follow all the way to the end the road laid by our own fury and our storm, our í desires and our needs? You with yours, with mine, two willful children, two grown-ups chained in their myths, two human beings feeding off the miseries of the other one, one, blood and misery, the sacrifices dear, sacrifices in the name of love, you and me, and me and you and afterwards the rest like a long procession. The blood of the other Jennifer, the useless and us and marching along a dark street which ended at the edge of the precipice. Were we so blind that we couldn't see the abyss?"

Jennifer and Antonio dedicated themselves to renovate TEXMEX. Antonio talked with his friends at the University and between administrators, economists and sociologists, designed the changes needed to bring the factory up to date and to prepare it for the challenges of the future. But after studying the project for two months, the Board of Directors rejected it.

"If that project is carried through, we would lose, er, I have the numbers here somewhere", said Luis Meyer, searching among his papers. He pulled out his pocket calculator. He quickly did some calculations. "We would lose five point nine per cent of the yearly capital gains."

"We know that. But it would happen only for the next three years. Afterwards, the capital gains would balance out", said Antonio. "The investment in the new machines would be paid back with the increase in production."

"Yes, but I don't see any reason to establish an incentive program for the workers. We pay them, without fail, every week. That

should be incentive enough. Besides, that type of thing should be proposed by the union, not by us", insisted Meyer.

"The chapter of economic incentives is fundamental if the entire project is to be successful. This has already been proven in Japan and in my country and in all of the industrialized countries", answered Jennifer.

"We are not a charity organization."

"It's not charity. We are giving them nothing. In exchange for the extra pay, we will require better quality work since the new machines will increase the production", said Jennifer.

"That is just a fantasy, lady. You don't know the conditions in Mexico. Besides, we are not working for them; they are working for us."

"That's precisely the point. They work for us and to get them to work better, we need to motivate them", said Jennifer.

"They work for us and with us. They are not pieces of machinery", said Antonio.

"They don't work for you. You are not a partner of this business", said Meyer, rudely. The architect, Gonzalez, intervened quickly.

"What I don't understand is why we have to invest so much money in new machines", he said. "We have the national market assured, the sales are good and the earnings, constant."

"We have to grow in the foreign market, mainly in the United States' market, because of its closeness. We share thousands of miles of border with the strongest market in the world. We'll be able to compete only by buying the best modern machinery. You need to realize that today we are working with machinery twenty years old. That is a long time. Ever since I was a little girl, I learned that the survival and development of a business depends on the investment and constant renewal of the machines", said Jennifer.

"In buying the machinery, we agree, but not in the rest of the project", said Meyer.

"The program won't work without the support of the workers", said Antonio.

"For the last time. Who are you?" said Meyer.

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly that. You are not a shareholder and I don't really know why you come to our meetings."

"Antonio is my counselor", said Jennifer.

"Well, lady, with all due respect, pay him the salary he deserves for his labor and don't bring him here. We don't allow company employees in", said Meyer.

"What the hell...!" Antonio stood up violently, throwing his chair to the floor. Jennifer stopped him.

"I am happy with the national market", said Salvador Urrieta, in one of his rare interventions. He was pale and if he talked at all, it was in response to Antonio's attitude. "I would rather everything remained the same."

"Me, too", said Gonzalez.

"And I", said Meyer. Jennifer pulled at Antonio's sleeve so he would sit down again.

All of them turned to Carlos Fernandez. The final decision was in his hands. The man seemed to be worried and he hadn't said a single word throughout the session. Jennifer coughed. Antonio knew that don Carlos liked the project, even though he considered it to be too bold, but he did not dare give Antonio his absolute backing, since, as the good conservative he was, changes scared him. Antonio saw him playing with his heavy silver mane, undecided.

"If TEXNEX, delays the project, in a few years it will have trouble satisfying even the national market", said Antonio, in a neutral tone, as if he were talking to himself.

"Hey, this is not fair", answered Meyer, immediately. "My wife doesn't come with me to the meetings. Nor does my lover."

"I can understand why they wouldn't", said Jennifer. Don Carlos raised his eyebrows, whistled a little song and moved his chair back before he talked.

"I would agree to the project, if it were ratified by the syndicate with an absolute agreement that we wouldn't have the

slightest problem with the workers while it was being implemented", he said elegantly. To the other shareholders, it seemed the right decision.

"Under those conditions, I would also agree; without strikes or absurd petitions during the next five years, the project could be interesting", said Meyer.

"Five years is too long", protested Antonio.

"Take it or leave it", said don Carlos.

After the vote, Jennifer and Antonio left the meeting room with the project in their hands. Now everything depended on the decision of a single man whose reputation, Antonio knew, was terrible.

"What is the next step", Jennifer wanted to know.

"We have to talk with the union leader."

"What do you know about him?"

"Very little, really. Just what has been published in the newspapers. He is a strange man, very polemic in the workers world. His name is Lorenzo Hernandez Gomez, better known as Madman. He became famous by shooting into a group of workers who were trying to change unions. While the meeting was being held, Madman showed up at the Department of Labor and, without provocation, he began to shoot."

"Did he kill anyone?"

"No. That time, his myopia made him miss, fortunately. But it is rumored that a few years ago, he almost went to prison for having killed a worker. He is also known for his affinity for forcing the workers to go to the Senate to have them cheer his boring speeches."

"Oh, come on. He can't be that bad", answered Jennifer to Antonio's warnings. "I am sure that we could convince him to give full support to the project."

"It is going to be difficult. Five years of waiting will be too long."

"But in the long run, it will be beneficial for all. He is a business man and he will understand."

"Business man?"

"Of course. His business is the workers", said Jennifer, with her usual pragmatism.

The secret meeting with the union delegate was held at La Traviata, a very exclusive restaurant in Las Lomas, away from the regular, noisy places. Elegant and quiet, with private dining rooms, the place was chosen by the workers' leader, who arrived late. He arrived almost two hours after Antonio and Jennifer to avoid the possibility that people would see them arrive together. Careful with appearances, the delegate didn't like to run unnecessary risks. When he came into the private dining room where Jennifer and Antonio were waiting for him, the delegate saluted them with an ambiguous smile and he cleaned his spectacles to examine the couple. Antonio realized that the augmentation of the lenses accentuated the disturbed look of the man. Dressed in a fine woolen suit, the delegate limited himself to listening while the couple made an effort to explain the advantages of the project for the next two hours. Lorenzo Hernandez had dinner in silence, drank his cognac in silence, and smoked cheap cigarettes that he placed carefully in a gold holder. He seemed pleased that the eyes of Antonio and Jennifer were constantly attracted by the heavy gold bracelet with diamond initials that he wore on his right wrist.

When he finished his dinner, Jennifer and Antonio waited anxiously, believing they would receive an answer from the man.

"This is a matter which needs to be studied", said the delegate. "We will have to get together again."

"When?"

"Next week. Same place. Same time. Until then...", he said and left. When the door closed, Antonio shook his head.

"He didn't hear a single word of what we said."

"Of course he listened. And I think he liked the project. But he cannot accept it so easily. He has to ask his people."

"To me, he seemed totally deaf."

"It is his way of doing business. Remember that I grew up surrounded by businessmen. But let's forget about him, darling. Since we are in such a romantic place, let's talk about us, what do you say?"

Antonio was dazzled by the bright look of love he found in Jennifer's green eyes. She was gorgeous, the place elegant, the food exquisite and the wine excellent. Antonio smiled. What else could a man ask for?

The second meeting with the union leader was a carbon copy of the first one and Jennifer realized that Antonio was right; Lorenzo Hernandez wouldn't listen. He would let them talk, but his attention was elsewhere.

"Why doesn't he answer anything?", said Jennifer, when Lorenzo left.

"He's waiting for something."

"What?"

"I don't know. Let's wait for him to make the first move."

At the end of their third meeting, the delegate mentioned the expenses he would have in order to achieve approval for the project. He said it without blinking, not caring that his lie was evident. With a cynical smile, he left.

"Now we know what he wants: money."

"But he receives a huge amount from the workers' salaries every month", said Jennifer.

"And you don't know it, but he is also on the weekly payroll of the factory; he, and all the members of his committee."

"And still wants more."

"Jennifer, please...he receives money from every revision of the collective work contract. And every time something changes the normal rhythm of production. And for every worker who is fired with justification or without it. And a fixed percentage over each clause of the contract. And an extra amount at the end of the year for the anniversary of the Virgen de Guadalupe, and for Christmas. And after each worker's congress..."

"Isn't there a law against that?"

"No. Onions have full autonomy and can do or undo as they please."

"My God. I think we are in the wrong kind of business."

There were a total of ten meetings, and at the last five, Antonio and Jennifer arrived with thick envelopes with money in them, in larger amounts each time, which Jennifer would get from the factory. When the proper moment arrived, Antonio would discretely slip the envelope under Lorenzo Hernandez' plate. Finally, the three of them agreed that the project would be debated during the following worker's congress.

"There won't be any problems?"

"You have my word, Mister Highland."

"Alarcón. My name is Antonio Alarcón."

"Excuse me", said Lorenzo Hernandez, placing the envelope inside of his coat. He put on his thick spectacles, played with his flashing gold chain and then left, limping, from the restaurant, Jennifer and Antonio waited for half an hour before leaving the place. That was one of the conditions that Lorenzo Hernandez had set for meeting with them.

One week after the workers' congress, Jennifer and Antonio received a recording of the delegate's speech to the union members and both were horrified by the absurd charges against them that the man was making.

"I can't believe it. This man is a schizophrenic", said Antonio.

"He is a liar", said Jennifer.

"And a thief", said he.

At their next meeting, they both demanded an explanation, but Lorenzo Hernandez shrugged his shoulders and quietly drank his cognac.

"What did you expect? Praises?"

"No. Just the truth", said Antonio, furious.

"You cannot tell the truth in politics. Don't be an innocent."

"But you cheated them. And us."

"I didn't cheat anybody, Alarcón. I told them what they wanted to hear. As for you, go ahead and start your project."

"But the congress rejected it!", said Jennifer.

"So what?", answered Lorenzo "El Loco" Hernandez, and he shrugged his shoulders. He seemed to be sincerely surprised by their reaction. Neither Jennifer nor Antonio knew what to say.

That was the last meeting that they attended. From that moment on, they left everything in the factory lawyer's hands.

Once they had the union approval, they were ready to start the project, but suddenly, Jennifer made up an emergency trip to California. She said she needed to see her mother to consult with her about something and she boarded the first flight to San Francisco. For fifteen days, Antonio didn't hear from her. Finally, Jennifer called him to say she was coming back the next day. She sounded depressed on the phone, but Antonio chose to wait the twenty-four hours to find out what was happening. At the airport, he found her very pale and pensive.

"Is everybody all right?"

"What? Oh, yes. Fine. Mother is fine."

"And your grandfather?"

"He didn't want to see me. He's still mad at me. But he is all right."

"Then what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Nothing", said Jennifer, but she was clearly upset. Antonio didn't cease questioning her. Jennifer was acting strange. The fact that she didn't want to tell him the motive for her mysterious behavior made him feel uncomfortable; she was excluding him from her life. But why? Somehow, Antonio guessed that whatever had happened, affected him also. Had she decided to end her relationship with him? Another man, perhaps? Antonio continued questioning her in different ways until he was finally able to break Jennifer's resistance.

"All right, all right, I'll tell you what happened, but, oh God, I don't know how", said Jennifer, and she threw herself on the sofa. She began to shake and cry.

"I had...oh, Tony, I love you, I love you. Swear to me that you'll understand."

Antonio went pale and imagined the worst.

"I can't swear anything. Tell me what happened."

"Please, it's just...I didn't know, no, I didn't...I never thought it could be like this, oh, God...", her trembling was truly intense. She seemed on the verge of losing all of her control.

"What happened?"

"I had an abortion."

"What?"

"I had an abortion."

"I don't under...Were you pregnant? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because..."

Antonio let himself fall on the sofa beside Jennifer. He didn't know what to do, decide, or think.

"Was it an accident?"

"No. I went to a hospital."

"But...why, Jennifer? Why?"

"Oh, Tony, I had to do it, had to do it, understand me, please; I had to do it."

"Why, Jennifer? Tell me why."

"I couldn't have it. Now is not the right time to be pregnant, Tony. I...I wouldn't have been able to take care of him properly and..and we couldn't have been happy."

"Don't talk for me."

"With all the problems of the factory, it would have been awful to be pregnant."

"You thought only about yourself."

"No, no, I thought only about you and what you wanted. It was only a six-week-old fetus. And besides...it is my body."

"It was my child, too, Jennifer. It is your body, but it was my child, too. Damn it, you should have consulted me."

"Consult with whom? With my lover?"

"Yes. With the father of your child. I'll be damned! You should have told me what you were about to do."

"You would have opposed it. I know you."

"It was our decision, not yours alone."

"Oh, Tony, don't take it like that. Please. I already feel very bad about it. It was awful, awful...Please understand me..."

"Understand what? Everything is done. What do you want me to understand? Why didn't you ask for that understanding of me before you did it?"

"I was scared."

"Of having my son, Jennifer? Were you scared of having my son?"

Jennifer lowered her eyes.

"I am sorry. I didn't think..."

"You are sorry? Ha!"

"Please..."

"Please, nothing. You cannot act as if you are alone in the world. Your decisions also affect my life."

"Please, Antonio, I told you I am sorry. Please...it was awful."

"Go to hell!"

Antonio left, slamming the door. When he returned three days later, he was dirty, unshaven and completely drunk. He didn't say anything when he came in. Staggering, he faced Jennifer, who was waiting for him, carefully made up: her blonde hair, meticulously brushed back, made the features of her beautiful face stand out. She was dressed and wearing make-up as if she were ready to go to a party. Only her green eyes, swollen and irritated, betrayed her. Antonio didn't say a single word. He simply went into the bedroom and began to pack.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Antonio laughed stupidly.

"Would you like to hear a joke?"

"No."

"The Pri-prime Minister of Canada said once that living beside the United States is like sleeping be-beside an elephant; you ne-never know when he is going to move."

"Antonio, calm down and listen to me."

"Wanna hear another, elephant?"

"I don't want to hear it."

"Do-do you know what Porfirio Diaz said?"

"I don't care."

"He said that Mexico is-is too far from God and too close to the United States. What do you think?"

"Antonio, listen to me..."

"I don't want to listen to anything. I am leaving in peace, Jennifer. Nothing has changed here."

"Where are you going?"

Antonio stopped. Disconcerted, he looked around. The walls were painted with fluorescent colors, with huge posters of stylized commercial brands that Jennifer had hung as decorations, seemed to be too shrieking, too dazzling. Antonio smiled, seasick, and had a vague sensation of being lost.

"And my friend the phi-philosopher says that our problem began when we said 'this is your house' and the gringos thought it was meant literally. What do you think?"

"I understand your fury. But I want you to listen to me."

"I don't care any more. Au revoir, ciao, ciao, goodbye, adios, Jennifer."

"You can't leave like this, Antonio."

"Wanna bet?"

"You have to listen to me first."

"No."

Antonio opened the closet where he kept his suits. Jennifer embraced him to stop him.

"Why do you want to leave me?"

"You still ask?"

"All right, all right. I made a mistake, but nothing has changed. I'm still the same. I still love you the same way...and you still love me. Don't say you don't. Love doesn't end in a day and you know it."

"Let me go, *carajo*."

"Don't be cruel."

"Cruel?"

"Yes, cruel. A thousand times cruel. You would rather destroy our love that forgive a stupidity. That was all! A stupid mistake. Don't you understand? If you leave me now, you'll destroy everything we have built. That's why you would be cruel. Are you going to destroy everything because I did something stupid? Who do you think you are? Don't you make mistakes, too?"

Antonio closed his eyes and stopped fighting. He understood what she said and knew that she was right; he could not cease loving her. He didn't have the strength needed to get away from that intense passion, as she knew so well. It was easier to give up; it was easier to give in...It sufficed to hold on to her.

"Let me go."

"I can't let you go, Antonio. Nor can you let me go. You and I were born to love each other."

"That means we are condemned."

"Exactly. We are condemned to love each other."

"Then remember something."

"What?"

"That what we love the most can also be what we hate the most", said Antonio, before grabbing Jennifer by the hair and pulling her violently to him and kissing her. He kissed her and bit her and she kissed him and bit him back. She kept on nibbling on his neck as he carried her to the bed and let her fall. He knelt before her, between her legs, and opened his pants angrily. She reached and pulled at him impatiently.

"Don't make me wait any longer, love, come, I am burning."

"No."

"Please, Antonio, I am burning..."

burning, the sun was burning him...

Antonio let her show him the way and he penetrated her with a single and furious move of his hips. Jennifer buried her fingernails in his back.

"Ah, yes, love, yes, like that, yes..."

burning, the sun was burning him, that burning sun which rose between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn was scorching his skin and was lulling him asleep, to sleep, to dream that we live and to dream that we dream of a man, of a woman, the entire humanity to create, create, creation, to create a world apart where hate doesn't penetrate, where the sun shines the same for all but never burns, where you and I, dear Jennifer, could be able to forget that love can also be terrible...

Antonio didn't set foot inside the factory again. He knew the situation well, since Jennifer would fill him in on every detail at dinnertime or in bed. Every day, they saw each other less. While Jennifer was at the factory, Antonio worked on the research he needed to write the historical novel he had abandoned. During the mornings, he would go to the National Library to excavate from the dusty and forgotten volumes, data that he would write on five-by-eight cards. He would stop at noon to have a drink and something to eat at a bar near the library. It was a place frequently visited by taxi drivers, boxers, factory workers, bureaucrats and lottery salesmen. It was there that Antonio became friend of a pair of workers who exercised at a gym on Bolivar Street. The two men worked in TEXMEX, S.A. One was named Roberto Toscano, better known as Rubí. The other one was tall, slender, and had elegant manners. His face was similar to the profile of a Mayan Stella and he was named Isauro Peña and wanted to be a rock musician. Occasionally they were joined by a third one. He was a shy and strange man whom Antonio knew only as El Perfumado.

After those bar luncheons which were sometimes prolonged until very late at night), Antonio would go back to the apartment only to find it lonesome and cold, since Jennifer had been busy all day long at the factory. Antonio would lock himself in his study to organize the information he had acquired from the forgotten books; he would place the five-by-eight cards on the walls in chronological order by chapters and by subjects. Then he would work on the writing itself. Based on the historic trial in which Hernán Cortés had been accused of killing his first wife, Antonio wanted to write a fantastic novel in which he would modify five hundred years of history. In the novel, as in reality, Hernán Cortés was declared innocent of the accusation, but when he found himself free, Cortés decided to follow the ideas of Alexander the Great and assumed the responsibilities for joining two multicultural empires, into a third one. Cortés asked Malinalli to be his wife, accepted the coronation proposed by his soldiers at the fall of Tenochtitlán, visited Spain in the company of La Malinche and their first son, Martín Cortés, and asked for and received the lifetime viceroyship in his character of hero and creator of a new race.

The next centuries, thought Antonio, should be a logical continuation of that first act. He wrote many more than the thousand pages originally projected, but he ended up throwing everything into the trash can. Again and again, he began the book and would write page after page while he drank brandy or tequila. He didn't know why he couldn't finish the novel; he had all the information needed plastered up on the walls, and in his mind, the novel was already written from A to Z, but when he went back and read what he had written, Antonio despaired and destroyed everything, only to begin again. The daily news ceased to interest him. Everything outside his fictitious world eluded his attention. Occasionally, Jennifer would comment on the latest happenings. One night, she came back from the factory particularly tense and angry. They both had dinner in silence. After splitting half a bottle of brandy between the two of them, Jennifer gave him the news.

"The Board is scared. They all want to take their money out of the country."

"Why?"

"The economic situation is forcing us to implement emergency measures in the factory."

"Such as?"

"The lawyers suggest a...temporary contraction in the labor force."

"Temporary contraction! What a twisted way of saying that you are going to fire thousands of workers", said Antonio, remembering his friends Rubí, Isauro, El Perfumado...

"Are you going to begin gripping again?"

"Yes. Cheers", said Antonio, rising his glass. Jennifer didn't answer and got up from the table. She got up without wanting to hear me, thought Antonio, listening in the midst of his sleep to the knocking on the door of his suite in Manzanillo.

...we didn't want to think of anything besides ourselves, no, no, I, with my book: she with her power plays, no, no, we didn't want to see. No. Didn't want to see...

They knocked on the door again.

Antonio opened his eyes. The sun blinded him for a moment and then he saw how, at the center of the bay, the freighter was sinking in a whirlwind; its bow was raised up in the air while the ocean swallowed the ship.

At the door, they banged forcefully.

VIII

Rubí trotted back to the soccer field. He felt damp with sweat and full of energy and while he ran he kept on doing his routine of shadow boxing. The sun was shining in his eyes and it blurred the details of the fields he crossed. As he went by the high tension towers, a leg of one of the towers broke and the tower fell to the ground amidst the cracking metal and the yellow, blue and red sparks from the cables. Rubí jumped aside, thinking about Juana Alonso and the way she had moved her opulent body against his side, and about how clean her freshly showered body had smelled, and remembered her face which looked like a balloon from a fair. He jumped across the creek filled with trash and arrived at the soccer field just in time to join his team before the second half began. He found the players of both teams grouped along both sides of the field, joking with their friends as they drank directly from bottles. Some were content with drinking lemonade, while many others drank beer. The very action broke the expressed prohibition of *you-should-not-get-drunk-on-the-field-boys*. Rubí saw three or four players who were drinking so the referee could not see the rum with Coke that their followers had handed to them. The sun was well on its way down to obscurity and it was approaching the highest peaks of the volcanic chain that surrounds the Valley of Mexico like a crown. From the dusty field, the mountain named Ajusco took on a profile that was like the face of a man looking towards the sky. Rubí saw it as he raised his eyes to the mountains. It was hot, with a dry and heavy heat that diminished gradually as evening approached. When Rubí arrived, the trainer was going along

the benches gathering all the players before the referee blew his whistle. "Where were you? Aren't you going to play?"

"I'm ready, Don Teofilito."

"Well, then. Hurry up."

"All right. Whenever you say."

Don Teofilito made his rounds, calling the players. Rubí went straight to the trophy bench where his friends were. Perfumado was drinking straight from a rum bottle he held by the neck. He seemed to be desolated. Isauro Peña was at his side, reading the paper.

"What's going on? How are we doing?" asked Rubí. He grabbed a bottled soda that was inside an ice bucket and opened it on the edge of the bench.

"Not so good."

"What's the score?"

"Tied one each", said Isauro. He folded his newspaper and used it to sit on top of the bench.

"At least we are not losing."

Rubí walked to Perfumado's side.

"Why are you so sad, compadre?" said Rubí.

"That son of a bitch..."

