

El Tunel
(The Tunnel)

By Ernesto Sábato

*“...at any rate, there is only a single
tunnel, isolated and dark, my own.”*

I

It will be enough to say I am Juan Pablo Castel, the painter who killed Maria Iribarne; I assume that people will remember what I did, and that they do not need any further explanation of my personal character.

Although not even the Devil knows what it is that people remember, or why they do. In reality, I have always thought there is no collective memory, which may be a type of defense for the human species. The expression, “all previous times were better,” does not indicate that before fewer bad things happened, but that, fortunately, people tend to forget about them. Of course, an expression like this is not always true; I, for example, am the type of person who prefers to remember only bad things and, therefore, would almost be able to say that “all previous times were worse,” if it wasn’t that for me the present seems even more horrible than the past. I remember so many calamities, so many cynical faces, and so many bad things that, for me, memory is like a frightening light that illuminates a sordid museum of shame. How many times have I been upset for hours, after reading an article in the police news! But the truth is that the most shameful part of the human race does not always appear there; in some ways criminals are people who are more honest and less offensive. And I don’t say this because I am a person who has killed someone; it is an honest and profound conviction. So a person is pernicious? Well, destroy them, and that’s the end of it. That’s what I call a *good deed*. Just think how much worse it would be for society if that individual were to continue spreading his poison and, instead of eliminating him, we would try to counteract his actions by hiding them, criticize them, or other similar vile actions. As far as I am concerned, I must confess that I now regret not having taken advantage of my chance to do away with five or six fellows that I know.

That the world is horrible doesn’t need any proof. Just one fact could prove it: a concentration camp, a man who suffered from hunger and then they force him to eat a rat. *while it is still alive*. But that is not what I want to talk about. If there is a chance, I will say something later about the matter of the rat.

II

As I said, my name is Juan Pablo Castel. One might wonder what it is that makes me want to tell the story of my crime (I don’t know if I said I was going to talk about my crime), and try to have it published. I know the human soul well enough to expect that some would assume it was vanity. They can think what they want; I don’t give a damn; for a long time now justice, or what people think, matters little to me. Let them imagine I want to publish this story out of vanity. In the final analysis, I am a person of flesh and blood, hair and nails, like anyone else, and I would feel that it is totally wrong for them to

expect me, especially me, to have some special qualities. A man sometimes feels he is some sort of superman, until he realizes that he too is mean, dirty, and treacherous. And I'm not speaking of vanity; I don't think that anyone is devoid of this notable engine of Human Progress. It makes me laugh to hear people talk about the modesty of Einstein, or people like that. The reason: *it is easy to be modest when you are a celebrity*. I mean, *to appear modest*. Even when one thinks that it doesn't exist at all, one quickly discovers its most subtle form: the vanity of modesty. How many times do we stumble into that class of individuals! Even a man, real or symbolic, like Christ, spoke words suggested by vanity, or at least by pride. And what about Leon Bloy who tried to defend himself from the accusation of pride, insisting that he had spent his life helping people who didn't even come up to his knees? Vanity can be found in the most unexpected places; right next to kindness, self-denial, and generosity. When I was a child and I despaired at the idea that my mother would have to die someday (with time, one comes to realize death not only is bearable, but also comforting), I never thought that my mother could have any defects. Now that she is dead, I ought to say that she was as good as a human being is capable of being. But I remember that in her final years, when I was a grown man, how it hurt me to discover that, behind her best actions, there was a subtle feeling of vanity or pride. Something even more demonstrative happened to me when they had to operate on her because she had cancer. In order to get there in time, I had to travel for two days without sleeping. When I arrived at the side of her bed, her dying face was able to smile at me with tenderness for a moment, saying a few words to take pity on me. (She took pity on my tiredness!) Inside me I felt, obscurely, the vain feeling of pride for having arrived so quickly. I confess this secret to show that I do not consider myself better than others.

Nevertheless, I am not relating this story out of vanity. Perhaps I would admit there is a bit of pride, or stubbornness. But why this mania of trying to find an explanation for everything we do? When I started to write this story, I was strongly determined not to give an explication of any kind. I wanted to tell the story of my crime, and that's all. Anyone who is not satisfied with that doesn't have to read it. Though I don't expect that, because it is precisely the type of people who want explanations that are the most curious, and I think none of them would want to miss the opportunity to read this story of a crime from beginning to end.

I could keep to myself the things that made me want to write these pages of confession. But since I have no interest in appearing eccentric, I will tell the truth, that all my reasons are quite simple: I thought that they would be read by many different people, now that I am well-known. And although I don't have any illusions about humanity in general, or about the readers of these pages in particular, I am encouraged by the weak hope that perhaps someone might be able to understand me.

EVEN IF IS IS A SINGLE PERSON.

"Why—someone might ask—such a weak hope if the story will be read by so many different people?" It is this type of questions that I consider useless. Nevertheless, you have to expect them, because people are constantly asking useless questions, questions where even the most superficial analysis would show that they were unnecessary. I could speak as long as I felt like it in front of a crowd of a hundred thousand Russians, and no one would understand me. Do you realize what I mean?

There was only one person who could understand me.

But that was precisely the person I killed.

III

By now everyone knows that I killed Maria Iribarne Hunter. But no one knows how I met her, what kind of relations there were between us, or what made me want to kill her. I will try to relay everything impartially because, although I suffered a lot because of her, I do not have the foolish aspiration of being perfect.

In the Salon de Primavera, in 1946, I exhibited a painting called *Maternity*. It was done in the style of most of my previous paintings; like the critics say with their insufferable patois, it was solid, and well formed. In short, it had the attributes that these charlatans always see in my art, including "something profoundly intellectual." But in the upper left corner, through a small window, there was a small, remote scene; a lonely beach and a woman who was looking at the sea. It was a woman who looked like she was waiting for something, perhaps some muted, distant call. In my opinion, the scene suggested an anxious and total aloneness.

No one noticed that scene; they passed over it as though it was something unimportant, only decorative. With the exception of one person, no one seemed to realize that that scene constituted something essential. It was the opening day. Some unknown woman stopped for a long time in front of my painting without paying much attention of the large woman in the foreground that was watching a baby play. Instead, she was staring at the scene in the window, and while she was doing that, I was certain she was shut off from the the rest of world; she didn't even notice the other people who passed by, or stopped in front of the painting.

I watched her anxiously for a long time. After that, she disappeared in the crowd, while I vacillated between an invincible fear, and the desire to call to her. Fear of what? Perhaps something like the fear of betting all the money that you have in life on a single number. And when she disappeared I felt angry and unfortunate, thinking I would never see her again, lost among the millions of anonymous people in Buenos Aires.

That night I went home, feeling quite nervous, discontented, and sad.

Until the gallery closed, I went there every day, staying close enough to my painting to see the people who stopped in front of it. But she never showed up again.

During the following months I never stopped thinking about her, and the possibility of seeing her again. It was as if the small scene in the window began to grow and fill the entire painting, and all the rest of my work.

IV

One afternoon, finally, I saw her in the street. She was walking resolutely down the opposite sidewalk, like someone who has to get to a particular place at a particular time.

I recognized her immediately. I could have recognized her