"Who?"

"The delegate."

"What did he do to you?"

"Nothing. He only took Graciela away", said Perfumado, and drank another shot from the rum bottle.

Rubí looked where the union leader's car had been. In its place was a truck loaded with bricks. Rubí wanted to ask more of his friend, but he didn't have time; at that moment, the referee blew the whistle and all of the players ran out onto the field. Rubí took another swig from his soda and put the bottle back into the bucket. He ran out onto the field, too.

From the first time he received the ball, he realized that the plays were not those of ability or strength as they had been at the

beginning; now they were aimed to kill. The blue players were much more tired than the white ones and that hindered their agility. Their movements were slower and more awkward. To even out their disadvantage, all the plays made by the blue team were made heels first, or with their elbows, or openly punching. Rubí tried to get the attention of the referee to have him enforce order after several violent encounters, but the referee was a small, skinny man, without character, who already had demonstrated enough of his inability to enforce the rules of the game on the players.

"Don't bother saying anything to the referee. That jackass loves to give blowjobs to his whistle, and that's it. You should answer the same way they give to you", said one of his teammates. Rubí smiled maliciously. Without knowing how the first half of the game had developed, he hadn't wanted to risk starting anything that could be counterproductive. But when his teammate said that, Rubí knew that the referee didn't have the control of the players. That meant everything was valid. On the next play, as soon as he had a blue player nearby, Rubí made use of the hook to the liver which he had learned in the boxing gym on Bolivar Street where he went at least once a week. The blue player fell on his knees, gasping for air. Rubí had hit him discretely, and the referee thought that it was a tactic of the blue player and he allowed the game to continue.

Rubí advanced until three enemy players surrounded him.

Before they reached him, Rubí passed the ball to his right and moved ahead of the blue defenders waiting to receive the ball again, but his teammate was kicked in the chin and the ball was now controlled by the blue team. They moved towards the white goalie, but couldn't penetrate the white players' defense and the ball went from one side of the field to the other with the players behind, in a constant surge of come-and-go.

Twenty minutes went by in that way, amongst pushes, elbow hits, trips and insults which grew stronger as the frustration grew in both teams and amongst their followers on the benches. Neither side was able to execute effective plays since it seemed to be open season on the one who had the ball. The players didn't worry

anymore about trying feints, elegant passes or well structured plays; they worried mainly about not being hit.

Rubí's fury grew because every time he received the ball, he was blocked by two enemies who pulled his shirt, kicked him or hit him with their elbows until they took the ball away. One of them, number eight, even laughed at him, and Rubí felt that all of his energy had turned into pressure-packed tension, which was growing greater all the time. His opponents hadn't given him the opportunity to use his famous hook to the liver again and Rubí began to feel anger so intense that it provoked a kind of pain in his chest. All of the time he was playing, his fists were closed. He followed player number eight, waiting for a chance to avenge the sneers, but number eight was very fast and kept away from him and Rubí had to swallow what he considered to be an humiliation.

Finally the opportunity came, only ten minutes before the game was over. Suddenly, number eight took off on the right side of the field, alone, while the ball was being played over on the left side. Rubí saw the play clearly and tried to anticipate it. He ran to cover number eight, but he arrived a second too late; number eight received the ball cleanly, moved ahead and placed himself in position to kick the ball in. The goalie was paralyzed... Rubí knew that it was a goal play, so he didn't think twice; he made a phenomenal jump and when he fell, he nailed his heels into the left calf of number eight. He heard a crack, a shout of pain, the whistles of the referee and, as he was getting up, he received a blow to his jaw that darkened his sight. Almost blind, he delivered blows left and right and the fight was spread in a few seconds. Not only did the players of both teams participate, but also the spectators, who were armed with the empty bottles of soda and wine. In the free-for-all that erupted, the ridiculous figure of the referee went from side to side, trying to impose order, but everybody pushed him aside and nobody listened to his calls.

The fight lasted about ten minutes from beginning to end, with some scattered altercations breaking out when somebody broke away from his teammates and ran to kick an enemy after everything seemed to have quieted down. When it was all over, there were several cracked heads and noses on both teams and nobody wanted to restart the game. The captains argued with the referee about responsibilities,

but could not agree on anything except that they would meet again on that same field, two weeks later, to try again to determine who would be the champion of the league for the year.

Rubí went to the benches. While his teammates changed and joked about the fight and nursed their wounded, Perfumado didn't stop moving nervously from side to side.

"Stop that, compadre. You are bugging me", shouted Rubí. He took his shirt off and with it, he cleaned his sweat and a slight trickle of blood coming down his face and neck.

"I'm still hot, compadre. I wasn't able to really hit any of those assholes", explained Perfumado, without stopping his nervous walk. Rubí knew what the real reason for his fury was.

"Next time, you'll get your revenge. Come on, let's go", said Rubí, and he pulled on his trousers.

"No. Wait", asked Perfumado, without letting go of the rum bottle he held in his right hand. His eyes had a hard look, glazed. His fury called to Rubí's who felt an additional rush of energy surge into his blood. He liked the sensation, felt twice that day already, which was produced by his body only when he anticipated violence or sex. It was a wave of heat trickling through his veins, like a warning call that would turn on all of his senses; those known and those he didn't know existed. He didn't move. He waited for Perfumado to indicate his intentions. Perfumado looked anxiously at the blue players, searching for an opportunity to act, but he didn't find one. The blue players finished changing, picked up their things and left the field all together, joined by their followers, who had to carry out number eight.

"Fucking shit. This is not my day", said Perfumado, and kicked one of the trophies.

"Hey, what the hell is going on, Perfumado? Don't take it out on the trophies", said the trainer, who ran to pick them up.

"It is not about you, Don Teofilito."

"Then watch out what you do."

"Let's go", ordered Rubí, grabbing his pack.

"At least you broke the leg of that son of a bitch."

"I wanted to kill him", said Rubí simply, and as he said it, he knew it was the truth; he had felt the desire to kill player number eight.

"The one I am going to kill is that delegate. Look what I'm getting for that crazy son of a bitch", said Perfumado, as he stopped to pick up a stone which he placed inside his pack.

"Now I am ready to baptize him", he said.

"Listen, what are you going to do now?" said Isauro Peña, reaching them on the outskirts of the field.

"What is it to you?" answered Perfumado aggressively. Rubí smelled the alcohol on his friend's breath; up to that moment he hadn't realized that Perfumado was so drunk.

"Nothing. I ask in case you want to go to the theater. My treat since today is my last day."

"Really. I had forgotten. Don't mind what I said, Isauro. I am not mad at you."

"I'll go with you", said Rubí.

"I won't", said Perfumado

"You've got to come with us. Aren't you our friend anymore?" insisted Isauro Peña, hitting Perfumado's shoulder in a friendly way, as he had done a thousand times before. But this time Perfumado saw him through his glassy eyes, and for a second, Rubí didn't know whether Perfumado was going to answer with a blow, with a smile, or with tears. All three emotions were present on his contorted face.

"Yes, but..."

"But, nothing."

"Really, you should come with us", insisted Isauro.

"All right. Let's go to the theater. But first, we will have some beer, right?"

"Right."

Isauro and Rubí looked at each other, shrugged and accepted.

The three friends left the field, following the groups of players who were walking toward the bus stop. The sun was already hiding behind the mountaintop ahead of them. The blurred profile of Mexico City, gray and dirty, extended itself all along the valley. Night was about to begin.

"Why are you leaving Mexico, Isauro?"

"I want to search other options, brother. I don't want to be anybody's slave anymore. I want to be free."

"And here you are not free?"

"Here, I am free to starve to death."

"Oh, come on, asshole", said Perfumado.

"Are you going to leave your family, your friends, your country, all of your world? And for what? To go to some strange place with strange people and risk being killed or ending up in jail. Do you really want that?"

"No, Rubí. What I want is to search for opportunities that I cannot find here. Besides, you've already heard the rumors in the factory. They say that many will be fired."

"And before they fired you, you leave on your own?"

"Yes. I quit to show them that they don't control my life. I control my life. I couldn't have stood it if they had fired me just like that, without any reason. By quitting, I showed them that my will is superior to theirs", explained Isauro, very excitedly. "The only consideration they have is for the objects which they can control entirely, like the machines. That makes them feel that their will is all-powerful. And it is not. By the simple fact that I anticipated their move, I showed my own strength. I showed that I am not a machine that is at their disposition. I showed that I am a free man."

"But why do you have to leave Mexico? I just don't understand."

"I am leaving Mexico because I want another chance in this life. This is the only one I have and I don't want to die without at least having tried to get what I want. I need to have more freedom to try other things. Here, I just can't."

"And there? Over there, you will work in the fields from sunrise to sunset. It will be the same. Or worse."

"Maybe, but over there, I'll have the opportunity to do what I like to do."

"Which is?"

"Play the guitar."

"Join a mariachi band."

"Nope. I like rock."

"Uhf, heavy. And do you speak English?"

"A little. I have been studying."

"Is that what you read in those books of yours?"

"Yes. Since I left school I have had to educate myself."

"About what?"

"Several things. About the condition of man, for example; about freedom; about the differences between the social classes."

"The main difference between the rich and us is that they have huge cars", said Rubí. They laughed. Perfumado watched them with resentment.

"But I read a lot about freedom. I like freedom. I would like to be able to be free. Only by being free will I be able to explore the depths of my capacity as a human being. Only by being free will I be able to express what I am and what I believe in. Only by being free will I be able to choose the road that I like the best."

"Freedom for what, or from what, Isauro? What is freedom?"

"Freedom to be yourself, however you are, without anyone forcing you to be anything else. I can't tell you what freedom is, Rubí, but I do know what it means to me."

"Let your mother understand you", said Perfumado, perplexed. Isauro Peña got mad.

"Do you like to be ordered around for everything, Perfumado? To be told what you will study, where you are going to

work, where you are going to live, what you should say or shouldn't say..."

"Nope. My father tried to do that when I was a kid. That's why I left the house."

"I don't mean your parents. I mean the government. Imagine that you had a supervisor for all aspects of your life. Would you like that?"

"Oh, shit. Well, no, of course not."

"Right. Then you are being free, for you are expressing a belief. That's what being free is all about. Freedom is an action, not a theory. Either you live in freedom or you live in slavery. Freedom is to be lived, brother."

"I don't understand you", said Perfumado.

"I do, Isauro. But nobody can be totally free. Not here, nor in any other place in the entire world. If you get married, you are not free anymore; you work, and there goes your freedom; your wife has kids, and you are not free anymore."

"I agree. But it is one thing to choose your own chains and something totally different to have them imposed on you, right?"

"Maybe", said Rubí, carefully. He tried to memorize the conversation with Isauro because he guessed that it was important and that it has some relationship with how he had felt that morning when he saw himself in the mirror and couldn't recognize himself.

For awhile, he stopped participating in the conversation and limited himself to listening to the enthusiastic ideas of Isauro Peña. Concentrated on his thoughts, Rubí barely noticed when they came out to Hidalgo Avenue. The three friends turned to the right and continued straight ahead for three blocks until they arrived at a narrow street named Infiernitos. At the end of the cul-de-sac was the cantina. Over the entrance hung a sign painted *in red letters*:

THE BIGGER HELL

The bar was a small room painted in Mexican pink. In the middle of the room were several metal tables and the floor was covered with sawdust still wet from the liquids spilled the night before. The cantina reeked of old beer and urine. The metal tabletops

had the brand name of the beer company that supplied the bar. CARTA BLANCA said the signs in a diamond shape. On one side against the wall, stood a metal freezer with large blocks of ice, which were slowly melting onto the bottles of soda and beer; the ice reflected the colors of the lighted music box. Along the other wall, there was a wide urinary covered with mosaics of different sizes and colors. Behind it, on the end of the counter, were several white ceramic pots which contained the different ingredients needed to prepare tortes and tacos; in one pot, there was sausage mixed with potatoes; in another, ground beef; a medium-sized pot held cooked eggs, and the largest was full of pig's blood. The smell of the pork being cooked floated all throughout the room. At the other end of the bar, closest to the street, a huge pot held the boiling oil where the pig's entrails and skin were being cooked.

A small glass window around the frying pan was the only protection against the flies.

"What do you want?" demanded the man behind the counter, rudely. His face was fat and he had a small, mouse-like moustache. In his hand, he held a giant knife that he used to slice the meat. Every once in a while, he would stop to wipe the blood off the knife onto his white apron.

"Beer"! said Perfumado, searching in the freezer.

"Anything to eat?" said the cook, still aggressively.

"Give us some tacos", said Rubí.

"How many?"

"Fifteen."

"Meat?"

"Meat and skin and tongue and eye and everything else. Mix them up."

"All right."

"Not everything. Rubí", said Isauro, in a low voice.

"Why not?"

"I lost my dog yesterday, ha,ha...Hey! Have you seen my dog around here? It's an animal about so tall and the color of coffee", he said.

The cook didn't answer, but his murderous look destroyed Isauro's joke. Perfumado came back, loaded with the beer. He placed them on the table and went back to the jukebox. He put in several numbers and letters. Then he went back to the table and the three of them drank their beer directly from the bottle. From out of the jukebox came the voice of Pedro Infante and the song sent each one into his own thoughts.

Mira como ando mujer, por tu querer/

Borracho y apasionado nomás por tu amor/

*Mira como ando mi bien, muy dado a la Borrachera y a la perdición...*⁵

"When are you leaving?" asked Rubí, after the song, saddened by the imminent departure of his friend. Isauro shrugged.

"Next week, I guess. I have to wait for the pollero to tell me what day we will leave."

"And how will you cross the river if you don't know how to swim?" said Rubí, searching for obstacles, hoping to change Isauro's mind. But it was useless.

"As far as I know, that's not the problem. There are many places where the river can be crossed by walking. And if that is not the case, I was told that there are people who can carry me across.

"Then what?"

"Then, I don't know. It seems that they have a deal with the border patrol on the other side to let the trucks workers go by, but the truth is, I don't know how They guarantee me the trip all the way out to the fields. The rest, I don't know. But I'll write to will let you know how everything works out."

"All right."

carrying it all works. collection You later and

5 TU, S0LO TU (*Felipe Valdez-Leal*)

***Oyes Lupita, dices que ya no me quieres/
Sera por los cuentos que te hen venido a contar
Le pido a Dios mejor que me lleve al cielo,
porque si vivo en el mundo yo te he de llevar,
de mi no te has de burlar...⁶***

"That son of a bitch will regret this", said Perfumado, suddenly, disconcerting Isauro and Rubí.

"Stop reopening that wound, Perfumado", said Isauro.

"And what do you care, asshole", answered Perfumado.

"Come on, take it easy."

"You better not mess with me, or I will break your face", said Perfumado, getting up to challenge Isauro, who got up immediately also. Rubí laughed at both of them.

"You are acting like children. Sit down. Here come the tacos."

Isauro and Perfumado reluctantly obeyed. Perfumado didn't want to eat his tacos so Rubí ate his and Perfumado's quickly. They kept on drinking beer. Perfumado drank his in one or two swias in his hurrY to qet drunk.

***Entre copa y copa se acaba mi vida,
llorando borracho tu perfido amor
Que negros recuerdos me traen tus mentiras
Como cuestan lágrimas una traición
Traigo penas en el alma, que no las mata el licor⁷***

6 OYES LUPITA (Vargas-Fuentes)

7 ENTRE COPA Y COPA (Felipe Valdes Leal)

"Isauro is right, brother. Don't you think about her any longer. She's gone. So what? One more, one less. So what? She's just a woman."

"I know that. What I can't stand is her laughing at me."

"Then why do you pay so much attention to her? Forget her."

"That is not something that should be done to a man."

"Forget her, brother."

"Sure. Just tell me how, Rubí."

"Let's drop it", said Isauro. "Cheers, brother."

"But they are not going to get away with this."

"No. They are going to write asking for your permission."

"Another joke and I'll break your face."

"All right. Drop it. Don't you recognize your friends anymore?"

"If you were my friend, you wouldn't be laughing at me."

"Forget her, Perfumado. Just forget her."

"That is easily said because you have never loved anyone, Isauro. You don't care about anyone. You are leaving your family, your friends, and your country. You don't care. Everything is of very little value to you. But I do know what love is and I swear that son of a bitch will pay for this."

"You think it doesn't hurt me to go away from here?"

"You don't care."

"You don't know me, brother."

"And I'll know you even less after you leave."

"You two are acting like a couple of children", said Rubí, and laughed again.

"Laugh if you want, Rubí. For you, everything is a joke.

Women are like socks to you; you use them and change them. Isn't that right?"

"That's because I love them all."

"The one who loves many, doesn't love anyone. And if you don't know what it is to love a woman, what good is being alive?"

"Now you're gonna turn against me?"

"Yes, brother, because I am tired of your jokes and your face. You seek out your friends only when you want something from them, but when you see them in trouble, you laugh at them."

"You are saying all of this because you are hurt, Perfumado."

"You feel superior because you are strong and know how to use your hands, Rubí, but you don't know anything about anything. All right, you are the best in the factory. But what good is that if you don't even know what is like to love a woman?"

"A man who lives chained to passion cannot be free", said Isauro Peña.

"You and your ideas can go to fucking hell."

"You just don't know how to lose, partner."

"I do know how to lose. What I don't like is to gamble."

"All right, take it easy."

"And if I don't, what? Will you hit me from behind?"

Rubí looked him in the eyes, furious. Perfumado stared back. He seemed about to cry.

"Shut your mouth. The only thing hurting you is your pride."

"I loved that woman for good, you know? And she does this..."

"All right, you love her. But that doesn't mean she has to love you back."

"Just saying so would have been enough. But she made a fool out of me. And I won't take that from anyone. Nobody laughs at me.

"When love is not free, it is not love, Perfumado."

"Are you still saying stupid things?"

Rubí signaled to Isauro to shut up, since he knew that it was useless to try to reason with Perfumado at that moment.

"You are right, Perfumado. I have behaved badly with you," said Rubí. "But I swear that I will never leave a friend in trouble again."

"Neither will I", said Isauro. Perfumado nodded and went to the freezer to fetch more beer.

They stayed at the Biggest Hell until eight, drinking beer while they listened to the songs that Perfumado chose on the jukebox. When they left the bar, they took short cuts through narrow and dark streets, without pavement, until they got to a wide and well-lit avenue.

-nine

Antonio jumped up as the blows on the door penetrated his consciousness. He crossed the room, looking at Jennifer, and when he opened the door, he found himself staring at a tall and strongly built man dressed in a clean, yellow guayabera. In his right hand, the man carried a black leather case. His forearms, excessively hairy, resembled those of an orangutan.

"Why did it take you so long?"

"I received the call fifteen minutes ago", said the doctor. "I came as fast as I could."

"Fifteen minutes ago?"

"Fourteen, to be precise", said the doctor marching firmly into the room, leaving in his wake, a soft aroma of formaldehyde. It was like the smell of an after shave lotion. Without saying a word the doctor bent over Jennifer and began to examine her.

Another man, slender and arrogant looking, appeared at the door.

"What's going on in here?"

"Who are you?" said Antonio.

"The manager of the hotel."

Antonio recognized immediately the voice. It was the same as on the phone.

"We don't need you here. Thanks for calling the doctor."

"Before you close the door, allow me to advise you that this a respectable place. If something happens to the lady, I'll have to call the police", said the man, without hiding his curiosity and trying to look inside the room.

"I won't allow you anything. Do as you please", answered Antonio, slamming the door in the manager's face.

The doctor was taking Jennifer's pulse. He had taken off the sheet, uncovering her splendid body, bronzed and freckled and beautiful. Had she been awake, it would have been a shameful humiliation. Antonio felt angry for having to subject her to that and also for not having thought about putting some clothes on her.

At the door, someone knocked again. Antonio thought that the manager had come back and he opened it quickly, but he found himself staring at a very young girl, slightly fat and dressed in white, who looked timidly at him.

"Is the doctor here?" she said shyly.

"She is my nurse", said the doctor.

Antonio allowed her to come in.

"Laurita, bring some towels and water from the bathroom. We have much to clean", ordered the doctor pointing to Jennifer with a vague gesture. The nurse went to the bathroom. Antonio heard the gush of water from the faucet.

"Is she...is she very bad?"

"Look, sir...you better leave us alone", answered the doctor, very irritated. "I don't know what happened here. Nor do I want to know. The authorities will come. But meanwhile, allow me to do my work."

"What matters to me is that she is saved."

"Serious! -"

"Don't be sarcastic. I'll leave you alone, but first tell me how she is."

The doctor looked disgustedly at him.

"Please..."

"What do you want me to say? The lady is unconscious. She has some evident traumas. Her pulse is regular, but weak. I cannot tell you anymore. It'll be better if you leave us alone", said the doctor as the nurse came out of the bathroom, carrying wet, hot towels.

"Go away, young man. Go and have your breakfast, or go to walk by the beach. I don't care. Calm down. Everything will be okay. We will call you when we are through."

"Yes, but..."

"Laurita, clean up the blood while I inject the cortisone."

The doctor bent down to look in his case and Antonio understood that he really was in their way. He couldn't do anything, except to be an obstacle. He had to leave the suite. And fast.

He put on a yellow shirt he picked up from the floor and his tennis shoes. He grabbed his wallet and went out to the corridor. He chose to go down the stairs and did it in a hurry, almost running. When he arrived at the lobby, he felt the eyes of the employees following him attentively. When he reached the reception desk, he identified himself and asked the girl to call him whenever the doctor asked for him. She looked at him fearfully.

"And where will you be?" she asked in a trembling voice. She was a very young girl, with a repulsed expression on her pretty face.

"I'll be at Huazaque Cove"; said Antonio without thinking, mentioning the first name that came into his mind. He hurried to get to the door. He needed to get out of there.

"That is far away from here. How do you want me to call you?" asked the desk clerk. Antonio was already at the door.

"Send one of the bell boys", said Antonio, and stepped out onto the patio of the hotel. He asked the doorman for a taxi. The doorman blew his whistle and immediately, a small car, painted white and red, showed up. Antonio climbed into the back.

"Where to?"

"Huazaque."

The driver looked at him through the mirror, unsure.

"Huazaque? Huazaque's Cove?"

"Yes, yes, that one", answered Antonio without understanding the doubts of the taxi driver. The driver looked at him again as if Antonio were mad, but didn't say anything. He just took off. When the taxi came out onto the copper stone street, Antonio was able to see that a sperm whale had come into the Bay of Manzanillo, followed by a baby whale which swam joyously beside and around its mama. The whale blew a large column of water through its spout before diving underwater.

Antonio remembered where he had heard the name of the cove. It had been the night before, during dinner at the house of the Fernandez Izárraga. Carlos Fernandez was seated at the head of the table; on his right was Jennifer and on his left the Municipal President of Manzanillo. Then came Frances and Antonio. Doña Serena sat at the other end, and finally, between her and Jennifer, the attorney-at-law, Hector Trujillo, the representative of the government.

"Hey, Mister Municipal President, is it true that recently there was a shark attack here in Manzanillo?" asked Carlos Fernandez while he ate his main entree, lobster tail.

"No, sir. That is a lie. It has been many years since we have had a problem with shark attacks in these beaches, Don Carlos. Nothing. Not one. Our beaches are the safest beaches in the entire world."

"Well...I did hear that some sharks had been spotted", insisted don Carlos with a soft firmness. "A very short time ago; I don't really know, one or two weeks."

"Ah, yes. But that happened in Huazaque, don Carlos. Not here."

"What happened?" asked Trujillo interested his moustache dirty with food.

"Not much, Señor Trujillo. Some seven or eight days ago, sharks approached the coast. It seems they were following a sardine school. They went into the cove at Huazaque, where there was a group of bathers from Guadalajara. One of those animals bit and tore the arm

of a twenty-year-old girl", said the Municipal President, with studied brutality.

"How awful", said Serena, dropping her knife and fork.

"I saw the girl when they brought her into the hospital at Manzanillo. The stump was torn to ribbons. Fortunately, it happened to be a small animal. Otherwise, it would have pulled the girl into the ocean and we would have never seen her again."

"What happened to the woman?" asked Jennifer.

"Who? The one who lost her arm? Nothing much, she just died."

"Oh, God."

"And the sharks?" asked don Carlos.

"We immediately sent out three boats with expert shark hunters. We haven't received any news, but I imagine that they have killed the sharks by now", said the Municipal President, showing his gold dentures when he laughed.

"The woman...who died. Was she bleeding much?" Trujillo wanted to know, as he opened the tail of the lobster with his knife. With his fork, he pierced the white meat, while he gazed sideways at Jennifer's breast.

"At the beginning, yes. The teeth of the shark tore off the flesh and veins. So you can imagine. The flesh hung from the stump and it looked like...well...it looked a bit like this lobster's meat, my friend."

"Could we change the subject of our conversation, please?" said doña Serena, pushing her plate away. Trujillo's eyes caressed the meat on his fork as if it were Jennifer's breast.

"Yes, let's talk about something else", said Jennifer with her marvelous smile.

"No, no. Let's keep talking about sharks. The lawyer seems to be fascinated with the subject", said Antonio.

"Darling, el Señor Trujillo hasn't come all the way to Manzanillo to talk about accidents", said Jennifer.

"Don't be silly, dear. That is his business. Accidents. That's why he is here, isn't he? Aren't you the one that takes care of the 'industrial accidents'? Aren't you here to insure that not one of the workers fired in the 'temporary contraction' of TEXMEX receives the compensation which the law requires?"

The lawyer didn't answer. He looked at Antonio sideways and then with suspicion at everyone else at the table. His sly look made him seem like a caged animal watching his captors.

"Antonio..." murmured Jennifer, trying to soften the tension which rose suddenly at the table. "Antonio, I would like to get an answer."

"And who are you?" spit Trujillo.

"Me? Nobody. Just curious."

"Oh, yeah? Then you must remember that curiosity killed the cat, my friend", said the lawyer.

"Sure. But the cat has nine lives, don't you forget it. And I am not your friend."

"Would you like a little bit of coffee?" said Serena.

"What I would like is for the lawyer to answer my question."

"Antonio, you are making us all uncomfortable", said Carlos Fernandez.

"You'll forgive me, don Carlos, but old habits are hard to change. Being a reporter I learned that the truth is always uncomfortable. But don't you worry. It doesn't kill", said Antonio.

"So you are a reporter", said the fat lawyer. A piece of the lobster was stuck in his moustache.

"Yes, I am."

"That explains it. Reporters are always butting in where nobody wants them", said the lawyer. The tension at the table increased. "No wonder they are called dogs."

"You are wrong. They call us dogs because our noses guide us. When we smell shit, we search until we find it."

"Antonio!" said Jennifer.

"I can answer your questions, Antonio. Señor Trujillo has come to help us find a better solution to the problems we have at the factory", said don Carlos.

"The best solution for whom?"

"For all of us, of course. Now, er, what do you all think about going out to the terrace? Inside here, it is very hot, don't you think? On the terrace, we can eat dessert and drink a glass of tuba or two. Tuba is a drink produced only in the state of Colima, Jennifer. I think you and Antonio will find it delicious."

"I am sure of it, don Carlos. Let's go", said Jennifer and got up immediately. They all followed her.

"You are starting to act weird. Stop drinking", whispered Jennifer in Antonio's ear on their way out to the terrace.

"Don't tell me what to do."

"You are being very disagreeable."

"So what? That's my problem, not yours."

They went out onto the terrace that was decorated in different tonalities of white, as the rest of the house. At one end, there was a wrought-iron table with chairs around it and at the opposite side of the wide terrace, three lounges gave a touch of color with their yellow cushions. Antonio went straight to one of the lounges with his drink in his hand. The other six people sat around the metal table. Serena proposed a game of cards while she served vanilla flans and glasses of Tuba. They all accepted but Antonio, who chose to stay lying down on the lounge. Frances played a hand or two, said she was very unlucky at that sort of game, and got up from the table to follow Antonio to the lounge.

"What are you drinking?"

"I was drinking brandy", said Antonio looking at his empty glass.

"Can I get you another one?"

"If you insist. Although it might be easier if you brought the bottle so you won't have to get up every five minutes."

Frances smiled.

"Good idea."

Frances went into the house. At the table, they were still playing cards and Jennifer laughed about something that the fatso had said. Antonio looked at the horizon. The moon was an irregular circle of ivory which here and there illuminated the surface of the Pacific Ocean. Beyond that, the profile of the Bay itself was perfectly delineated by the lights of the town of Santiago that sparkled like diamonds in the blanket of the dark hills. From where he was lying, he was able to contemplate the entire panorama and he could follow the curvature of the coast, which was completely dark for some distance and then profusely lit where large hotels, condominiums and homes stood. On the other side of Santiago Bay, the hills rose up to reach La Punta, the highest place. La Punta was a kind of a wedge against the ocean thrusts.

The waves were breaking some twenty meters away from the terrace where he was, and their constant wash lulled Antonio. He felt slightly dizzy from the drinks, but not enough. Never enough. He wanted to stop thinking completely, so that his mind would shut up and the contradictory voices would quiet down their screaming. He thought about Jennifer, but he didn't want to think about Jennifer anymore.

"Here, I brought this", said Frances. She was carrying a tray with clean glasses; an ice bucket of cut crystal, lemons, a bottle of tequila and several Cokes. She placed her load on a small table beside Antonio.

"Have you tried Colagallo?" she asked.

"No. What is that?", answered Antonio.

"You'll like it. Look, you make it like this", she said. Frances grabbed a lemon, sliced it in two and squeezed it into a glass; She added some salt, ice, and then more lemon and more salt, three fingers of tequila and the rest of Coke. She tasted it. Unsatisfied with the results, she added more lemon drops and then handed the glass to Antonio.

"Hum, delicious."

"What did I tell you? I'll leave the bottle here."

"Aren't you going to join me?"

"Of course. But I'll have only one."

"One is none, two is half, and three is one..."

"...and since one is none, we start all over again", completed Frances. Both laughed. The advantage of being a drunk, thought Antonio, is that you reach a point in which you can say anything and nobody holds you responsible for it.

"You are cute, Tony."

"Call me Antonio. Tony is Jennifer's lover."

"Salud."

"Salud."

"Hum, it is good. Do you like my blouse?" asked Frances. Antonio guessed that she wanted to show not her blouse, but her round and heavy bosom.

"It looks like you'll break out of it any moment."

Frances blushed slightly and laughed.

"I think it shrunk", she murmured shyly.

Antonio got up from the lounge and went to lean against the wooden rail. He felt on his face the full impact of the breeze that was softly wetting the terrace. Frances did the same.

"Can I ask you a favor?"

"I have no money", said Antonio.

"Seriously."

"Go ahead."

"If I ask you an indiscrete question, will you answer me?"

"Sure."

"Do you...do you think I am pretty?"

Antonio burst out laughing.

"Don't laugh at me", she complained.

"But I am not laughing at you. I'm sorry. I laughed because I cannot believe that you don't know how pretty you are. Very pretty. Gorgeous."

"Really?"

"Positive."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me. Be thankful to your genes."

"My what?"

"Forget it."

She fell silent and Antonio saw that she was pensive. At that moment, it began to rain softly. Those at the table started complaining. They picked up the cards and then went into the house to continue the game inside. Antonio decided to remain on the terrace. He liked the sensation of fresh air on his face. Frances thought it was a fun idea and stayed with him. She kept on talking silly, coquettish things and Antonio stopped listening. He thought about the sea, about the rain and about other things while he felt the effect of the Colagallo in his body. From time to time he would nod at whatever Frances was saying. He was listening to her voice chatting ceaselessly and to the muffled rumble of the rain on the beach and the surf roaring and thought that all of it was part of a single universal movement, a global symphony, the parts of which molded in a soft and sensual rhythm. Then the rain increased and there was lightning and Frances leaned against him and Antonio felt her young, firm body and in a moment, he accepted what was offered to him; he gave in to what she requested with her voice of rain and roaring surge. He kissed her, bending down over her.

When they joined their lips, the little seductress opened her small mouth and left it open for him to play with her tongue. She breathed deeply to indicate the intensity of her pleasure. Antonio looked back. They were standing at the far end of the terrace, behind some giant plants. They couldn't be seen from inside the house. The rain was wetting them slowly, in the same way that flowers get watered in the afternoon. The heavy breathing of Frances was mixed with the wind that was pulling the drops of rain in a diagonal.

Antonio lowered his hand to caress the heavy, hard breasts of Frances and she moaned sweetly with the wind and the rain. She held him tight. He kept on caressing her. He moved down to her round

hips and found her behind hard and soft at the same time, like a peach, and without stopping he arrived at the center between her legs and pushed, thinking that his actions would scare Frances away and that she would stop, but she pushed back against his hand and moved her hips with a sensual rhythm when he stroked her mound and felt it wet and pressed the thick cushion of hair. Frances let him continue. She had her eyes halfway closed and her little mouth open and she hung on to Antonio's neck and caressed his hair with pointed fingers.

Reaching the point of no return, Antonio moved quickly and he pulled up her skirt and stuck his hand into her underwear. He found the heavy, wet knit of hair and kept on going lower and lower and she opened her thighs to ease the arrival of the wandering fingers which were exploring the way. Antonio tore her briefs in a sharp move, turned her against the rail and pulled down his own zipper. He let his member free and he took her like that, standing, and felt the hot skin of Frances as a contrast to the cold rain and it was fast and easy and in a few minutes everything was over. It was an encounter as passing as the rain itself.

"More", she asked breathlessly.

"No. II

"Please."

"We can't do it here anymore."

"I want to see you. Alone. Later."

"Impossible."

"Tomorrow, then. Whenever you say."

Antonio moved away from her a few steps, and arranged his clothes. He picked up the torn briefs and threw them towards the waves. The rain was slowing down.

"Remember your parents."

"I don't care."

"But they do", said Antonio, and sat on the lounge just as Serena entered the terrace.

"Are you tired of getting wet?" she asked. She seemed worried. Her normally peaceful face showed a few lines on her forehead.

"No, mother. This is a lot of fun", answered Frances, and gazed mischievously at Antonio.

"Tony, it'll be better if you come in", insisted Serena with a nervous and tense intonation.

"In a moment, Serena."

"Tony, come into the house", repeated Serena, applying an unusual pressure.

"As soon as I finish my Colagallo", answered Antonio.

"As you wish. He who chooses to die...Frances, come in right now!"

"But mother..."

"I said right now!"

Frances went reluctantly into the house. Serena looked at Antonio and was about to add something else, but she changed her mind and went back inside.

Antonio shrugged. In front of him the Pacific Ocean didn't look as pacific anymore. By this time, the rain had stopped completely, but the waves had grown and, full of sound and movement, they were hitting against the sand of the beach that extended beneath the terrace.

"Have you ever been over here before?" asked the taxi driver, when they passed a small town which had had some houses destroyed. The white adobe houses, with thatched roofs, seemed to be abandoned.

"No."

"Look, that is our latest volcano. Just born yesterday", said the driver, pointing with his finger. At the back of the town, behind the houses, a hill of thirty or forty meters rose against the emerald green vegetation; through its top, smoke and red lava were spewing, which ran down the slopes towards the small white houses. On the roofs of

some of the houses that were still standing, groups of photographers were filming what was happening.

"It was born yesterday", repeated the taxi driver.

.Hum. "

"It will bring us good luck.

"Maybe."

"Why are you going to Huazaque, patron?"

"To visit", said Antonio distractedly.

He could not stop thinking about Jennifer. He remembered the screams, Jennifer's screams, the sounds of an argument growing as fast and unexpected as a flood tide when they had arrived at their suite at Las Hadas. Antonio closed the door and Jennifer threw her bag on the bed and faced him, furious and wild.

"You are trying to change five hundred years of history with a novella. How absurd!"

"You are right. It is absurd. But that is what historians have done throughout the centuries. I, at least, am honest; I call it fiction."

"You are crazy...", said Jennifer. She went directly to the table, poured brandy into a glass and drank it in a gulp.

"That's nothing new. You need to be crazy to become a writer", answered Antonio, trying to keep calm. If he had not been so drunk, he would have stopped the argument right then and there. But he was tired of shutting up and allowing everything to remain unresolved. For once, he didn't want to stop; now, he wanted to keep going until the end.

"You live outside reality", said Jennifer pouring herself another drink.

"Whose reality, Jennifer? Yours? Ours? Theirs?"

"Everyone's reality."

"You are the one who doesn't like to see reality, my dear. Don't lie."

"And the way you insulted that poor man, accusing him of being a thief."

"He is a thief."

"And what about you? You are a failure, that's what you are."

"Might be. But that doesn't make Trujillo less of a thief."

"Damn you, Antonio. Don't you understand what we are trying to do? We are trying to save the factory."

"And just how are you going to do that? By firing the workers to pay for machinery which is not even in the warehouses yet?"

"Don Carlos told me that if Trujillo doesn't decide by next week, Meyer will sell his shares to the Japanese. Nobody feels secure about the situation in this country and they want to have their money safely outside."

"They are using you, Jennifer."

"No, no, listen; the Japanese want to buy the factory so they can declare it bankrupt. Then they would take out the old machinery to resell it in a poorer country so they can bring in their best machinery to reopen the factory, producing the same or more with a third of today's work force", said Jennifer.

"A good business all the way around."

"But not for the workers, Tony. For all but them."

"Don't lie, Jennifer. Don't try to use the workers as a justification. You could care less about them."

"You are wrong. I want to save the factory for them."

"For yourself."

"Yes, for me, for you, and for them. For all of us!" shouted Jennifer and raised her hand. She almost scratched him, but Antonio pushed her hand away. Jennifer tried to control herself and tried to smile, but her usually marvelous smile was nothing but a furious grimace.

"I have to defend my inheritance, don't you think?"

"At what price, Jennifer?"

"Whatever! I don't care. You all thought I wouldn't do it because I am a woman, but I will show you how wrong you are. I'll show you and my grandfather and everyone else. I wasn't born to lose and I will defend myself at any price."

"But don't you realize what's going on? Your grandfather is using you to perpetuate his dream of power and glory. And the Board is using you to avoid their own responsibilities. Don't you understand?"

"All of those are the excuses of a failure. Everything is going to hell!"

"Have a nice trip."

"Are you still being cynical?"

"Cynicism is the last resource for those of us who fail, dear Jennifer."

"At least you accept that."

"I accept the fact that the full moon has turned you into a wolf."

"I rather be a wolf, than a bitch in heat. Or perhaps you think I didn't see you with that...that little bitch?"

"Ah, so all of this is due to your jealousy!"

"Jealousy? Ha! Don't be ridiculous. That poor flea is not a match for me. I am a thousand times more of a woman than she is. But you humiliated me in front of everybody and that was the worse thing you could have done", said Jennifer with her flashing green eyes, as green as the foliage on the mountains which surrounded the road which Antonio saw as a blur every time the taxi driver would say anything to bring him back to the present.

"Did you hear me? It was the worse thing you could have done!"

"Your jealousy is making you see things that do not exist", murmured Antonio, doubtful. Jennifer lost control and laughed as if she were about to cry.

"We all saw it! We all witnessed your magnificent performance on the terrace. All night long you were looking for an

opportunity to be alone with that...that poor stupid girl who wants to be like me."

"You are wrong."

"No, Tony. You are the one who is wrong", said Jennifer, deeply bitter. "Perhaps you believe that you are the only one who can be daring?" Jennifer asked rhetorically. And then she let out a painful laugh.

Antonio leaned against the rattan dresser. The room was spinning, spinning; everything was going around in his brain. He knew that Jennifer was insinuating something. She wanted to say something but her words were blocked in her throat and he could not guess what it was. He could not think clearly, could not find out why his instincts were sending him danger signals. With his hands, he grabbed the rattan dresser edge and squeezed.

"Do you feel very proud of your daring?" asked Jennifer, with her voice suddenly as hard and sharp as a steel knife. The breeze from the Bay had disturbed her hair and her eyes were empty of any expression. Her anguish accentuated her appearance of being a madwoman. She was trying to smile, but grimaced instead.

"Tell me, are you very proud? Because I am. Very proud. I am very proud of my daring, ha, ha, very proud", she said, and finally was able to produce a sly smile.

Antonio shivered when he saw her like that. Jennifer had lost her customary control and would go from one emotion to the next with the same speed as an actress in a tour-de-force.

"What...what do you mean?" said Antonio with difficulty.

"I am saying it very clearly, dear. I am saying that other people can be daring too", said Jennifer with profound solemnity.

"What did you do, Jennifer?"

"Nothing that you didn't do first", she answered, and now she was suddenly sad and tired. "At least I was able to close a good deal. And you? Did you get anything out of it?"

"What are you talking about?" said Antonio, but he stopped when he suddenly remembered the fat man being very attentive to Jennifer and her laughter and the imperious suggestions of Serena. He

put it all together and imagined, with a wave of nausea, Jennifer being kissed by the driveling fatso, Jennifer naked in the dark and the fatso getting close to her.

"What did you do?" he shouted with a knot of vomit in his throat.

"Nothing that you didn't do first."

"With that pig? Jennifer, for God's sake, with that pig?"

Jennifer lowered her eyes. Before she was sad. Now she seemed to be pleased by the effect her words had. On her face danced a look of satisfaction. Antonio understood that this was what she was looking for. He pulled away from her and began to grab his clothes from the drawers of the dresser.

"What are you doing?" asked Jennifer.

"I am leaving. What did you expect?"

"What?"

"I don't want to know anything else about you. Don't come into my life again, Jennifer. Let me leave in peace. I've had enough. I am fed up with your stupidities and your damned ambition. Do whatever you want with your life, but don't ever mess with mine again."

"You can't leave me. You are mine!"

"No, Jennifer. All of this has been a sad farce. We were wrong, that's all "

"NO!" she shouted and jumped on him to stop him. "You can't leave me just like that!" she screamed, wrestling his clothes away and fighting Antonio. "It won't be that easy for you to get rid of me! I am better than that little bitch!"

"Jennifer, enough! Enough, I said", shouted Antonio. "I don't care what you are, Jennifer. Quite simply, I don't want you in my life anymore. You have no right!"

"You won't leave me for that little bitch!" said Jennifer, and with the bottle of brandy she tried to hit Antonio in his genitals.

He threw her aside, but she bit his shoulder and scratched his back and Antonio felt himself being pulled by a tide of black and

The Blue Unicorn

red water which surged into his mind and after he struck the first blow, the rest came easily, one after the other, beyond his control.

X

The bus took them to the Tasqueña subway station. Rubí and Perfumado pulled out their tickets, but Isauro, laughing jovially, jumped over the bars of the entrance stile. As lively and playful as a small boy, Isauro put up his fists and feinted at Rubí. When the worker raised his hands like hammers, Isauro ruffled Rubí's hair and ran away. Rubí chased him all the way out to the tracks where they waited for Perfumado to arrive. He did, with a bitter grimace on his face.

The platform was full of people on their way back home. The convoy of orange cars arrived completely empty and when the doors opened, people jumped in to search for a seat. The three workers waited, leaning on the wall until everybody else had gone into the car and then they went in quietly. The doors closed and the convoy took off.

"Look", said Isauro, hitting Rubí with his elbow. Standing beside the door was an attractive woman who turned to look at them after she felt their eyes on her body.

"She's mine", said Isauro. He approached the woman, and taking advantage of the movements of the train, he discretely caressed her behind, which was clearly revealed by her tight dress. She moved aside, without protesting. Isauro turned to Rubí with a picaresque smile. Rubí elbowed Perfumado, urging him to watch, but Perfumado just ignored him. Isauro started to talk to the woman. She didn't pay much attention at the beginning, but after three or four stops she stations she began to answer Isauro's caresses lovingly. To Rubí, it all seemed like a good idea and he searched for a candidate, but in vain.

Among the standing travelers, there wasn't a woman he could approach. But beside the central exit door, there was a girl with the bearing of a secretary. Between her arms she held her Purse as if it were a baby; she had her feet crossed and her knees slightly open and she was having a hard time staying awake. Rubí stood beside her. The wide neckline of her flowery dress she had on gave Rubí a complete view of her small and rather sad breasts. He compared them mentally with the opulent bosom of Juana Alonso and his blood heated with the memory. Following the natural movement of the speeding wagon, Rubí moved closer to watch her better, until the girl fell completely asleep.

When there was only one stop before their destination, a heavy black smoke began to issue from the back of the wagon and then flames appeared. People moved away, screaming. Perfumado, with his eyes even more glazed and empty, grabbed the metal bar overhead with both hands and barely paid attention when the fire came close to him. Just then, the wagon stopped at Pino Suárez and everybody left the car in a hurry. Rubí had to pull Perfumado's sleeve. The three friends ran down the long corridors, searching for an exit.

"And your lady friend? You should have brought her with you. She was coming on strong", said Rubí.

"She didn't want to. She was afraid because she saw three of us. She said there were too many of us for her."

"She probably got scared when she saw Perfumado", said Rubí.

"What? What? Scared of what?" said Perfumado aggressively.

"Take it easy. It was just a joke."

The immense station at Pino Suárez was a great sea of hurried people who changing lines, went up and down staircases following contrary currents, walked into open stores, stopped to eat fast food, ran to reach their trains, left wagons and ran along corridors and all of that activity added to the heat generated by the trains running on their tracks, made the atmosphere inside the station almost unbearable. The station seemed to be a huge oven, rocking in a

ceaseless movement. The three friends ran all the way outside to the street.

Rubí breathed the fresh air deeply. The air downtown was polluted, but compared to the air of that oven inside the subway, Rubí thought it was extremely pleasant and he filled up his lungs.

There were four or five blocks along Fray Servando Teresa de Mier to the theater. They followed the avenue, walking among the bureaucrats who came out of the offices from the State Departments of Budget and Finance and the Agrarian Reform. When they were almost to Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas, a patrol car approached them.

"Stop right there!" ordered the policeman, from the right side of the car. The three friends stopped in front of a seafood store that was beside a building under construction. The patrol car stopped completely and the policeman got out.

"Show me your ID's!" he ordered, snapping his fingers. The three workers showed their factory identifications. While the policeman was inspecting the cards, Rubí saw a cat pulling the half-eaten body of a rat as large as a rabbit from the building under construction. The reek of decay surrounded them.

"Where are you going?" inquired the policeman. The three workers intimidated, hesitated for a moment before they answered.

"To the theater", said Rubí.

"Oh, yeah? And what do you have in those sacks?"

"Clothes", said Rubí, opening his immediately.

"Show me yours", ordered the policeman to Perfumado.

"We are not thieves", said Perfumado, and he held on to his canvas bag.

"Shut up! As if I didn't know your kind. Come on, big mouth, open your sack", answered the policeman. Without waiting, he grabbed Perfumado's bag and opened it to examine its contents with a flashlight. Suspiciously, he pulled out the stone Perfumado had placed there earlier.

"And this?"

"It—it's just a stone."

"And why do you hide it away? Is it worth anything?"

"I don't think so..."

"You don't. Well, I do. Let's see what else...Do you carry any tools to open cars?"

"Come on, jefe, what is this? We may be poor, but we are honest. We carry only our uniforms", explained Rubí.

"Oh, yeah? Uniforms for what?"

"Our soccer uniforms."

"Don't give me that. You just came from a bar. Don't act stupid. What kind of a fucking sucker do you think I am? You all are drunk."

"Come on, jefe. We are not drunk. Sure, we had some beers, but just a few. We wanted to celebrate my birthday", said Rubí with an irresistible smile.

"I knew it! That's why I went to the Police Academy. To learn how to detect criminals like you."

"We are not criminals. And you are violating our freedom", said Isauro.

"What did you say?" growled the policeman.

"I said that you are violating our freedom", repeated Isauro calmly. The policeman looked at him from head to toes before answering, still surprised by Isauro's boldness.

"I have your freedom right here. Do you want me to give it to you?" said the policeman pulling out his stick.

"No, jefe, come on. Let us go. We are Just workers and we are going to the theater around the corner to watch the naked dancers", Rubí hurried to say.

"And why do you want to see naked girls?"

"Is there something wrong with that?" said Perfumado.

"I think you all are acting very suspiciously. I think you better come into the patrol car. We are going to take a little trip to the police station."

"But why? We haven't done anything!" protested Isauro.

"Are you trying to start a riot?"

"No, patron, come on, let him go. Look, here is a small token of appreciation for your efforts in keeping this city safe. But let him go", insisted Rubi docilely. He placed some folded bills in the policeman's hands. His smile was friendly and brilliant and made the policeman smile himself.

"All right", he said and let go of Isauro. "You should learn how to treat authority, big mouth. Learn from your friend). He knows how to respect authority."

Isauro didn't answer.

"Go away. But be careful. If I find you doing anything wrong, you will go to jail", warned the policeman, discretely counting the bills which Rubi had placed in his hand. He pulled out the stone from Perfumado's canvas bag and weighted it.

"Just in case, I'll take this with me", he said, placing the stone inside of his jacket.

"It is just a stone", insisted Perfumado.

"It doesn't matter. All right, leave now. You don't need to thank me", said the policeman getting back into his patrol car. When the car disappeared among the traffic, Perfumado shouted insults directed at the policeman's mother.

"It's too late, jackass. Why didn't you do it when he was right here?" said Rubi, laughing.

"I'm not stupid."

"How much did you give him?" said Isauro.

"I don't know. I just grabbed from the envelope without seeing. But from now on you both will pay for everything, 'cause I'm broke."

"Sure thing. Don't you worry. It was my treat anyway", said Isauro.

They slung their sacks over their backs and moved on. They crossed Izazaga, and passed by the old church of San Francisco. The building stood out in the night as if it were a monolith of red tezontle stone. Before they got to the next corner, on the right side of the street

was the entrance to the burlesque theater. Large color photographs of naked women advertised the show inside. At the thicket window there was a long line of lonesome looking men. The entrance, profusely lit, had an air of dirtiness and abandonment in spite of the bright photographs. Isauro went ahead to stand in line. Rubí and Perfumado waited inside the lobby. The manager's office was open and inside, a man and a woman were fighting. Their screams attracted Rubí's attention. A man with a shiny baldhead was shouting at a woman who was dressed in a very tight dress of scandalously bright colors and a platinum blonde wig. The woman stood with her back to the door and she was crying, imploring something in a low voice.

"I don't care about it!" shouted the bald headed again and again. Rubí looked straight at him. The woman felt his gaze and turned to see him. Her make up was running down her face. Rubí recognized her before the bald man could get up to close the door.

"Hey, Rubí", said a small man with an odd appearance, who was leaving the ticket window. Small and with a cylindrical body, plus a well-trimmed moustache, he seemed like a caricature of a human being. He was Pichichi, another workers from TEXMEX.

"Quihubo, Pichichi", said Rubí.

"Have you come to stick your tongues out", asked Pichichi moving his small moustache like a mouse 's. He wasn't more than a meter and a half in height and his shoulders and his hips seemed to be the same width, so he seemed like a midget.

"Maybe. This is Isauro's farewell party, answered Rubí, still thinking about the woman he had seen in the manager's office.

Pichichi didn't want to ask his next question.

"Did...er...did the supervisor punish you?" he asked finally.

"No. He just threatened me with two days of punishment. But if he sends me home, he'll pay for it."

"Good, Rubí, very good. Don't let them fuck with you, brother", said Pichichi and he turned to Perfumado, who was leaning absentmindedly against a wall.

"What is going on? Why are you so sad?"

Perfumado didn't answer.

"Leave him alone", said Rubí.

"Hey, Rubí, what about the rumor that we are going to get fired?"

"One thing I know is that they are going to fire you for sure, Pichichi. They have discovered your tricks."

"Which tricks?"

"Don't act like you don't know", said Rubí, and his smile was cold. "Your dirty tricks with the supervisor."

"I don't know what are you talking about. You are crazy", said Pichichi, not so sure.

Isauro returned with the tickets and the four of them entered the small auditorium. There were two side corridors and a wide one in the center that led to the stage in the back. The rest of the place was filled with metal chairs.

The auditorium smelled of stucco and humidity. The stage, made with wooden planks in need of paint, had two large folding screens with views of the ocean painted on them. They were at the sides of the red frontal curtains that hung from the ceiling. A walkway extended from the middle of the stage to the center aisle. The walkway was carpeted in red also. There were a few people already inside, but by the time they had reached their seats beside the walkway and had sat down, the theater was full and the show began.

Out of the huge speakers, hung high on the sides of the stage, came a march from an old and scratched record. A dark-skinned woman with her hair dyed red came out and began to dance. The low lights did not show the true age of her loose flesh. She did a dance routine awkwardly and without any enthusiasm. Every so often the needle of the music player jumped and made her lose the rhythm of her steps and it all looked pitiful. She quickly took off the few clothes she had on her, as the public shouted to cheer her on.

"Hair! Hair! Hair...!"

The dancer took off her dress with movements, which tried to be graceful, and which once might have been so, but now they were only sad reminders of her true age. She had a small bra that barely covered her purple nipples, and a minute bikini. She had a fatty body

and all her flesh jumped at every step she took. She began to sweat, and the lights made her brown skin shine. The dancer turned her back to the public, bent down and opened her legs, and little by little took off her red bikini. She stopped when half of her square buttocks were exposed. She straighten up, turned around, and with a single movement she released her huge tits, which she wiggled by moving her shoulders at the rhythm of the music. The public roared joyfully, forgetting the scratched record and the bad dancing.

"Take off your panties!", shouted one.

"Hair! Hair! Hair!", shouted those who were in the front rows and the ones in the back echoed it. The woman took off her red bikini and the spectators, the majority of whom were factory workers, bureaucrats, and unemployed, applauded enthusiastically. The woman caressed her breasts, dipped a finger into her mouth, and then moved it down over her pubic hair and offered it to a boy on the first row, who hungrily sucked her finger. The dancer lay down and she raised her legs, opening them completely so everybody was able to see all of her secrets.

"Walk the plank!", ordered a middle-aged man, whose short cropped hair made him look like a soldier.

"That dog-face is horny", said a toothless man.

"I am your father, asshole!", answered the first man.

"Daddy, where is my mommy", said another one.

"Don't argue anymore, or I'll break both your faces!", said, a fourth man, amongst the general laughter.

The dancer played bit longer with her body and then left. With the second dancer, a woman younger and more slender, the routine was repeated except that she was forced by the audience to walk the walkway carpeted in red. The ambiance inside the theater was getting hotter quickly. The smoke from the cigarettes gave a foggy aspect, an almost unreal quality to the show. The woman began to walk the plank coquettishly when she was entirely naked, and instantly several men rose from their seats. Lined up on both sides of the plank, they waited for the dancer to go by. As she kept walking along, she allowed the men to kiss her strong thighs. Guards in

uniform stopped the spectators who tried to grab or touch the woman's body with their hands. They were allowed to use only their mouths. And their tongues. She went by, choosing those she liked the best, and would approach the edge of the walkway to push her pelvis in their faces. She did so in quick movements. Perfumado had placed himself almost at the end of the plank. The dancer grabbed his head and pulled him to her pubis. She made her hips spin sensually, but then she made a gesture of pain, pulled Perfumado's hair and slapped him. Perfumado returned quickly to his chair while the dancer furiously left the stage amongst the hoarse laughter of the public.

"What did you do?", said Rubí.

"I bit her", answered Perfumado with his eyes empty of expression as he snapped his teeth.

Another dancer came out to do her routine. Then, a magician with a red cape followed. He did some fast tricks and out came a midget singer, a one eyed juggler, and finally, the special number of the house was announced with all the front curtains closed. The lights were turned off for about five minutes. When they were turned on again, the curtains opened and a black woman, whose body looked marvelously firm and well proportioned, was lying down on a bed. She was dressed in a vaporous white negligee and faked being asleep. In her dream she began to sensually caress her own body, circling her breasts with her fingertips and played with her nipples until they turned purple and hard. Her hands went down to her flat belly, touched her round, strong thighs and her fingers slowly approached her short, curly pubic air, while all the time moaning her sexual need aloud. Behind the bed there was a window, and on the 'street' two men dressed in overalls walked by. When they heard the moaning they stopped and looked inside the room. They were very surprised when they discovered the woman masturbating. She pulled out a huge plastic phallus from the nightstand beside the bed. The men outside signaled each other. One of them jumped inside. He quickly covered the woman's head with a pillow case and held her still while the other one came in and got undressed. When the man was completely naked, he laid down next to her. She tried to resist, but the man ended up dominating her. The first one placed himself on top of her, the second man undressed and joined the couple and the three of

them soon ended up together on the carpet, where they dexterously represented all possible varieties for three bodies. Lights started to go off amongst the general silence until only the silhouettes stood out in the darkness. The moaning of the two increased just as the movements of the shadows became more and more frenetic. There was a general moan on the stage, which was echoed in the whispers of the silent public. The shadows then pulled apart. The two men left through the wings. Lights came on to show the mulatta again on the bed, dressed just as in the beginning. It all had been part of her dream, but now she was waking up and reached to the audience in a silent invitation for someone to volunteer to go up and embrace her. The public cheered and applauded.

"I want some!", shouted somebody.

Come on up and get it!", she said, but nobody moved.

"Go on, Perfumado. Go up and find out if it's true said Rubí with his mouth dry and his voice hoarse. Perfumado obeyed impulsively. He jumped onto the stage amongst the whistles and roaring laughter from the public. The woman got up from the bed to receive him with open arms and held him and kissed him. She opened Perfumado's shirt and rubbed her huge breasts against his flat chest while he stood there, unable to move or to answer yet the caresses he was receiving in abundance. The woman made him lay down on the bed. Still kissing him she went down his slender body while she slowly unbuttoned his electric red suit. When she got to his abdomen, she knelt down and looked closely at his erect member, then she pulled down his trousers so everyone was able to see it clearly. The audience laughed and cheered wildly.

The mulatta forcefully manipulated his genitals until he complained aloud. She got on top of him and when it seemed that she was going to ride him, the other two men, still dressed in their overalls burst in from the sides. They dominated Perfumado by force, while the public cheered, and tied him with leather straps face down on the bed. Then the workers picked up the gigantic plastic phallus and threatened him with rape. Perfumado fought and screamed, but the more he fought to free himself, the more he shouted and tried to get free from the straps, the funnier the entire scene was. After a few minutes of this

farce, the two men let him lose. Perfumado pulled up his trousers and tried to hit the men and he chased them around the stage. The mulatta held on to him until he calmed down, and she kissed him and convinced him to forgive the joke and leave the stage. Perfumado jumped down from the stage with his face red and went straight to his seat, rearranging his electric red suit.

The woman threw another kiss and invited more volunteers. The only response she got was a general catcall and laughter from the public. The strip-dancer grabbed the microphone and asked for silence and then she said, "let's give a hand to this young man, so he'll forgive our little joke. One, two, three", she shouted, and everybody applauded.

The front curtains were closed, the lights were turned on, and a male voice over the loudspeaker invited the public to leave quietly the place through the side doors of the theater.

"The Champagne Bottle Theater thanks you all for your patronage of our show, which is performed just as the shows in Las Vegas. We hope you will be back soon. So long. Leave quickly, please, so the next show may begin."

The four friends left the theater still laughing about Perfumado's piece of acting, and he seemed to accept the jokes without being upset. He even seemed to be in a good mood.

Outside, they had to stop and wait under the marquee because it was raining very hard.

"I know how that son of a bitch will pay for what he did", said Perfumado suddenly.

"Tch, tch, just wait, Perfumado. Listen, Pichichi, did you bring your taxi?", said Rubí.

"Of course. I don't go anywhere without my girl."

"Will you give us a ride? We'll pay you for it some other day."

"Okay. I'll go get the car. I left her in my private parking lot two blocks from here", said Pichichi. He grabbed the newspaper from Isauro, used it to cover his head, and ran through the rain.

"Which one is his private parking lot?", said Isauro, perplexed.

"The street. What else? Wake up. You are very slow tonight", said Rubí, feeling tired. Without having sleep the night before, and with the exercise and the excitement and the blows of the game, and then the beers and theater, he now felt his eyes closing against his will. He could not think clearly. He wanted only to lie down and stretch out his battered body. The small wound at the corner of his eyebrow wasn't even swollen and it had a scab already. By the next morning it would be just another scar on his body.

"Let's go to Garibaldi", proposed Perfumado.

"Nope. Let's go to sleep. I have already spent half of my money", said Rubí.

"I wanna go listen to the mariachis", insisted Perfumado hoarsely. Suddenly, he seemed more drunk than when he had gone into the theater.

"I wanna listen to the mariachis!", said Perfumado louder, as if they hadn't heard him the first time.

"Well, then you will have to go on your own, because we are going to sleep", said Rubí.

"Rubí, you are my friend, right? You wouldn't leave a friend alone, you promised Let's go have a drink with the mariachis. Come on. Don't leave me alone tonight. I feel very bad, Rubí. I am going to do something don't want to. I swear to God I don't want you to be left alone tonight. Let's go to the mariachis."

"Well, we can go for a while, Rubí. I'll pay for it. I'll use the money they gave me at the factory", offered Isauro Peña. "Anyway, it is my last night in Mexico", he added.

"The truth is that I am very tired. Last night I didn't sleep. My grandfather died and we buried him yesterday", said Rubí, all of a sudden remembering his face, and he realized how distant his memory seemed already. He hadn't thought about him in many long hours.

"Let's go to the mariachis. I wanna hear the mariachis!"

"Your grandfather died? Oh, brother. I am sorry. Really sorry. I know how much you loved your grandfather. But there is nothing we can do. That's life."

"That's the way it is."

"I wanna hear mariachis!"

"Damn Perfumado, how stubborn you are. You are a first class ass. Stubborn and dumb and silly. First, you let them take your girl and now you want to drown in alcohol for her. Behave, my man."

"Don't laugh at my pain, compadre."

"I'm not. But don't be so stubborn."

"Come on, Rubí. Let's go. Pichichi can take us. Just for awhile. It wouldn't be a bad idea to go hear the mariachis play. I mean, the three of us are in a sad shape. Perfumado lost his girl, you lost your grandfather, and I am losing so many things that the truth is I am getting scared, Rubí. I know that once I cross that border, my life will change forever and I don't know if it will be for better or for worse. But just in case, let's go to hear the mariachis play Las Golondrinas for us at least one more time."

"That son of a bitch will pay for this", blurted out Perfumado, leaning against the wall so as to avoid falling down. He seemed to be getting drunker the minute.

"Shut up already!", ordered Rubí.

"I wanna hear the mariachis", murmured Perfumado as if he were a chided child.

Rubí was bothered by it all. He felt pushed in different directions. On the one hand, he wanted to stay with his friends. This was probably the last time he would see Isauro Peña. And Perfumado felt bad, as he himself was saying. Very bad. On the other hand, Rubí was really tired. If it hadn't been for that extreme tiredness, he wouldn't have hesitated.

"Come on, Rubí. Just for awhile", insisted Isauro.

"You go."

"No way. Without you, it's not the same."

"Well, what the hell, let's go to Garibaldi", said Rubí.

He'd realized that if he kept on refusing, his well-earned fame as a good friend and partygoer would be in danger.

"I want to hear mariachis!"

"All right, Perfumado, all right. You got it. Now shut up."

"Okay. But I swear that that son of a bitch will pay-for what he did."

"Sure, sure, now calm down,"

Pichichi made a signal with the car lights and then honked the horn so they could recognize him as he approached them on the street. He stopped his battered old taxi right next to them. Isauro opened the front door and pretended to threaten the taxi driver. With a hand in his pocket, he acted as if he carried a hidden weapon.

"This is a high jacking."

"Hum. You made a mistake. I am poorer than you."

"You should get scared anyway."

"Fuck you."

"You are the one who is fucked up anyway. We are going to Garibaldi."

"To Garibaldi? Is that true, Rubí?", said Pichichi looking at Rubí through the rear mirror.

"Yep. Do you care to join us, partner?"

"Will you give me your sister?"

"Not yet. But don't lose hope. Maybe tomorrow. Now let's go to Garibaldi!"

"All right!", said Pichichi as he raced the engine and then released the clutch suddenly. The car jumped forwards and the wheels screeched.

"How did you like that?"

"Not bad. This heap still pulls- answered Isauro. He was regaining his earlier childlike euphoria. He slapped the dash, which was covered by a heavy cloth. Under the rear mirror, hanging from a wooden rosary, was the image of Saint Christopher, the patron of travelers. And behind the wheel there was a small plastic altar with the

image of the most important saint in Mexico, La Virgen de Guadalupe.

On the corner, two ragged men were assaulting a policeman. They had taken his gun away, and one held it on him. The policeman held his arms raised while the other man searched his pockets.

-eleven

"Here we are", said the taxi driver. Antonio, deep in his thoughts, hadn't realized the trip was over.

"Eh? Ah, yeah. Good", he said, as if waking up from a dream. From his wallet, he pulled out some bills and gave them to the taxi driver. He opened the door and left the car.

"Where is it?"

"Follow the path down", said the driver, pointing to an open path between the abundant vegetation.

"Thanks."

"Do you want me to wait for you?", said the driver through his window.

"No", said Antonio. He walked over the stones of the dirt road towards the path. Beside it, there was a decaying shack, almost covered by weeds.

"Hey!", shouted the driver, getting out of his car just as Antonio was stepping onto the path. "Hey!"

Antonio waited for him.

"There are sharks in there, friend!", said the man, honestly worried.

Antonio shrugged.

"I don't care. I am not going to swim."

The driver hesitated.

"A woman was killed here last week."

"I know. But I am not going to swim. I just want to be left alone for awhile", said Antonio, and it was true when he said it. At that moment, he was thinking about many things, but not about swimming. However, as he pronounced his words of denial, they sounded strange and faraway, as if someone else had pronounced them. The driver still doubted whether he should go or should stay, but Antonio reassured him.

"How long before nightfall?"

"Four, maybe five hours", said the driver, looking at the sun.

"Come back then", said Antonio. The taxi driver smiled and said goodbye. He went back to his car, honked the horn twice, waved his hand and drove off on the dirt road. Antonio saw the car disappear between the hills. Then he walked down the path until he entered the hidden cove. He found himself standing on the fine and golden sand of the shore, at the middle point of the semi-circle of the cove. From there, he was able to see the entire place.

By then, the rumble of the motor had died and the only sounds came from the roaring of the waves breaking against the sand and crashing against the reefs, which were sharp points of black stone on both sides of the cove. A yellow seagull cried over his head. Antonio watched the lonesome seagull gliding over an ocean of an intense turquoise color. The seagull sang happily as she flew freely through that clear sky, which was almost transparent, because its blue was so clean and light. At the entrance of the semi-circle of the bay, some rocks in the shade; of a pyramid were blocking the entrance of heavy surge. Both sides of the horseshoe-like cove were bounded by the steep slopes of Colima's mountains, abundantly covered with the bright green foliage of the coast, which was like a cape of luxurious velvet cloth covered with emerald dust. The yellow seagull disappeared behind the rocks on the left slope just as a pelican flew out. The bird's nest was just above a *bufonera*. Each wave which came crashing against the reefs would push the water through a conduit between the rocks and the pressure made it go up and over the top. The sound it made was very similar to a horse's snort, thereby the

name *bufonera*. The gush of water would jump high and white and foamy.

The pelican flew from one side of the cove to the other, shaving the waves' crests, searching for food. After flying for awhile, it dropped into the water and when it came out, it had a fish in its mouth. The fish shone as silver under the sun before the pelican swallowed it. Then the bird rose and flew away towards the open sea. Antonio kept watching it and saw it land on a white object which was floating at the entrance of the bay, smoothly rocked by the waves. Antonio examined the object in the distance; it was like a balloon at the fair. From afar, it seemed tiny, but for him to see it so clearly meant that it was very large. The object was about half a mile away from the beach. Antonio decided it was a buoy. A marking buoy probably placed there by the shark hunters. And they? Where were the shark-hunters? The cove was completely empty. There was nobody to be seen in that sea of strong tides: not on the beach and even less on the mountains around the cove. Antonio looked around several times to be sure. The place was completely abandoned.

Antonio watched the place, a few meters away from his feet, where the tide changed colors. Immediately behind, the waves broke. There was a brown line that extended itself along the beach. Beyond that line, the sea was dark blue with some silver spots in the places where the water in constant movement reflected the rays of the sun. The dark blue color was solid until it reached the line where it changed color. That was the point where the waves wallowed, and under the surface, the water changed to green, then to brown, and then it was only foam spreading over the golden sand of the shore. Antonio guessed that right there, along that line, the changing floor dropped off sharply. It was different from all the other beaches in Santiago and Manzanillo, which was shallow and calm, deep into the ocean. It was for that very reason, he thought, that the sharks had been able to get so close to the beach.

And the shark-hunters? Where were the shark-hunters? The fatso had said at the dinner table that three boats loaded with expert fishermen were looking for the sharks. Where were they? Perhaps they had caught the sharks. It didn't seem possible since a few hours earlier, the fatso had insinuated that the sharks were still at large. Already

having tasted human flesh, the animals were extremely dangerous. And the taxi driver did warn him and he should know.

Suddenly, he heard loud and triumphant laughter followed by sighs and whispers and evil advice. He saw Jennifer's image and he remembered all the attack of nausea as he clearly remembered all the stupid violence that the madness had forced him to unleash. The smell of putrefied blood came back. Antonio tried to vomit, but his stomach was empty. Pushed by the incessant murmurs and by his desperation to get rid of all the putrefaction, he swiftly took off his shirt and his tennis shoes; he felt the burning sand under his soles. After a slight hesitation, he also took off his black trunks. He was entirely naked except for one thing. On his neck, he wore the gold chain that Jennifer had given him for a present. He took off his chain and threw it on the sand. Now he was truly naked under the sun and he ran to the sea. With his first step into the sea, he felt the warm water on his ankles; with the second, the water reached his thighs, and with the next wave, the salt water went up to his waist and then to his chest and then Antonio wasn't able to stand anymore. He hadn't been mistaken. The bottom dropped off abruptly and he sank entirely in the strong waves.

The water was warm, very warm, and almost hot. It was a few degrees cooler than the temperature of his skin. Antonio submerged himself. The water was pleasing and he allowed his body to be swung in a comfortable lull. However, he felt the pestilence still present in his body. The putrid smells emanating like puss from all the pores of his body, and then the voices of driveling madmen shouted at him to swim out to the buoy.

In a flash of lucidity which was superior to the orders from the raging madmen, Antonio thought only that it was a double temerity to try to reach the buoy in that abandoned cove. Besides the danger coming from the sharks hidden under the water—were they still there, waiting?—his body was in very bad shape after years of drinking and smoking. If anything were to happen inside the sea, it would necessarily become a one-way ticket, without the possibility of return. He hesitated, but then the madmen laughed at him. Antonio remembered Jennifer and he started to swim forcefully. He concentrated on the rhythm of his strokes so as not to waste energy; one, two, three strokes, stick your head out of the water on the right

side to breath deeply while your arm is in the air, then put your head and your arm back into the water at the same time; ONE -let the air escape through your nose TWO -bend the palms of your hands to pull more water and advance farther with each stroke THREE -stick out your head and breath in deeply...He had to remember that the movement of his legs had to be synchronized with his strokes to make the entire movement smooth so as not to create too much splash...One, two, three, stick out your head...It was easy and Antonio recalled the synchronization of all the muscles of his body without any difficulty. What is well learned is never forgotten, he thought, thinking briefly of the lessons received on the beaches of Acapulco many years before, when he was a student in high school.

... what are you searching for, Antonio? why do you insist on being a writer? what do you search for in history? are you trying to justify your life somehow? forget it, life doesn't need to be justified. are you trying to find absolute truths? a single absolute truth, perhaps? no, forget it. you won't find one because there is none. you are a failure and refuse to accept it. failure. a failure...failure, failure...take off your mask and look at yourself in the mirror! you are a failure! a failure...one...one, two, three, stick your head out...

Think about something else, he told himself. Think about the sharks. That's better. He counted again; one, two, three, stick your head out on the right side...He kept swimming until his arms got tired. He stopped and allowed the waves to rock him. He located the buoy; he was still less than half a way. It was farther than he had thought. Or so it seemed now. He turned to see the coast and he found it far away on the horizon of the sea. He started again with his strokes, but he wasn't able to fill up his lungs completely. He felt them filling up only partially. He would open his mouth and gasp for air, making an effort to breathe in all the oxygen he needed, but his lungs seemed to be closed. The cigarettes he smoked were to blame, he thought when he stopped again to rest; floating with his face up, he closed his eyes to the bright sun. I have to keep going, he thought. I must. You must keep going, the madmen ordered him. You should keep going, said his conscience, and Antonio restarted his strokes, concentrating on the white buoy with blue strips, which was right ahead, waiting for him.

A bed of green and brown seaweed floated around him and its touch made him remember the sharks. The madmen laughed and rang bells that reverberated all along Antonio's body. A cold and dark shadow came down over him, clouding the sun. He started to open his eyes every time his head was under, in spite of the fact that the salt water irritated them. He intended to see the sharks approaching him with their open jaws, coming up from the bottom of the sea. Even though he could see nothing, he kept swimming thus, thinking that at least he would be able to see his death face to face.

With the arrival of the shadow, he also heard a noise. Antonio heard a buzzing growing louder and some other strange sounds. The shark hunters on their boats, he thought, but when he stopped to look, the cove was just as empty as in the beginning. Or worse. Now he could not even find the pelican and the seagull that had been there at the start of his journey. He kept on swimming. The noise increased. He wasn't able to find an explanation for them. Intimidated by the cold, dark menace coming from the shadow, Antonio began to gasp for air after each stroke even though he knew that he would tire even more. It was a vicious circle and the shadow's presence grew even stronger.

Antonio had to stop another three times to float on the surface of the water, exhausted. Each of the three times he started his movements again, he felt the imminence of the shark attack which was to come up silently from the depths under his body: from the obscurity of that immense body of blue water. Trying to push the shadow away, to keep it under his control, he realized that if he died at that moment, there would be nobody to witness his death. He would die in perfect solitude.

He looked at the buoy. He was near, very near it. He couldn't give up now that he was so near. Put aside your morbid ideas and finish what you started, he said to himself, furious with his own body for being so tired. The dark shadow hadn't gone away. It was still there, near him, around him, above him; threatening to wrestle away his control at any moment. Antonio warned himself that if he allowed the panic to dominate him, then he would really be lost. While he could keep the shadow away, he had hope. He didn't want to quit. He wanted to finish what he had started. At least he wanted to finish with

the goal he had imposed on himself. If I arrive at the buoy, I will be able to rest as much as I need, he thought, without stopping. He couldn't feel his arms anymore. They were like independent parts, foreign to his body. His legs, however, were strong and had plenty of energy still.

In spite of his own advice about not being morbid, he kept on thinking about death. And he thought about God and death and Jennifer and God until suddenly he touched the buoy.

The buoy! He had reached the buoy! Just when he had felt incapable of ridding his body of the fear and tiredness, the buoy touched his hands and it produced the same relieved reaction which a man condemned to being shot would have had if his execution got postponed at the last minute.

Grabbing the buoy with both hands and standing on the anchor chain to acquire more security, Antonio waited to recover his strength. His arms seemed like heavy metal bars. He had to move them by conscious effort. Although he didn't feel any pain, it was as if they were something foreign. His eyes were burning and he couldn't breathe. The pelican reappeared. Antonio saw it taking off from its nest above the bufonera and he watched it as if the bird were a partner of his: the only partner he had in the entire world. The bird glided over the surface of the water following the wind currents and it made several dives towards the sea, but it would stop before it touched the water until it suddenly dove down near Antonio and then rose with another fish in its beak just like he had the first time, but now it was a bigger fish and half of its body remained outside the beak. The fish shook its tail before being completely swallowed by the pelican.

The shadow, which had left the moment Antonio touched the buoy, reappeared. It approached quickly with the same impetuous violence of a whirlwind and Antonio wanted to hold onto the buoy until someone arrived to rescue him. But then he overrode that desire. He dove down and looked underneath the buoys. The anchor chain descended and lost itself in the obscure and blurred bottom of the sea. He didn't see anything, but something was happening, something terrible. He came back to the surface and heard a loud clap of thunder and the entire sky seemed to break into pieces with that extraordinary

noise. It was as if God had turned away from him. He thought about Jennifer. He feared for Jennifer. He prayed for Jennifer. He dove again, but he didn't see anything and came back up to the surface. He breathed deeply, holding onto the buoy. The shadow had surprised him, but he had to keep it away. He could not make it go away, but if he allowed his physical weakness and his exhaustion to be weapons the shadow could use, then all his effort would have been in vain. And Jennifer? Perhaps the thunder in the sky meant that she had died? No, no, please God, no —it was as if his voice wasn't his, and as if it didn't have the strength to be heard.

He thought about returning to the beach immediately. Maybe they were looking for him to tell him...to tell him something, whatever. He knew that to begin his return as exhausted as he was would be difficult, but the alternative was worse. He knew that if he held onto the buoys much longer, then he wouldn't be able to let it go. Never. The shadow would end up controlling his weak muscles. With that thought, he let go of the buoy immediately; he let go of it as if it had burned him. By making a tremendous effort to control the movements of his heavy arms, he began to return to shore.

He concentrated on the awkward and difficult movements of his body, and slowly he began to lose track of time and distance. He didn't know how many times he stopped to rest, a few minutes each time, nor the times he felt the sharks under his body, nor how he was able to keep the shadow away, right on the other side of the line. He didn't know how far he had traveled, since the current pushed him gradually towards the other side of the cove, the farthest side. The heaviness of his arms became intolerable but, without, without knowing how he kept moving them. His legs became weaker, too, and his gasps turned into a single and endless struggle to get air. The images he saw inside and outside the water became part of the same entity and he stopped knowing which was the sky and which was the depth of the sea. He ceased thinking, except for a single image; it was the image of the bullfighter in red and silver, coming back to kneel before the bull after having been wounded and left almost dead by an enemy ten times bigger than him. Now he understood, carajo, he understood it more clearly than anything else he had ever understood in his life. He understood the humiliation, the courage, apparently

wasted in vain, the pride... He understood and shared all of that somehow and also the pain and the satisfaction of still being willing to look at the enemy, face to face, a face which wasn't other than his own face.

The world became a continuous silence and he stopped listening even to his own gasping. The light disappeared and the sea and the sky and under his body there was nothing. There wasn't water nor fish nor sharks nor mysteries he couldn't discover. He didn't exist. Nothing did. The heat didn't exist, nor the cold, nor the flesh, as neither did his bones nor his blood. Nothing existed in that silent darkness. There only existed the image of the bullfighter dressed in red and silver coming back, always coming back in a fractured and immortal movement, his only eternal truth in the black silence of a universe delivered to oblivion and to indifference, a crushing indifference which was discretely drowned in the ocean. That indifference which was the secret jealously guarded by that ocean and by all the oceans. Black and purple contrasted silently with the red and the silver. He began to swallow water; the salt tasted bitter and he tried to spit and he swallowed more water while he listened to Jennifer calling him from the bottom of that indifferent ocean. He was already sinking when he saw, in the distance, an animal that approached him, galloping on the red crests of an unknown and distant sea, the primary sea, the divine sea, the sea of the origin of life and the mother of imagination. The giant animal galloped above the crests turned red by the blood of death and the blood of partum. Death and rebirth. Birth and death, the tears of the beginning and the tears of the end. The reddish waters expelled by the contractions of a dying womb which held the total and basic genesis, wrapped in liquid blankets a' thick as the blood of a bull. A blue unicorn kept advancing between the waves of the heavy liquid, approaching in spite of the clashing of a hurricane wind which opposed its movement forwards, approaching against the giant tidal wave to rescue the man who seemed like a dot placed in the immensity of all which surrounded him in the silent darkness; nearer, every moment nearer, with its constant and firm galloping, until the unicorn passed by him and Antonio made a last effort and grabbed the tail which was like the long hair of a woman and the unicorn pulled

him through the surface of that raging sea: that angry and roaring and convulsive and violent sea.

When Antonio finally felt the loose touch of the sand under his feet, he let go of the unicorn's tail. The animal reared and attacked the waves of blood with its horn and it was swallowed by them. Antonio saw himself on the beach as the bullfighter in red and silver who came back to kneel before the bull and challenge him again. He heard the first sound a newborn would hear and that sound was the whinny of a horse. He let himself be pushed by the waves. He was so tired that he could not even internally celebrate his being back, his having come back to his starting point, his having successfully accomplished his personal odyssey and having defeated the shadow, coming back to earth, coming back to life. The malignant shadow and its stench was left behind, drowned in the depths of a sea now calm and quiet, a sea which seemed to sing with the waves his having come back to shore. The light was born and the sun warmed up his skin. The battle was over.

Antonio Alarcón stumbled until he let himself fall on the hot sand. First on his knees and then face down. He breathed deeply and plentifully and then he closed his eyes.

XII

"You are more than my friend, Rubí. You are my brother. I swear by the Virgen that you are my brother. Ask me whatever you want, Rubí, and I'll give it to you. I swear. For friends like you I give my life, brother."

"Shit, Perfumado. I think you are becoming a faggot", said Pichichi and he laughed like a rabbit. They were inside the taxi waiting for the traffic to loosen up along Lázaro Cárdenas Avenue. It had been half an hour since they had left the theater. Less than three blocks later the cars stopped completely. They were paralyzed a block away from the Avenida Juárez, and that part of downtown was still seething with people on the streets. One block away, Rubí could see the massive Fine Arts Palace. Soft, bluish lights lighted its marble walls. The statue of a horse and rider on a white pedestal stood at the corner of the building. There was a lot of activity all around. Rubí could see the blue lights on the patrol cars and the red ones of the Latino Tower showing the time: 11:25. Several drivers had left their cars to join the groups of curiosity seekers who were blocking the street beyond the rope laid by the police. Isauro Peña was sitting in the window with half his body outside. When someone passed by on his way back to his car, Isauro questioned him.

"Hey, what is the trouble?"

"An airplane fell outside Fine Arts Palace."

"Really? An airplane?"

"Yep."

"And will it take long to clear it?"

"Who knows. They are just picking up the bodies."

"Did many people died?"

"Who knows. The police aren't allowing anybody in."

"All right. Thanks, brother."

"Sure thing."

Isauro went back inside the taxi.

"It seems it will take a long time", he said, reaching over to turn the radio on. He turned the button in vain.

"It doesn't work", said Pichichi.

"I wanna hear the mariachis!", said Perfumado.

"Are you gonna start again? Do shut up, Perfumado. Don't make us shut your mouth with out fists", said Isauro. Pichichi laughed like a rabbit.

"All right!", he said.

"Neither of you are my friends. Rubí is the only one."

"Marry him, faggot."

"Rubí, you are my brother. Really. Let's go to have some drinks, all right?"

"Are you pretending to be drunk, or what? You haven't had that much to drink", said Rubí, challenging Perfumado. He opened the window and breathed deeply. He was more tired with each passing minute and it was more and more difficult to withstand Perfumado's stubbornness. His friend was stretched out on the seat, with his head back. He had taken that position, he said, to avoid getting sick.

"I need a drink."

"Wait a little longer. Just until we get to Garibaldi."

"We should buy the bottle now. In Garibaldi, they are really expensive", warned Pichichi.

"Buy it where?"

"Two blocks from here there's a store open all night," said Pichichi.

"Go for it, Pichichi", ordered Rubí.

"I'll go", offered Isauro. I am bored doing nothing."

"All right. Buy yourself a bottle of rum Castillo and four large Cokes. Make sure the Cokes are really cold, man", said Rubí, pulling money out from his pocket.

"Forget it. I'll pay."

"Take the fucking money."

"I said no", answered Isauro, rejecting Rubí's hand. He opened the taxi door and left. He was walking away when he slapped his forehead and returned to the taxi, taking small jumps like a child would do. Rubí smiled. It didn't matter what Isauro did, it seemed impossible for him to lose his natural grace.

"Tell me exactly where the store is", Isauro asked sticking his head through the window.

"At the corner, you turn right. Its two blocks down on 16 de Septiembre. The store is right on the corner. You cannot miss it. It has a gray metal curtain. Knock on the window. There's always somebody inside."

"You better go with him", said Rubí.

"Yeah, I better go. Take care of my business, Rubí."

"No sweat."

Pichichi left the car and walked away with Isauro. Perfumado made a strange noise at that moment. Rubí turned to see his friend. Perfumado was weeping.

"What the...? Oh, come on, don't cry, you sonofabitch. You are just like a woman."

"I am crying out of anger, because I am so mad, Rubí. I am as mad as hell. I didn't deserve this. But I swear they will regret it."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to kill them."

"Easy, snake, easy. Don't rattle your tail at me."

"She thinks I'm stupid."

"You think that. She never wanted you."

"She was beginning to love me, Rubí. I know. But that sonofabitch blinded her. He took advantage of his power. But it's one thing to accept his thievery and another thing to allow him to take my woman away."

"She has always liked those who are above her. She thinks workers are beneath her. Remember the problems she had with the boss. She believed that by going out with him she wasn't going to have any more problems at the factory, but that turned out wrong and she almost lost her job. Don't you remember?"

"Yeah, brother, but this is different. I do know. I know her problems. But deep down she is good, really. She is a good woman and she loves me. But like any other woman, she likes expensive things, you know? And that sonofabitch arrived with his gold bracelet and his brand new card and, hell, he swept her off her feet. Why did he take her with him, if he doesn't love her? He just wants her as his whore. That's it. But he will regret this. I swear by the Virgen de Guadalupe that he will regret this. He got me where it hurts the most, but I will get him where he hurts the most, you'll see."

"Don't lie to yourself, Perfumado. You don't even know her. Nobody knows women. Not even themselves."

"She's a good woman, Rubí. I swear it."

Rubí thought about how to say the next word so as not to hurt the wounded feelings of his friend even more, or how not to be disrespectful. Rubí felt Perfumado's pain like his own, but he could not support his unbounded ideas of revenge.

"All right. I am not saying she's not a good woman. It's just that she doesn't like workers like herself. She likes those who have influence and money. I'm not saying that she's not a good woman. It's just that you have neither the money, nor the power."

"I know. But I have been thinking and I do know that sonofabitch will regret this, brother. I do know how. Just don't leave me alone. I want you to help me, Rubí. Don't leave me alone."

Rubí was about to say something else, but he knew it would be useless. Perfumado really seemed to be bewitched by Graciela, thought Rubí, looking at the sick face of his friend. Lit by the

streetlights, Perfumado's face was becoming hardened with the ideas crossing his mind. His glazed eyes became frozen in an expression of an intense hatred that demeaned the tears he had spilled a few seconds before. Rubí listened to the words of his friend and refrained from joking about him and his threats.

He was bewitched. Now Rubí had no doubt. To hold on to Graciela even to the extent of denying reality was an indication of witchcraft for Rubí. Oh, yes, her action was condemnable, he thought, but Rubí knew that Perfumado was to blame. Twenty times she had rejected him, and twenty one times Perfumado had come back. After each rejection, Perfumado seemed to fall deeper. Now he didn't even care that Rubí saw him cry over a woman. A woman who wasn't even his, who had never been his and who would never be his. He was bewitched. There was no other explanation. Rubí again thought about taking Perfumado to the shaman to have the spell cleansed. He had to find the right moment for that. Now, there wasn't any point in mentioning it. It would be useless.

"Don't be scared, Rubí", repeated Perfumado with his hoarse voice. He had difficulty manipulating his tongue and left the words unfinished.

"No, Perfumado. You now me better than that. I don't get scared easily. Now calm down."

"All right. You are coming with me."

Where to?"

"You are the only real man in the factory, Rubí, don't back out on me now."

"All right. I won't. Let's go. But where?"

"That sonofabitch will pay for this, you'll see", said Perfumado, mysteriously. His breath smelled strongly of liquor.

Rubí didn't answer. Why bother? Perfumado was bewitched and drunk and he was being stupid. The best thing to do was to let him talk and unload his anger; to let him get as drunk as he wanted now that they were there to take care of him.

After that, thought Rubí, he'll be able to withstand the pain better. Rubí yawned. I should take him to the shaman...Rubí yawned

again. And again. His need to sleep increased every second. He laid his head on the windowsill and hurt the wound on his eyebrow. He yawned again and felt a drop of blood running down his cheek. If they don't come back soon, he thought, I'll fall asleep. Perfumado was still mumbling unclear threats incoherently. Rubí looked out onto the street. He didn't see his friends, but he did see many people on the sidewalk; couples who were going out to the movie theaters; groups of workers coming back from their factories and prostitutes who were beginning their night. A couple was necking while leaning on a light post. She was dressed in blue, with a green plastic belt and white sandals. The man was dressed in jeans and a checkered jacket. The woman was leaning against the light post with her legs open and was grabbing the man's neck and pulling him against her to kiss him anxiously again and again. She wouldn't let him go away. He would turn his face away with indifference to watch for his bus. She caressed him and forced him to kiss her again.

Rubí thought about Juana Alonso, about her face like a balloon, and felt again the same strange feeling he had experienced that morning when he looked at himself in the mirror. The world around him seemed different. The stores along the avenue were closed with metal curtains painted in bright colors showing images of their products and with large, black letters. There was a repair shop and a jewelry store. Another one, painted in yellow, sold second-hand shirts. A third one was a bookstore. Beyond, there was a lottery-ticket stand, a record store, a torn down building and a show store. Across the street was a fabric store with the windows lighted, besides a square building over which the arch of the entrance had its name sculpted on the stone "**BANCO CENTRAL**". Then there was the mysterious and imposing building of the *Procuraduría General de la República*, and before the building at the corner was a group of restaurants and fast food stores.

Rubí had seen all of that a thousand times, but something was changing inside him that made all the external things seem different.

He heard a honk that shook him out of his reflective mood, and then another one, longer. Several cars near the taxi started their motors. The line of cars began to move. The police had finished

clearing the way and the traffic was moving again. Rubí was about to jump into the front seat to take the wheel when Isauro and Pichichi arrived running, loaded with the rum and Coke bottles.

"Here comes the fun", said Isauro. Pichichi turned on the motor and inched forward.

They passed by the Fine Arts Palace slowly to see the fallen plane. The machine had its nose buried into the small frontal garden of the building. Its broken wings were strewn in the street. It was a white airplane with red stripes on the side and it was torn to pieces except for its tail that stood proudly like a fish tail. Rubí looked over the fallen machine and the beautiful marble building and he was able to admire the beautiful and strong columns and the statues of the frontispiece, the medallions of the pediment. Then his attention was fixed on the cupola, the immense cupola with its bronze top. In the darkness, it seemed like an angel flying into the sky. Going through Cinco de Mayo Street Rubí also saw a small car parked beside the staircase of the Palace, with its roof squashed.

"Look, they got killed by the holy."

"What holy?", said Isauro.

"The holy sonofabitch that fell on top of them", said Pichichi with his rabbit laughter.

Ahead, near Garibaldi Plaza, the mariachi bands, most of them dressed with the traditional Charro suits (made of black cloth with silver buttons) had walked all the way to the scene of the accident. They took advantage of the crowds to look for clients among the people driving slowly by. The mariachi bands covered almost half of the avenue as the taxi drove toward them. It was a large and noisy group of musicians. A woman with a short dress and a wide rimmed straw hat approached the musicians, took a picture, and then went around kissing each one on the mouth. They surrounded her, and Rubí could not see her face.

"Must be a drunk gringuita", said Pichichi.

They crossed Donceles and Rubí was amazed to discover a music store that was still open. In the next block, there was the famous Blanquita Theater, with its marquee lights turned off.

The musicians, looking for a job, were spread out along the right side of several blocks. They ran behind cars, which slowed them down, and jumped on top of them, surrounding them.

"Do you want a serenade?"

"We have a marimba!"

"For each one pay only—"

"We play everything, man. Norteñas, Boleros, country, even songs from Yucatan..."

The musicians shouted simultaneously in a very close race among the several dozen mariachi bands spread out on the street. Several of them carried their instruments along the avenue and would play pieces of songs to attract the drivers, trying to be the chosen ones to sing to the girlfriend or the wife of the client. Some of them, to protect themselves from the evening cold, carried in their shoulders heavy blankets of cheerful colors.

Pichichi drove his taxi carefully through the crowds. They were not as closely surrounded as everybody else was. The musicians recognized Pichichi and left immediately.

"They don't pay any attention to us", said Isauro.

"That's because all the taxi drivers, like me, have prearranged business with certain bands", said Pichichi.

Finally, they arrived at the Garibaldi Plaza, which was dedicated to the memory of the Italian hero. Pichichi parked his car behind another taxi just as old, beside the sidewalk of the Plaza.

It was illegal to park there, but Pichichi gave the policeman some money and said they wouldn't be long.

"Please take care of my business, patrón. Don't let them steal it away."

"Who would want to steal that piece of junk?"

Rubí walked into the Plaza which extended into the street and which seemed to him like an anthill, with people moving constantly. Small groups of tall, blond tourists entered and left from the bars and restaurants around the Plaza, especially from the most famous ones: Tenampa and Santa Cecilia.

"Wait, let me mix the drinks", said Isauro and he proceeded to do the mixing very quickly. He opened the Cokes with a tool Pichichi handed to him and emptied half of each one onto the street. Then he bit off the plastic top of the rum bottle and filled the Cokes with rum, dividing the contents of the bottle of rum into four equal parts; he shook each Coke, covering the top with the palm of his hand, and finally he tasted the mixture.

"Damn...It's just right", he said. He gave a bottle to each one. Perfumado took a long swig from his immediately.

"Easy, Perfumado, it isn't milk", said Pichichi.

"Let's go to the mariachis", said Perfumado, belching.

The four of them advanced into the Plaza. It was a rectangular shape with water fountains on both sides of the flower stands. Rubí was at the head of the group. First they walked around the Plaza, searching for the best place to sit. There were many public benches, but visitors who didn't have the money to pay the cover charge to the nightclubs took them all. All the way at the back of the Plaza, right in front of the Virgen de Santa Cecilia's altar, who was the saint of the musicians, a couple was sitting on the stone wall. Three guitar players sang love songs for them. The woman was laughing and crying while holding four or five dozen roses in her arms. She cried and laughed, burying her face into the roses. Her boyfriend held her tight and sang softly in to her ear the love songs played by the guitar men. The couple had that air of innocence and permanent wonder that always identifies quickly those newly arrived from the provinces.

"He will pay, Ruby. I swear he will pay for this", said Perfumado furiously when he saw the couple. He was holding on to Rubí, who was taller. Rubí held Perfumado around the waist so Perfumado wouldn't fall in his drunken stupor. Perfumado's deep fury and his stubborn persistence to stay on the same subject was exasperating, but Rubí tried to understand him, even though sometimes he had to tighten his lips to keep from screaming at Perfumado.

At that moment, they passed by the market of San Camilito, which stayed open all night long with dozens of shops which sold food specially cooked to cure the most painful hangover; there was pancita,

menudo, birria, tacos de barbacoa in salsa borracha, consomé de carnero, pozole, carnes asadas con salsa borracha, sopa de médula...

When the smell became very strong, Perfumado began to gasp. Suddenly, he let go of Rubí, ran behind a tree and vomited everything he had in his stomach. The laughter and jokes from Isauro and Pichichi covered up his noisy retches. Rubí smiled when he saw his friends happy. He liked to be with his friends. He liked to share their joys and their sorrows. He liked to be trusted with their secrets, as Perfumado had trusted him. It had always been the same. Ever since high school, he had been a natural leader for a group of students and had formed his own band to defend themselves against the attacks coming from the neighborhood college. The two years he remained in college it had been the same. But now, with years of experience, he felt a personal responsibility for them, for each one of his friends. And each day that responsibility increased; they came to him in search of advice, came to him in search of support, came to him when they wanted to party, and came to him when they needed to cry. He liked that responsibility. It was as if he were the father of them all. He looked at Pichichi and his small moustache laughing like a rabbit and shaking his entire body, leaning on Isauro Peña, who laughed openly and shook his long hair. His slender and proud figure made him stand out anywhere. They were looking at Perfumado, who was holding on to the tree and showing them his middle finger, unable to stop vomiting, and Rubí saw his three friends as if through a distorted lens. He saw them remote and defenseless, with their Coke bottles in their hands and their laughter and their sadness and their eternal poverty and their happiness, full of life...He turned towards the Plaza and saw under the street lights the musicians running behind the cars on the avenue, saw the couple with the flowers crying their eternal love with the Virgen as a witness, he saw the bands of miserable people with their torn clothes who were lying on the sidewalks beside the market, waiting for someone to give them a few coins so they could buy more alcohol. Rubí saw their clothes black with dirt, and Rubí wanted to reach out with his hands and invite them to join his group. One of them was hitting his wife, and her screams reached deep into Rubí's mind. The cheap prostitutes walked among the crowd, hiding from the police; the curious faces in the cars watching all, a pair of old men

washed the windshields in search of tips; some boys swallowed fire by drinking gasoline and spitting to produce large flames and impress the tourists who were taking pictures. On a wooden bench a musician with white hair, sad and skinny, was sitting with a serape hanging loose on his shoulders; he was all alone and was playing a large, golden harp. He lovingly caressed the strings, removed from all the commotion that surrounded him. Rubí thought about his grandfather when he saw the old man, and again thought that all of what he was seeing seemed new and strange, as if he were looking at it for the first time. But he wasn't; all of it was a repetition of scenes that Rubí had seen each day since he had been born. However, now they seemed to be actually different; it was as if he didn't recognize them. At that moment, a ballet dancer walked by him. She was a very young girl who moved her tight hips underneath her dancing skirt and showed her long skinny legs covered by white stockings. Her dancing shoes were dirty and broken and the top of her dress was squashing her small breasts. When she passed Rubí, she looked at him, her eyes painted like a rainbow, and she smiled, showing her small, white teeth and the tip of her tongue where she had some chewing gum. On her head was a silver crown.

"Don't you worry, handsome. We all carry the music inside", she said, enigmatically, and kept on walking without stopping.

Perfumado came back from the tree and chased Isauro and Pichichi around the Plaza, acting as if he were angry, but he was laughing at them at the same time he insulted them. Rubí didn't understand what the girl had said, nor did he understand Perfumado, who suddenly seemed to have left his drunkenness beside the tree, nor did he understand his other two friends. He didn't understand anything. The images were not distorted; they were plain and the colors bright, but Rubí couldn't decipher them.

"I swear to you nothing will stop us, Rubí. You and I will destroy that sonofabitch", said Perfumado, in a good mood. He held onto Rubí and guided him to a band of mariachi that was playing for several student couples. They were all sitting on a bench beside the water fountain while the mariachi band played for them. They listened to the songs for awhile, and then the four workers went to listen to a band playing music from the north for a family who came from Chihuahua. After that they followed an albino Charro who sang just

like Javier Solís, and all the time, the four of them drank from their bottles and told jokes and teased each other and Rubí couldn't get emotionally involved. He was so distant from that suddenly strange world that it left him cold. He ended up by leaving his friends for awhile to sit by the old man and his harp. He sat beside him on the bench and, in silence, offered him his bottle of Coke. The old man took a swig, nodded with a tired look, and played the harp for Rubí. Poverty recognized poverty and the old man played for his only listener without asking anything in return, except whatever Rubí could or would share with him. The only thing Rubí had to share was swigs from the mixture of rum and Coke and he placed the bottle on the floor, between himself and the old man. Their silence was more eloquent than words. Rubí thought about his dead grandfather, thought about Juana Alonso and her playful kids and the sick one. He thought about Isauro Peña leaving Mexico and about Pichichi being scared because they might all be fired from the factory. He thought about Perfumado with his heartache. He thought about all of that but about nothing in particular and he allowed the old man to express with the harp what he was feeling that night; something he would remember for the rest of his life. "Do you like it?"

"You are a first rate player, grandpa."

"I'll teach you if you want."

"Thanks, but it would be very hard, grandpa. As a musician, I am a very good friend."

"That is good. It is good to have friends."

"Thanks, anyway."

"Nobody wants to learn to play this instrument anymore. Now they chose other things."

"Rubí! Where are you, Rubí?" shouted Perfumado.

"Is that you? said the old man.

"Yes."

"Rubí! Where are you, dear Rubí?" shouted Pichichi, imitating Perfumado's voice in a feminine way.

"What a strange name you have."

"My father called me that when I was a baby. You know how it is. I was baptized Roberto. Roberto Toscano at your service..."

"Rubí-i-ii! Where are you hiding? We miss you."

Rubí made a signal with his hand for them to leave him alone, but he only provoked more laughter from his friends.

"I'm waiting, dear", said Perfumado.

"Rubí! Rubí! Don't fall asleep, Rubí. Don't fall asleep, Rubí. Don't fall asleep, because, as the poet said, life is nothing but a dream, gentlemen, and he who falls asleep is carried away by the waves", insisted Pichichi.

"The poem is not like that" Isauro started to correct.

"Oh, shut up know-it-all! Rubí, come here, because we are falling asleep!"

"We have a mariachi band!" announced Perfumado, and belched noisily. "We are waiting for you so they can play their songs for us. "

"We have a mariachi band!" repeated Pichichi.

"All right! I heard!"

"Don't let me down, Rubí. Just don't let me down, because we have many things to do."

"You better go. Your friends are waiting."

"But I don't want to go."

"Go. Some other day we will see each other again."

Rubí gave the bottle to the old man. They shared another swig and Rubí rose to his feet. He left the bottle beside the harp.

"I'll leave it here for you to fight the cold."

"Thanks", said the old man. Rubí grabbed one of his hands and he kissed the dry and wrinkled skin as a sign of the respect he felt for the old man.

"Adios, abuelo."

"Vete con Dios. Ah, one thing. Tell the one in the red suit to behave well and not to do anything foolish."

"All right, grandpa. Goodbye."

"So long, Roberto."

Rubí rejoined his friends.

"Where were you?" asked Isauro.

"With the old man and his harp", said Rubí and he turned to show them, but the old man was gone. He was nowhere to be found in the Plaza.

Perfumado finished making a deal with the mariachi band. The mariachi band would play a song for each one of the friends, and at the end, they would determine the amount to be paid by flipping a coin; double or nothing. Each one of the four friends had to choose his own song, and the first one to chose was Isauro. Without hesitation he chose immediately.

"La Barca."

Yo ya me voy, al puerto donde se halla/

La Barca de Oro, que ha de conducirme/ Yo ya me voy..."

"Listen to me, Rubí. I swear you are my brother, but you need to back me up," said Perfumado embracing Rubí's shoulders.

"I know we are drunk, right? But I also know that you are strong and can put up with everything I say, can't you?" he murmured and then, euphoric, he sang the last part of the song along with the mariachi band. Then it was his turn to choose. Contrary to what he said about being drunk, after emptying his stomach, he seemed fit and sang along easily, although completely out of tune. They all sang with him, but Rubí saw that Isauro was becoming sad. He hit him with his elbow.

"Come on, don't be sad. We are your friends. For the rest of your life. Don't forget it."

Me cansé de rogarle, me cansé de decirle que yo sin ella de pena muero/ Ya no quiso escucharme/

Si sus labios se abrieron fue pa' decirme, ya no te quiero.../

"Thanks, brother. I know I will miss you."

"We'll be waiting here. I am sure you won't be able to stand those gringos and will come back soon."

"We are friends, right?"

"We are brothers, Isauro. We are your brothers. And if you ever need anything, just call."

"Do me a favor, Rubí. Just one. Take care of my family."

"Tell them that if they have a problem, they are to look me up at the factory. I'll take care of them."

"Thanks, Rubí. I really appreciate that."

"Don't worry about it."

"Come on, brother, get ready. It is my turn to choose", said Pichichi.

"Which one do you want?" said the mariachi leader.

"La Vida es un Sueño."

"Jose Alfredo Jiménez?"

"The same one."

Cariño de mis cariños, corazón apasionado

No quiero verse llorando, porque me voy de tu lado

Yo no nací pa' darte el mundo que tu has soñado

Pa' mi las nubes son cielo

Pa' mi las olas son mar

Pa' mi la vida es un sueño, y la muerte el despertar...

"There is one song left", said the singer when he finished.

"It is yours, Rubí", said Pichichi.

"Chose, brother", said Isauro.

"You are my main man, Rubí! And you and I will show them who is the best, you'll see. Now ask, brother, ask for any song you want."

"Which one do we sing?"

Rubí scratched his head, unable to decide.

"Come on! Don't tell me you don't remember any!" said Pichichi.

"Silence, frogs! The main toad is about to sing for you. Come on, maestro, play 'The King' for me!"

"Jalenle, muchachos!" ordered the lead singer and Perfumado screamed happily. Pichichi laughed like a rabbit and the four of them sang loudly, standing in the middle of Plaza de Garibaldi.

Yo se bien que estoy afuera, pero el día que yo me muera, sé que tendrás que llorar

Dirás que no me quisiste, pero vas a estar muy triste, y así te vas a quedar

Con dinero o sin dinero, hago siempre lo que quiero, y mi palabra es la ley

No tengo trono ni reina, ni nadie que me comprenda

Pero sigo siendo El Rey...

"Come on, Rubí. I want you to have a drink with me", said Pichichi offering the bottle to Rubí. He took a swig.

"Another one, gentlemen?" asked the lead singer of the band.

"If it's for free, as many as you please", said Isauro.

"Okay, here goes the coin!" said Perfumado. He flipped it on the air and the singer called "Tails". He won and the four friends paid the required amount.

Perfumado grabbed Rubí's neck again and pulled him away from the group.

"I know how we will do it, brother. My light just came on. And we will be thanked for it, you'll see."

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on, you know..."

"The same thing. You are getting truly boring."

"No, brother, wait. I have a perfect idea. Perfect, I swear."

"What is it?"

"Don't back out on me now, you hear?"

"I won't man, I won't. But tell me what is it?"

"Tomorrow...no, tomorrow we can't. Monday we will go to see a lawyer who can help us."

"Who is he?"

"He is the lawyer who fixed a problem for one of my brothers when he was fired from his job. They told me he is a really nice man."

"And what is your idea?"

Perfumado looked around to see if he could be heard, and lowered his voice even more.

"You are aware that nobody in the factory likes the crazy Hernandez, isn't that true?"

"Sure. Nobody likes him. So what?"

"Let's get rid of him. Let's change the union."

Rubí smiled.

"Hum, snake, you are totally drunk."

"Just wait. You'll see. Just don't back out on me, Rubí. Without you, we won't make it."

"All right, all right. Now, let's get out of here", said Rubí.

"What time is it?" said Perfumado.

"It's morning already, my idiot son", said Pichichi.

"Three o'clock in the morning", said Isauro.

"The night is over. From here, straight to the factory", said Rubí.

"We can sleep for awhile inside the car", offered Pichichi pointing to the old taxi.

"Sure."

"Why not?"

The four friends walked around the Plaza once more, listening to what the bands sang for others, and returned, singing, to the taxi. There was only a little of rum left in Isauro's bottle of Coke, and they all took a last swig. Perfumado suggested buying another

bottle of rum, but everybody decided against it as Pichichi drove towards the south of the city, following Avenida Reforma first and then Insurgentes. They drove without trouble through the empty avenue to San Angel, where Pichichi stopped the taxi on the street corner across the Alvaro Obregón monument.

The dawn was cold and wet. The rain had left the pavement slippery and it was beginning to rain again in the southern part of the city. Standing under the tin roof of the taco stand, the four of them warmed their hands over the fire of the roasters.

"Listen, Pichichi, are you a good friend?" said Perfumado with intense curiosity. Rubí immediately knew why Perfumado was asking and he tried to stop him as he remembered the warning from the old harp player. "Shut up, Perfumado."

"Why do you ask?" said Pichichi. "You answer me first. Are you a good friend?"

"It all depends. Who do I have to kill to prove it?" Perfumado smiled maliciously. "Crazy Hernandez."

Pichichi laughed.

"Uhf. To kill that sonofabitch you will have to get in line."

"Hey! Here are tacos you asked for!" said the man at the taco stand.

Perfumado was about to add something else when a patrol car stopped beside them. The policeman watched attentively. Rubí made a signal so Perfumado would close his mouth. The policemen asked for ten tacos, watching the workers closely.

The four friends finished eating and left. Perfumado bent over Rubí to whisper in his ear.

"Pichichi doesn't know about Graciela. Don't say anything. Please."

"It's your problem."

"All right."

Pichichi was driving his old Chrysler down Avenida de los Insurgentes. He was driving slowly, planning aloud where he was going to park the car so they all could sleep and rest a little before

their shift started. Rubí leaned back against the window and closed his eyes. Sleepy, he heard Perfumado go back over the same thing.

"So tell me, Pichichi. Are you a good friend, or not?"

"Sure I am, but first tell me what you want."

"You said it already. We want to get rid of Hernandez and bring in another delegate."

Pichichi watched him through the rear mirror.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Totally."

Pichichi didn't answer immediately. Isauro let out a long, piercing whistle.

"You should have told me before I quit", he complained.

"It would be a great fight...," said Pichichi.

"Are you in, or not?"

"Well, sure I am. But...how do we do it?"

Perfumado started to explain his idea. At that moment, they were passing by the University. The rain kept falling softly. Suddenly, a silver colored sports car passed them and changed lanes. It almost crashed into the taxi. Pichichi had to stop suddenly to avoid the crash and that threw Isauro into the dashboard and Perfumado and Rubí against the back of their seat. Isauro and Rubí were able to use their hands to protect themselves, but Perfumado hurt his mouth and began to bleed, but that didn't matter to him at all.

"It's them! It's them! Go get them, it's them!" shouted Perfumado.

"Who?"

"Go get them", ordered Perfumado. Pichichi sat up and accelerated

"That's not Hernandez", said Rubí, but Perfumado would not listen.

"Get him! Get that sonofabitch!" shouted Perfumado again, wiping the blood running down his jaw with the back of his hand.

Pichichi reached the sports car just as it was leaving the University area. The sports car was swerving on Insurgentes Avenue. Pichichi drove up and the passengers turned to look indifferently at them when Perfumado stuck out his head to find out why they had tried to run into them. On the front seat of the sports car was a blonde with a look of contempt on her face. Rubí couldn't see the driver, but he knew that it wasn't Hernandez. Behind, a couple was necking in a tight embrace. The blonde in the front seat looked at the workers with revulsion and then stuck out her tongue when Pichichi and Perfumado opened their windows. The couple behind separated and laughed about something said by those in the front seat. Then, the blonde opened her window.

"What do you want, dirty bums?"

"Dirty bum, your mother, stupid woman! Don't you know how to drive?" said Pichichi. The blonde turned to the driver, whose baby face showed among the shadows inside the car.

"Stupid yourself, worthless Indian! Let's see if you can get me with that heap of yours!" he shouted, and he speeded up.

"Those sonofabitches are leaving! Step on it, Pichichi", shouted Perfumado as the sports car pulled away.

Pichichi put the accelerator all the way down to the floor, but his old car wouldn't have stood a chance reaching the sports car, except that the driver lost control on the curve by the Neurological Hospital. He skidded on the wet pavement, bounced the tires against the sidewalk, started to overturn and then almost crashed against the huge doors at the entrance of the Fountains of Tlalpan forest. A light post finally stopped the sports car.

"They fucked up! Stop!" ordered Perfumado.

"Leave them", said Isauro.

"Come on! Let's kick their asses, don't be a coward. Those sonofabitches will remember me!"

Perfumado opened the door and jumped out before Pichichi could entirely stop his taxi, and everybody else followed. Rubí, not saying a word, was closely watching all the action.

The driver got out of the sports car, obviously drunk. He carried a tire iron. Another man, just as young as the first, also got out of the sports car, but with difficulty. He seemed to unfold until he reached his height of over six feet.

"Don't even dare to come closer, fleabags, because you'll regret it. My father is the Secretary of Justice, and

"Shut up, motherfucker! Now, insult me again, big mouth!" shouted Perfumado, and he jumped on the young man. He tried to kick him in the genitals, but failed and the other one hit him over the shoulders with the bar. Pichichi went after the giant, showing his courage in spite of his short stature. In a single blow he was knocked down.

Rubí approached the man with the tire iron, fainted, and when the other one tried to hit him, Rubí avoided him and, taking advantage of his opponent's action, he hit him with a left hook to the jaw and then a right to the nose. The one with the tire iron fell backward right beside the rear tire of his car. Isauro went after the Giant. Isauro was six feet tall himself, so the match was even. Rubí let Isauro to fight him alone. Perfumado had gotten up and was kicking the fallen man with uncontrollable fury. The women inside the sports car cried and shouted together.

"That's enough!" said Rubí. Perfumado ignored him and kept on kicking the fallen man.

"Stop that, I said!" shouted Rubí and pushed Perfumado away. The young man on the ground was bleeding from his mouth and nose, and was unconscious.

"Do you want to fight, Perfumado? All right, then go after that one, who turned out to be good", said Rubí, pointing to the giant who was fighting with Isauro and seemed to be having the best of the match. He has Isauro against the wall and was hitting him while Isauro stopped the blows the best way he could.

"Now it's against me, rich boy!" shouted Perfumado and jumped on him.

"One by one, bunch of cowards!" shouted the giant.

Rubí helped Pichichi get up, but he barely got him on his feet when Perfumado was doubled over by a well-placed blow from the giant man and fell to the ground after a second blow to the head. He had been knocked out cold.

"Damn Perfumado. You are totally out of luck", murmured Rubí.

"Who's next?" asked the giant bravely.

"I am", said Rubí, approaching the giant. He watched the eyes of the man attentively while he approached with his fists raised; in those eyes, there wasn't the slightest shadow of fear.

Rubí wasn't used to people not being afraid of him, so he put on his evil face and measured his enemy. The giant man's fine cashmere suit was torn and stained with blood. Isauro's fists had been able to open a small wound in the giants' eyebrow, just like the one Rubí had. When he saw the blood, Rubí felt a sudden acceleration of his pulse and that burning current of energy he liked so much.

"You are tough", said Rubí. "But I am tough and a half", and he hit hard and quick. The giant was two heads taller than he was, but Rubí thought that the taller they were, the harder they fell, and nailed his fists into the giant's kidney to loosen him a bit. He repeated the punch three times in a row and when the other one bent down a little, Rubí got into position to punch him with his right, but the giant was quicker and hit Rubí on his ear. Rubí was surprised by the strength behind the punch. It felt like a hammer. He was able to avoid the left hook of the giant and, recovering himself, dug his fist into the kidney of the giant again. He knew well the strength of his own punches and was surprised to find the giant still standing. The other one answered with his elbow and hit Rubí's forehead. The fight was now in close quarters, with their faces bruised and their breath short. Rubí stepped back a little and the giant reached out to hit him with another one of his hammer-like blows to the head.

Rubí thought he was going to faint; his eyes and his legs got weak. The giant man chased him. Rubí received him with his head and butted him in the chest. The giant grabbed him by his hair and kicked him. Rubí reacted quickly and before the other one could recover his equilibrium, Rubí hit him on the jaw with his famous left hook. The giant lifted his head. Rubí repeated his hook, followed by a right to the stomach and then, when the giant bent down, Rubí lifted him off the ground with a knee to his face, which destroyed the giant's nose. Rubí heard the noise made by the nose exploding; pluaf, the nose went pluaf and the blood sprayed Rubí's face and the giant fell backwards on the sidewalk.

Perfumado, Pichichi and Isauro approached Rubí and patted him on the back for his victory. The women were crying again, or maybe they had never shut up; Rubí had not heard anything while he was wrestling with the giant.

"Let's get the whores!" said Perfumado, and without waiting for an answer he opened the door of the sports car and tried to pull out the blonde by grabbing her hair. Isauro and Pichichi turned to look at Rubí, doubtfully, waiting for his approval or refusal. Rubí stood still for a few seconds and time stopped while he tried to think. All of it was happening so fast that Rubí felt himself being pulled along by Perfumado's actions.

"Come on! What are you waiting for?" Perfumado hurried them.

"What do we do?" asked Isauro. Rubí turned around quickly.

The deserted streets made his decision more difficult. He and he alone, had to make the decision. He remembered his promise to never leave a friend alone and didn't want the other workers in the factory to laugh at him or consider him a coward, even though he knew that he was allowing things to go too far, so he answered with a single command.

"Bring them out!" Pichichi hurried to help Perfumado, and between the two of them, they pulled out the women, who didn't stop shouting and calling for help, but there were no nearby houses. On one

side of the street there were the Fuentes Brotantes; on the other, a supermarket.

"No! Tell them to let them go, Rubí", said Isauro.

"Why?"

"I don't agree with this."

"You tell them", said Rubí, hoping that Isauro could convince them, but Pichichi and Perfumado had already forced the women to get into the back seat of the taxi and didn't listen to Isauro's appeals. Pichichi grabbed the wheel and urged them to get in the taxi.

Immediately, he drove the old car towards the outskirts of the city by way of the old road to Cuernavaca. Behind him, Isauro and Perfumado were sitting by the windows and the women were in the middle. The blonde kept on shouting. Perfumado slapped her to make her be quiet. Immediately, both girls shut their mouths, although they continued sobbing quietly.

"Damn rich girls. Now you are really going to die", sentenced Perfumado, provoking loud cries from the blonde and protests from the dark-haired girl.

"No, no, I am just the secretary of Licenciado Yañez, I don't..."

"I don't care! I told you already. You are going to die. I don't give a shit about who you are"; said Perfumado and he stuck his hand under the dress of the blonde woman. She tightened her legs instinctively.

"Let go, you shitty whore. Do you know what will we do to you? We will flay you, little by little, using a nail clipper, until you look like a cow inside the slaughterhouse. You'll see.

"I am just a secretary, boys. I swear in God's name, I am just a secretary..."

"You shut your mouth! You will get it also, you'll see. You better start praying, because your turn has arrived, whores. You will cry bloody tears. You will regret having been born. I'll pull your eyes out. You will beg me on your knees to kill you. You think you have the right to do everything because you have influential parents, right, bitches? But here it won't do you any good. Pray, whores, pray,

because now the devil is here. I am the devil. And I will take your soul with me, damned whores. You say that I am an Indian, right? Well, you are about to learn what Indians do to bitches like you. I am going to kill you, bitch", said Perfumado with so much hate and intensity, that he left everybody else frozen. The blood on his mouth and nose gave him an ugly aspect as if he were a beast that had escaped from a zoo. Even Rubí felt an unsettling anxiety when he heard the abominable threats of Perfumado and he regretted having allowed himself to be controlled by him. A crazy man, Perfumado was suddenly controlling all the action. Something inside him had broken, something in his brain had ceased functioning correctly; he drove when he talked and his voice was like that of a man who had completely lost his reasoning powers. He spit out his vicious threats like a madman, and even his tone of voice was different; deeper and loaded with poison. His voice wasn't the same. His body reeked of blood and sweat. While he shouted his threats, he was trying to open the thighs of the blonde woman. She was folded over herself and was covering her face with her hands and cried and shook, out of fear, after each new insult, but she would not loosen her legs. Perfumado ripped her pantyhose, tearing it to shreds and raised her skirt. When he found the minute, white, lace briefs he also tore them and he put them in his mouth and chewed on them. Then he spit them out.

"You are going to die", he blubbered.

"You will gain nothing by killing us", said the blonde suddenly, with a surprising serenity.

"You will die, bitch. Don't even bother to beg anymore, because you will die anyway. I will tear you to pieces."

"Do what you want, but don't hurt us."

"We will do whatever we want, even if you refuse to give us permission, damn whore. Let me see, open your legs."

"Don't hurt me, please, don't hurt me. We will give you whatever you want, but don't harm us. Do you want money? I can get you money. My father is very rich. Yes, very, very rich. Let me talk to him and I can get you lots of money. How much do you want? A million pesos? Two million? I can get you two million in a short time, just let me call home."

"You really think that with your money you can fix everything, right? You are full of shit, whore! Open your legs, I said."

She still resisted. Perfumado slapped her with the back of his hand and broke one of her teeth.

"No more. Please."

"Then do as I say."

She opened her legs.

"Hum, you almost have no hair. And you are already wet, damn whore. Do you like it? Do you like to be fucked? Tell me, do you like to be fucked in your ass? I bet you do. What do you like the best? Do you like to suck? Yes, you love it, right? Then show me how you suck on it, damn bitch."

Perfumado opened his zipper and pulled out his erect member and shook it. He grabbed the blonde by her hair and tried to force her to bend down, but she resisted and changed her tactics.

"Don't force me. I'll do it, but don't force me."

"Shut up!" shouted Perfumado and slapped her again.

"Don't hit her anymore!" shouted Isauro.

"Well, then, she better do as I say. And shut your mouth, Isauro. This whore is mine."

"If you don't do anything to me, I can get you lots of money", she insisted.

"Come on, bitch, suck on it!"

The woman cried in silence, shaking her head. Perfumado slapped her again and pulled her hair, forcing her to lower her head. Isauro held on to the dark-haired girl, who was silent and barely breathing in her fear. Her entire body was shaking.

"Don't worry. Nothing will happen to you. I am not going to let him do anything to you", he whispered in her ear.

"There, there...easy. Do it softly, bitch, or I will pull your eyes out, you whore. Suck, Graciela, suck, don't act as if you don't know what you are doing. You have done it many times before. There, bitch, there..."

"Shit, don't be so voracious. Leave something for the driver, okay?" said Pichichi. Worried, Rubí was watching the road to make sure nobody was following them.

"Don't bite me because you'll die if you do! There, there, with your tongue, use your tongue, Graciela..." murmured Perfumado with his voice feverish and strange. "You didn't want me for good, now you'll have me for bad, you bitch."

"Shut up, Perfumado!" said Rubí, altered. "That's not Graciela."

The taxi passed by the town of San Pedro Mártir and kept on going up the deserted road. When they reached the precipice at the kilometer 27, Pichichi reduced the speed because he saw a policeman with a flashlight inspecting the inside of the cars parked at Lookout Point, a small paved area from which the entire city across the Valley of Mexico could be seen some 900 feet below. At that moment, Rubí was trying to think of a way to control the killer fury of Perfumado, but for some absurd reason, when he saw the city lights spread out in the darkness, the only thought that came into his mind was that it looked like pearls and rubies and sapphires and diamonds on the large, black skirt of a China Poblana. Underneath her skirt, the China Poblana was naked.

"I swear to you I am just a secretary, boys. Don't hurt me, please. I am about to get married", the girl said.

"To whom? To the giant back there?" asked Pichichi.

"No. To my boyfriend. Come on. Don't hurt me. On the Virgen's name I beg you, don't hurt me. I beg you in the name of whomever you love the most..." she cried.

"Just behave well and nothing bad will happen to you, pretty girl, you'll see", said Pichichi.

"If you kill me, who will feed my small brothers? I am the only one that is working in my family."

"You are going to die, whores!" shouted Perfumado.

They passed the side of the road to Topilejo and kept on going. At the kilometer 32 there was a group of houses in the middle of the countryside and a crazy man who was playing with his dogs in

his garden saw them go by. Rubí was able to distinguish him clearly by the lights that lit the garden. For a moment both saw each other's face. The other man was slender and with a heavy mane of ruffled hair, who was playing with a white German Shepherd and a black one. After that house, there was only darkness in the fields and on the road.

Two kilometers ahead, Pichichi drove onto an abandoned path. He followed the road up the mountains towards Oyameyo Hill, away from the maize fields. When they lost sight of the main road, Pichichi stopped the taxi.

"Come out of there. Fast!" he ordered, opening his door.

"Do whatever you want, but please don't kill us. Please. Do not kill us", begged the blonde. Rubí pulled her away from Perfumado.

"I need to piss", said the dark-haired secretary.

Rubí ordered Perfumado to go with the secretary beside the road, so as to get him away from the blonde. Then he ordered Pichichi to turn off the taxi lights.

"We won't see anything", complained Pichichi.

"Do you want the police to see you?"

"Oh, well, no, you're right", said Pichichi and turned off the lights.

In the intense obscurity of the mountain, Rubí saw little by the light of the full moon. The dark shadows of his friends moved around the fog left floating over the fields after the rain.

Perfumado followed the secretary and, while she was urinating, Perfumado took out his penis and put it near the woman's mouth, but she pushed him aside and vomited.

When she finished, Perfumado took her back. Pichichi had already taken off the blonde's clothes, who was shaking beyond control due to the wet cold of the mountain, and her terror. Pichichi placed her clothes on the grass beside the path and forced the woman to lay down on top of them.

"Keep an eye on Perfumado", ordered Rubí to Isauro in a whisper. "I don't want to kill anyone". Then he pushed Pichichi aside.

"I go first", he said, and took off his trousers. He lay on top of the woman.

"Don't, please, don't...I'll give you money but please, don't...oh,uh,uh,oh,ay,ay..."

"Shit", said Pichichi.

"Don't cry, blonde. Don't cry on me", said Rubí, feeling the warm flesh of the woman and the soft thighs which held his waist and the silky sheath which received him.

Perfumado undressed the other woman and also laid her on her clothes on the grass.

"Damn you, sonsofbitches. This is the only way you feel brave, faggots, in a group against a woman", screamed the secretary, when Perfumado covered her with his body.

"What is it, little darling? Don't you like my cock? I'll make you come, you just wait and see", gasped Perfumado, but at that moment his excitement got the best of him and he came.

"You see what you did? Damn whore!" he shouted and slapped her. He stood up, leaving his place for Pichichi.

"Kneel up, bitch", ordered Pichichi. She didn't obey him and tried to cover herself with her clothes. Pichichi punched her on her breasts. The secretary screamed with pain. She began to pray in a low voice and her eyes closed. The blonde was gasping under Rubí's body.

"Kneel up, I said", repeated Pichichi. The secretary obeyed him awkwardly.

"Not from behind, please, because it hurts too much", begged the secretary, when Pichichi knelt behind her.

"Shut up!" ordered Pichichi and grabbed her by her hips and pointed his member. Perfumado was watching them and, not being able to stay put, he knelt down by the secretary and he raised her head by pulling her hair.

"Shut up your big, mouth, whore. Come on, suck on it!" he ordered. The secretary buried her face between Perfumado's legs. "Don't bite me, bitch. You know how to do it", he said, while Pichichi

pushed against her behind. His movements became faster and Pichichi murmured softly things nobody could understand.

Rubí left the blonde at that moment and Perfumado left the secretary and ran to replace him. Rubí elbowed Isauro while he took out a cigarette. He lit up. With the light of his match he was able to see Isauro's sickened and serious face.

"What are you waiting for? Perfumado beat to it."

"I am not going to do this", said Isauro.

"Why not?"

"It is not my trip. I want love and peace.

"Fuck you."

"I am serious. I am not going to do it. This is a crime", said Isauro, trembling.

Rubí understood what Isauro was saying and felt a pinch from his conscience, but the moans coming from the women and their warm bodies in the cold night and the perfumed and the expensive creams he had smelled on the feminine skin kept him in a state of excitement which he didn't want to control. He breathed deeply and inhaled the smells from the open country; the earth wet with rain, the corn growing, the cempazúchil flowers, the grass, the pine trees and the rain and the smell of sex and he didn't want to think about anything else. Isauro asked for a cigarette and after lighting up, Isauro added solemnly, "Do unto others, as you would want others do unto you."

"It's your loss", said Rubí, refusing to listen, perhaps fearing what Isauro was saying. For a second, he thought about the old man playing his harp, but then he deliberately put it out of his mind.

Perfumado was becoming more and more violent because the blonde didn't seem to be enjoying what he was doing to her.

"Come, bitch. Come, I said. Don't you like my cock? Damn whore. You only like the cocks of rich boys, eh? Move your ass, bitch. Didn't you hear me? Come, whore, come..." he said, pulling her hair. The woman didn't react. She seemed dead. Nearby, Pichichi was finishing with the secretary. He let go of her and she fell face down praying all the time. She repeated Our Father and other prayers many times. Rubí threw down his cigarette and approached her. He turned

her face up and lay on top of her and caressed her breasts and he bit her nipples and her lips and when the secretary increased her prayers, Rubí penetrated her with a single push. She screamed, but then went back to her prayers.

"What is wrong with you?" Pichichi asked Isauro Peña. Isauro was shaking, his hands in his pockets.

"Nothing."

"Aren't you going to use your pecker?"

"NO!"

"Why not? Don't tell me you are a faggot!"

"Think what you want! I am a free man and nobody forces me to do what I don't want to!"

"You are an asshole."

"Oh, no, I am not. You are the asshole."

"You are crazy, partner. Luxury fleas like these are not going to jump into your sack, you know? Take advantage of the trip, don't be a sissy. You won't find girls like that easily..."

"Leave me alone!" shouted Isauro and went back inside the taxi."

Pichichi shrugged and walked over to Perfumado, who was busy with the blonde. She was lying with her arms extended, as if crucified, and she let him do what he wanted with her eyes closed. She seemed to have fainted.

"Put her on top of you", said Pichichi. Perfumado turned to look at him, puzzled.

"You know, like in the theater", said Pichichi.

Perfumado hesitated for a moment, and then smiled when he understood the idea and did as he was told. He moved the woman on top of him. It was like moving a lifeless doll. Her long hair covered Perfumado's face. Pichichi knelt behind her, guided his member and then he let himself fall. The woman screamed and insulted him.

"Damn...you...all", she said with an effort. Then she said nothing more.

Rubí heard the condemnation and felt fear and hurried to finish what he was doing to the dark haired secretary, who never stopped praying. She repeated Our Father again and again in a monotonous and expressionless way.

Perfumado was the first one to finish. A moment later Pichichi followed, and when they all were dressed, Rubí finished too.

"I am hungry", said Pichichi.

"Now what do we do with them?" asked Perfumado and he spat on the ground. Rubí felt a current of cold wind, and felt the shadow of fear around him again. It was an intense fear that got stuck in his throat and didn't allow him to think.

"What do we do with them?" insisted Perfumado.

"What do we do?" repeated Pichichi.

Rubí looked at his friends, and looked at the women, and then looked again at his friends, trying to hide his hesitation.

"Let's go!" he ordered dryly.

They climbed into the taxi. Isauro Peña was lying in the back seat and seemed to be asleep. He didn't say a single word when his friends came into the car and Rubí didn't know what to say either.

Nobody knew what to say. Pichichi started to back up the car and he turned on the lights; they showed the women being left behind, lying on the wet grass on the obscure path among the maize fields. The dark-haired secretary was crawling slowly towards the blonde and she was reaching her hand towards her when Rubí saw them for the last time.

They came out to the road and Pichichi drove down the mountain. Looking out his window, Rubí realized that although the hills of Topilejo were hiding the city of Mexico behind them, the luminosity coming from the immense valley of lights was such that the sky on that side was illuminated with gold and orange lights, as if it were a new dawn. But it was a false new dawn.

Nobody talked until they had reached Avenida de los Insurgentes.

Once they were on the profusely lighted avenue, Perfumado was the first to talk.

"Damn whores", he said. And he laughed. Pichichi also begin to laugh like a rabbit. His short laugh bothered Rubí. He turned to see Isauro Peña. The young man seemed to be crying in *silence*.

-thirteen

The morning of May First of that same year, at seven thirty in the morning, Rubí Toscano left the subway station at Portales with Juana Alonso. The couple walked five blocks north. When they arrived at the bridge where Calzada Carranza crossed underneath Tlalpan, they stopped to wait. It was the place they had chosen a few days earlier to meet Pichichi. The couple leaned against the rail of the bridge and kissed each other lovingly. Fifteen minutes later, Rubí saw the old Chrysler, plates JRB 127, coming down the avenue. The car stopped long enough for Juana and Rubí to get in and then Pichichi speeded up immediately. Ahead, Calzada Tlalpan was closed to the traffic and the police rerouted Pichichi. He crossed Tlalpan through a tunnel and he guided his taxi dexterously through the adjacent streets towards downtown.

Twenty minutes later, Pichichi parked his car on the Alva Iztláxóchitl Street, the closest spot available to the gathering point, and they walked the rest of the way.

All the workers that belonged to the C.O.M. were gathering at the corner of Avenida 20 de Noviembre and Jose Maria Izazaga, two blocks away from the Plaza Tlaxcoaque. Half of the workers from TEXMEX, S.A., had received a written order to go to work at the factory as usual, in spite of it being such an important holiday.

As he approached the meeting place, Rubí recognized the uniform of his coworkers. The Plaza de la Constitución was about seven blocks away. The C.O.M., one of the eight largest unions in the country, would march that day at the end of a long line of huge

battalions that began with members of the C.T.M., the largest workers' federation, and was followed by those from the C.R.O.C., the C.G.T., the C.R.O.M., et cetera, all of which would come from different streets to march around the Zócalo.

The President of the Republic was to see them pass by from the balcony of National Palace.

Juana Alonso, Pichichi and Rubí joined their coworkers, and prepared for a long wait.

Nineteen days before, on a Thursday, Perfumado had been waiting for Rubí on a corner by the factory. Rubí was surprised to see him there. Perfumado had had not been to work since the Sunday before, and now he was pretending to read the sports page as Rubí walked over. In a mysterious way, Perfumado uttered a single command.

"Come with me", he said nervously. He gave the newspaper back to the boy at the stand and he walked over to Tlalpan, grabbing his pack with both hands and squeezing it constantly. His entire demeanor showed that a huge conflict was being fought inside him. He was dirty and his suit was wrinkled as if Perfumado had been living in his clothes for the three days he had been absent from the factory. The yellowish color of his eyes clearly showed the excess of alcohol and his need for sleep.

When they arrived to Calzada Tlalpan, Perfumado suddenly grabbed Rubí's sleeve.

"You won't back down on me, right?"

"No.

"Good."

"Where are we going?"

/ "You'll see", said Perfumado and started to walk again.

They boarded a bus full of passengers that ran down Calzada Tlalpan. On the way, Rubí watched three professional thieves stealing the passengers' wallets.

The bus left them at the entrance of the General Anaya station of the subway. Rubí followed Perfumado in silence. They went

down to the platform with the crowd where the heat generated by the trains and the sweat of the passengers created an asphyxiating wave. They changed metro lines in Pino Suárez. When they got to the Salto del Agua station, Perfumado left, followed by Rubí. Once on Dr. Vértiz Street, they went into an old building, three stories tall, and went up to the top. The office they were looking for was the last one of four. It was a dark, small place and the reception area had three plastic chairs placed in front of an old desk where an extremely slender secretary was smoking a cigarette with a careless enjoyment. Having nothing better to do, she was going through the glossy pages of a fashion magazine when they came in.

Perfumado asked for a lawyer named Chontal Garcia, and the secretary made them wait while she went into the office to announce their arrival. A minute later, she came out accompanied by a middle-aged man, strongly built, who had a huge moustache like Emiliano Zapata. He was dressed in an old, worn leather jacket and blue jeans. He seemed to be very nervous.

"Do you want to talk to me."

"Yes, sir."

"What...I mean, who, who sent you to me?"

"A friend", said Perfumado.

"A friend of whom?"

"Mine. And yours."

"Which friend? What is his name?"

"Well, the truth is that he is my brother. His name is Martin. Martin Juárez."

Chontal Garcia concentrated by closing his eyes and when he remembered the face to whom the name belonged, he smiled. He had a kind and warm smile that contradicted the hardness of his eyes.

"Ah, yes. Martin. Sure. Come, come on in. Make yourself at home."

The lawyer told them to sit on the long, plastic bench he had inside his cheap office, across from a wooden desk, which he had full of folders. He sat behind his desk, placed his feet up on it, and

contemplated the workers in silence, waiting for them to begin. Rubí didn't say anything, since he really didn't know what was he doing there. Perfumado didn't say anything either, since he was overpowered by the anxiety the visit had produced in him. He was still holding tightly to his pack as if he had something precious in it.

"If you don't tell me what do you want, I won't be able to help you", said Chontal after awhile.

"We want to replace out union", stammered Perfumado abruptly. Rubí turned to stare at him in silence. "We want you to help us", Perfumado added.

The lawyer contemplated them for awhile before he answered, weighing his word carefully.

"Why do you want to replace your union?"

The workers looked at each other in surprise, and were disconcerted by the question.

"What do you mean, why?" murmured Perfumado.

"Well, you need a reason, boys. Don't tell me this is a personal revenge, ha, ha, ha..." the lawyer joked, but he stopped laughing when he saw the worried faces of the two workers.

"Look, if this is a personal revenge, do not count on me", said the lawyer. "I work with my brain, not my guts. You need to have a valid reason for wanting to replace your union."

"There are many reasons, sir. The union we have now does nothing for us; they don't defend us or anything. They are always on the side of the owners of the factory. And the delegate charges us money for everything. Even when we get fired", said Rubí suddenly.

"Which one is your union?"

"C.O.M."

"Hernandez? Are you with Hernandez?" said the lawyer, jumping from his chair with a sudden interest.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Uhf, yes. No need to tell me anything more. You couldn't be in worse hands than his", said the lawyer, recovering his aplomb. "I understand why you want him out. That man is a thief. Quite simple."

"So you now him", said Rubí.

"Something like that, yes", said the lawyer, mysteriously. "I'll tell you about it some other day", he promised while a dark shadow crossed his face for a moment. Suddenly serious, he stood up. He adopted the posture of a professor.

"Do you know how you change unions?"

"No. But my brother said..."

"I don't care what your brother said. Each case is different. Do you know the legal requirements?"

"No", said Perfumado. Rubí shook his head.

"I will explain them to you so you will understand that it is not enough to want to change. There is a lot of work to do", said the lawyer, and he caressed his thick moustache a la Zapata, and he inhaled deeply.

"In legal terms, the first thing you have to do is to prepare a suit to challenge the holders of the collective work contract of the factory. The suit is submitted to the Secretary of Labor. He examines the case and designates a date for a vote among the workers. On the designated date, all of the workers have to walk by the representatives of the Labor Secretary to vote aloud on which union they would rather have as a representative of their group."

"Is that it?" asked Rubí, smiling, feeling a growing trust in the lawyer.

"Yes, that is all in legal requirements, but it implies many things. Theory is one thing, and practice is another. Hernandez uses an exclusivity clause in all of his contracts. This means that the union can exclude any worker it doesn't want. In other words, it can fire them."

"Is that legal?"

"Completely."

"That means Hernandez can fire us legally", said Perfumado, in a low voice. He seemed to have shrunk in his chair.

"Yes. And he will do it if he finds out what you are trying to do before you act. He will fire you for sure."

"Then we can do nothing?"

"I didn't say that", answered the lawyer. "We could talk for hours and hours about all the things that could be done, but we will leave that for later. First, I need to know who you are and other things", said the lawyer, and began to ask the workers an array of questions. The interview lasted several hours. When they left the office, Perfumado and Rubí knew exactly how they had to proceed.

The lawyer had explained the project in a general way and all of it could have been accomplished, thought Rubí under the May first sun, if Perfumado had done the things carefully, as the lawyer had recommended.

The hours had begun to trickle by slowly for him and Juana Alonso and the thousands of men and women who were waiting along Avenida 20 de Noviembre for their turn to march. Rubí leaned on Pichichi's shoulder and stood on the tip of his toes to look around. He critically examined the human wave that pushed them from the back and the front in rhythmic motion and he thought that probably none of those workers really knew what they were doing there, sweating in their uniforms in the asphyxiating atmosphere of downtown. None knew, because none had participated in the decisions about the parade. Like he had, all of the workers had simply received an order to be at the Zócalo at a certain time or risk being punished if they disobeyed. And we all obeyed, thought Rubí. Unwillingly, but here we are.

"Sheep, Pichichi. We are all sheep", he said.

"You might be a sheep. I am a ram", joked Pichichi, and he laughed with his rabbit laugh which Rubí had begun to hate. Rubí wanted to punch his face when he remembered what Pichichi had done.

"First, spread in concentric circles", Chontal Garcia advised them. He explained what that meant. Each of them was to talk discretely with his dearest and most trusted friend. The four of them were then to gather at one of their house 's. There, they would plan the next step, which was more of the same. The four of them would talk to another friend and the following meeting of eight would be held in a different house. Then there would be sixteen and their numbers would increase after each meeting.

"That is called geometric increase. When the majority of the workers agree on changing the union, we will be ready to move. When you gather twenty or more workers, call me immediately so I can help you handle the meetings", added Chontal Garcia. "Talk only with your must trusted friends."

"That's gonna be hard, sir."

"Why?"

"Because my best friend is here with me", said Perfumado, pointing at Rubí. The three laughed.

"Well, then, go ahead. Plan the meetings and be careful that you are not discovered before it is time. Stay in touch with me. If you do it carefully, nothing should go wrong. I'll expect you back in a week."

"All right."

They said goodbye to the lawyer and left. But once in the street, from the instant they crossed the threshold of the old building, Rubí guessed that Perfumado had already forgotten the cautionary word of the lawyer. Perfumado was so excited that he was already tasting his revenge and he couldn't see the danger. Rubí began to work carefully on his own, but Perfumado forgot what he was doing and, four days later, he had organized a meeting with more than fifty workers. The meeting was to be held on the next Sunday at five in Patotas' house. Patotas was a mechanic who lived near the factory.

Saturday night, Perfumado disappeared.

Rubí leaned against the wall and sat down on the floor to rest. He was used to standing for his eight-hour shift, but he wasn't used to the sun's heat and now he was thirsty, too. Around eleven o'clock, the organizational committee arrived to deliver C.O.M. flags and some huge banners with printed legends which Rubí saw for the first time.

"Hey, you, come here. I want you to carry this", said one of the organizers to Rubí. He gave him the end of a huge rolled banner.

"What does it say?" Rubí wanted to know.

"Just carry it. And you, too. And you. And you", said the organizer to other workers from TEXMEX. Together, they displayed the banner which, in large letters, said,

"THANK YOU MISTER PRESIDENT"

"What is this? Thanks for what? I won't carry that"; said Rubí and he went back to where Juana Alonso was waiting. The organizer and Pichichi went after him.

"Aren't you going to carry it?"

"No. Nobody asked me what it should say. Give me a banner that says what I want and I'll carry it."

"Sure. They will come ask for your opinions", said Pichichi. The organizer wrote Rubí's name in a notebook and left.

"They are going to punish you", said Pichichi.

"I don't care."

"But why? What is wrong with what the banner said?" asked Pichichi. Rubí knew he was being interrogated.

"Do you agree with it?" he asked, with a malicious smile.

"It's all the same to me."

"That is the point. It is not all the same to me, anymore", said Rubí, angrily, but with a harmless smile on his face. He knew Pichichi was playing a game, and he realized that Perfumado had been right; Pichichi was a traitor. Pichichi, the eternal joker, was a two-faced hypocrite. Rubí accepted it without bitterness. It was simply a matter of accepting the truth.

"All of this is like the joke about the hunchback. Don't you remember it", said Juana Alonso, with her voice sweet and showing her love. They had been living together for eleven days and they intensely enjoyed their mutual company.

"A one-eyed hunchback, who had only one arm and one leg, was on his way to the Villa de Guadalupe when a friend of his saw him. 'Where are you going in such a hurry?' the friend asked. 'I'm going to show my gratefulness to the Virgen de Guadalupe', said the hunchback. 'Grateful for what? You should go to complain'", said Juanita Alonso. The gestures of her face, more than the joke itself,

made Rubí smile. He hugged her and kept on reading the banners carried by the workers. He read them aloud, but what they expressed -the standard petitions for more salary, the usual congratulations was so foreign to him that they left him indifferent.

He thought about Perfumado. The Monday following his disappearance, his family went to ask his whereabouts at the factory. Rubí met them in the street and went with them to check the hospitals and emergency rooms, but they didn't find him. Tuesday, the Locatel phone service informed Rubí that a gravely wounded man who fit Perfumado's description, was at the Red Cross in Ecatepec, all the way on the other side of the immense city.

Rubí got there his brother's motorcycle and found his friend in a large room among other sick people. Perfumado was terribly beaten and even part of his lip was missing. He had several fractures, but the one in his cranium endangered his life. Rubí called Perfumado's family and, while he waited for their arrival, he sat on a chair beside the bed. The place reeked of illness, of formaldehyde and death, and there were moans and cries all over. Rubí wished with all of his soul that he could take Perfumado away from there. An hour went by. Then another and then suddenly, Perfumado muttered something in his delirious state.

"Pichichi, it was Pichichi. He...snitched on me. They grabbed me, four of them grabbed me...near the house...the sonsofbitches kicked me..."

"Who were they? Did you recognize them?"

"No. They...they said that I deserved that because I started organizing the workers..."

"And then?"

"They...they took me into a car...sonsofbitches, putos maricones...one by one, sonsofbitches...I...they kicked me in my testicles, Rubí, my testicles..."

That was all. After that, Perfumado fell back into his coma and died later that same day without talking again. The authorities intervened and, although the family begged them not to, the pathologist performed a mandatory autopsy that proved that

Perfumado's death had been caused by the severe beating. That same night, they transferred the body to the Federal District for the wake. The next day, after work, Rubí and five other friends of Perfumado went to the graveyard. They arrived just in time to form a farewell guard. While the coffin was being lowered to the bottom of the grave, one of Perfumado's sisters' newborn babies broke the silence with its impatient tears and continued crying while the grave diggers finished their job.

When he came out of the graveyard, Rubí felt lost and desperately needed to talk to somebody. He could not talk to his family because they wouldn't understand; they would ask questions and it would all get very complicated. He thought and thought and he could not think of anyone willing to listen. It was ironic that he had so many friends and yet didn't have anybody to talk to. Finally, he looked up Chontal Garcia and told him what had happened and silently asked for his advice.

"How stupid they are. Now, they are also murderers. How stupid they are. Well, two things are obvious. One, we must keep our heads down for some time until we find out what is happening inside that factory. Something big must be going on for them to dare so much. Two, this had been your first political lesson. I can think of another advantage, but, out of respect, I won't say it."

"Say it."

"That they made a terrible mistake. Perfumado's death had given us a political weapon against which they won't be able to fight."

"You don't understand, sir."

"What is it that I don't understand?"

"Perfumado was not a political weapon. Perfumado was my friend. And I didn't stop him. I allowed him to crash head on against a wall all by himself." said Rubí bitterly, and he left even more anguished and disoriented. It was eight o'clock at night and he couldn't think about anything to do but go to Juana Alonso. She took him in, lovingly, and listened to him and, after that night, Rubí moved into her house.

As the day advanced, the streets were full of groups who were growing tired of waiting. Some group leaders were trying to keep their members in the traditional formation of five deep at the urging of their respective organizers, but the majority of workers were dispersed along the street. Some groups were laughing and chatting while others played hopscotch and many kept moving around in the shadows of the buildings, trying to escape the intense heat and the boring wait. The aguas frescas, Popsicle, and ice cream vendors were moving their small stands from one place to another among the crowds. There were vendors of colorful paper hats and paper periscopes to look at the parade from above everyone's head. There were also quesadilla stands that sold fried pambazos and sopes and tacos de canasta and tortes...

"Now what are we going to do, Rubí?" said Pichichi, while twisting his tiny moustache. He was suddenly serious. It was close to noon and Rubí had already drunk six or seven glasses of fruit juice without quenching his thirst. He was getting hungry, but he could not move from his place, surrounded as he was. The long wait under the hot sun of Mexico City was beginning to wear him out.

"What are we going to do about what?" said Rubí, feeling that Pichichi was about to show his true colors.

"Are we going to change unions or not? Now, there are rumors in the factory that half of the work force will get fired. Maybe it is our turn to go."

"Well, so what? If they do, we'll just have to look for another job, won't we?"

"I cannot resign myself. Especially after what they did to Perfumado."

"I can't either. But what can we do?"

"His idea was good. We have to get rid of Hernandez."

"I know nothing about that, Pichichi."

"Perfumado said that you agreed."

"He said something to me. But look at the conditions of the factory. Nobody wants to risk losing their jobs."

"And if we hold another meeting like Perfumado proposed?"

"No, Pichichi. It cannot be done. Forget it."

"We are fucked, as they say."

"As they say...", said Rubí, thinking that Pichichi had fallen into his own trap. He had come to fish and had been caught, instead.

"Shit."

"Tight."

"We are damned."

"Sorry."

"Yes. Me, too."

At noon, Lorenzo Hernandez arrived, surrounded by his committees and his aides. From atop his car, he mobilized his troops. They were forced to line up in a column, ten deep, and then move fast. They were told to hurry to block the members of the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, who were trying to gatecrash the official parade through one of the streets on the left of the Avenida 20 de Noviembre. Due to the fact that they didn't have legal standing as a union, the teachers that belonged to the Coordinadora hadn't been allowed to parade in front of the Palacio Nacional.

The workers from the C.O.M., urged by their leaders, and very anxious themselves to leave that oven-like heat and the moving ocean of people, violently blocked the members of the Coordinadora, who defended themselves with the sticks from the banners. The battle was quickly controlled by the security guards, which came out from all over and made some arrests.

Finally, the group of workers from TEXMEX began to move. The organizers from the union tried to have the banners raised higher, but their cheers were received with tired looks, insults, and unwilling gestures. The workers marched without desire, in an uneven step, unwilling to keep to any formation.

Ahead, teachers from the Coordinadora and students from the Preparatoria Popular were able to infiltrate the parade and formed parallel columns. When Rubí, Juana Alonso and Pichichi were walking by the Presidential balcony, a whistle came from nowhere and, as if they all had agreed, the catcalls spread like a crest of a wave

among the workers marching around the Zócalo. The next day, the newspapers calculated that there had been more than a million and a half union members marching by the political leaders of the country who smiled tirelessly for the television cameras focused on them.

Lorenzo Hernandez had placed himself right across from the presidential balcony on top of a truck to proudly supervise the marching of his troops. Rubí looked at him and shouted an insult that was lost among the general catcalls.

The workers from TEXMEX walked around the Zócalo faster and faster, being both pushed and guided by the other workers behind and ahead of them.

"Today is Labor Day, right?" said Juana Alonso, grabbing Rubí's hand.

"Right."

"Well, it shows. Today, they have made us work more than ever."

Rubí shrugged, unwilling to even fake a smile. At that moment, his customary headache had come on again because of all those hours under the hot sun and now, the only thing he wanted to so was to get out of there.

They left the Metropolitan Cathedral, entered Cinco de Mayo Street, and when they were passing underneath the marquee of a hotel, they heard the explosions. There were three of them. First two, and after a moment, a third one.

Rubí looked at the gray smoke coming out of the balconies at the National Palace. Immediately, there was confusion and screams and the hurried movements from the thousands of policemen in charge of controlling the workers' parade. Both the uniformed policemen and those in plain clothes ran towards the Palacio Nacional.

"What was that?" said Pichichi, scared.

"Some idiot just died. Let's get out of here. Run before all hell breaks loose. Come on."

Rubí Toscano pulled Juana Alonso by her hand and the three of them ran along Cinco de Mayo, along with the thousands of other workers. While running, Juanita Alonso lost one of her shoes.

She and Rubí stopped to pick it up and they lost sight of Pichichi. Juanita Alonso took off the other shoe and ran barefooted.

They kept going until they arrived at the garden at the Alameda Central. Once there, they stopped to recover their breath and sat on a green wrought iron bench under an old Ahuehuete tree beside the Fine Arts Building.

Rubí looked at the building, incredulously. Its beauty, majesty and tranquility were incongruous with the tumultuous noise coming from the waves of workers pouring out of the street adjacent to the Plaza Constitucional. On that day, it seemed like a different building, thought Rubí, remembering with sadness and shame that night, three weeks earlier, which he now remembered as if it had been a nightmare. He thought about his dead friend and realized that if he had not allowed himself to be pulled along by Perfumado's uncontrolled passion and anger, his friend might still be alive. It had been a terrible mistake to be trapped by the spirit of the moment. But he also understood that he had all of his life ahead of him and he swore that he would never fall into that trap again. He felt a special responsibility towards his people. The trust they had placed in him meant that he could not make mistakes. He realized that he still had plenty to learn. He thought about the lawyer, Chontal Garcia. He liked that man. He seemed to be an honest and sincere man who Rubí felt could be his friend and teacher. He promised himself to keep visiting him in his office and not to lose contact. He didn't want to fail again.

"Do you want an ice cream?" said Juana Alonso after some time. She was looking at him very seriously, but with a spark of mischievous coquetry in her black eyes. The run had brought a slight sweat to her round and pretty face.

"Ice cream is good to cure scares", she said and her sweet voice made Rubí smile.

"We should get some", said Rubí, thinking that it was the best thing he could do for the time being.

The two of them approached an ice cream cart passing by. Juana Alonso wanted lemon and Rubí, peach. Suddenly, Rubí understood that in spite of the tragic result, Perfumado's death had given him the possibility of a future. Now, Rubí had an objective in

his life. It would be a long battle, indeed, but Rubí guessed that in the end he would win due to a simple reason: Lorenzo Hernandez was an old man and he was young. Time itself was on his side.

They received their ice cream cones and embraced tightly as they started to walk peacefully while they ate their ice creams and admired the elegant stores and windows of the buildings along Avenida Juárez.

XIV

A shout woke Antonio Alarcón out of his lethargic stupor. He was lying face down on the burning hot sand with his legs partially covered by the ceaseless surf. Half of his face was buried in the sand and he was gasping for air with his mouth open, not feeling the tiny particles of sand which came into his nose and mouth and stuck to his tongue and palate. He didn't move even when a white crab came out of its hole in the sand and crawled over his face in search of food.

He could not move. Quite simply, he could not. But the sharp voice screaming his name penetrated his semiconscious state like the point of a dagger pricking him back to life. The scream calling his name was repeated once or twice; he couldn't be sure which as it became mixed with the noise of the waves. The third time the voice reached him, Antonio knew that it was a real voice, a call from this side of the earth and not from that other side from which he had just come back. He raised his head a few inches and blinked until he could focus more clearly on the blurred figure which was coming toward him from the other side of Huazaque Cove: the same point from which he had started his journey. Unable to believe what he was seeing, he shook his head and leaned on his elbow. He thought he was delirious again. In the distance, Jennifer looked splendid in a white, sleeveless dress that made her bronzed skin stand out. Both the dress and the blonde hair were softly blown by the wind and Antonio told himself that it was just his imagination. Jennifer could not be at Las Hadas. It wasn't a real woman; it was a ghost-like vision produced by his exhaustion, he told himself. But it was so beautiful a vision that

Antonio prayed silently that he would never forget that image. He prayed he would keep that image in his memory until the end of time.

"Antonio!" he heard the scream calling him again. He clearly understood his name, but he hesitated. Perhaps it wasn't a vision. He stood up. Jennifer was in front of him, fifty steps away. When he rose, she stopped for a moment. Then she walked toward him with the sunlight on her face and her figure, framed by the golden sand and the emerald green hills surrounding the cove.

"Damn you, Antonio!" shouted Jennifer. She came closer, step by step, and Antonio began to distinguish the details. He saw the patch that hid her left eyebrow, the adhesive bandage on her right cheek, the swelling that almost closed her eye, and the bruises that transformed Jennifer's features into an ugly mask. Antonio thought that there was not a more terrible awfulness than that which appeared on a ruined beauty. Antonio closed his eyes for a second. He didn't want to see her like that. But something about her made him open his eyes and look straight at Jennifer. He stood up the best he could and waited with his head up.

She stopped about twenty feet away. Her left arm was bandaged. In her right hand, Jennifer had a gun. Antonio recognized the weapon. It was a small, stainless steel .38 caliber pistol, and it shone in Jennifer's hand as if it were made out of silver. The inlaid ivory handle, Antonio knew, had Jennifer's initials in white gold letters. The gun had been a present from her grandfather when Jennifer had turned eighteen. She had proudly shown it to Antonio. And now, she was aiming it directly at Antonio's head. She aimed right at his forehead to shoot him with a gray lead bullet. There, right between his eyes, in the best style of the gunfighters of the West. Jennifer aimed at him with a firm hand. For a few seconds, in which time stood still, they looked at each other. Antonio looked into her cold, green eyes and he glanced over Jennifer's wounds and bruises.

Then, a slight smile appeared on Antonio's lips.

"Quihubo, güerita."

"Oh, my God, Tony...You son of a bitch, I...I'm...I love you so..." murmured Jennifer, crying at the same time.

"And I..." Antonio began to say when Jennifer interrupted him by pulling the trigger. The explosion shattered all other sound and reverberated around the beach. The first bullet grazed Antonio's scalp and he was able to learn what bullets sounded like in the air. Antonio blinked at the explosion, but he didn't close his eyes. He kept them open and looked straight at Jennifer, immobile. It was useless to try to defend himself, so he waited quietly. He kept his smile. Jennifer shot again. The bullet grazed Antonio's shoulder like a tongue of fire and hit the sandbank behind him. The third bullet was also buried in the sand by Antonio's right foot. Jennifer kept shooting until she emptied the chamber and all the cartridges were lost in the sand.

Then she let go of the weapon and, covering her face, she started to cry as she ever cried before in front of Antonio. Now, they were not capricious tears; now they were pained and truthful tears that shook Antonio. He didn't move from his place. He felt the burning of his shoulder wound, but Jennifer's tears hurt him much more.

"Jennifer..." he called. He opened his arms, which were as heavy as marble, to silently invite Jennifer to take refuge in them. Jennifer shook her head once, twice, three times, and then she ran across the space that divided them. Antonio held her and kissed her softly on her lips, on her teary eyes, and then their legs grew weak and both let themselves fall onto the sand with their bodies intertwined.

"It was your fault", said Jennifer.

"It was yours", answered Antonio.

The sun was a gigantic balloon, orange and red, which was sinking slowly into the blue horizon of the Pacific Ocean. Jennifer and Antonio saw it disappear. They didn't say anything else. Carefully, Jennifer caressed Antonio's shoulder wound with her hand. She kissed it and felt the bitterness from the ocean salt mixed with the sweet heaviness of blood on her lips. Antonio stretched out on the beach and placed his left arm around Jennifer in a protective way. Jennifer laid her head on Antonio's chest as she used to do before, at the beginning. Antonio closed his eyes and went to sleep. She felt secure and kissed his skin. Jennifer murmured something that Antonio didn't hear before she also closed her eyes and fell asleep.

The nightmare was over.

The Blue Unicorn

THE END

The Blue Unicorn

The Blue Unicorn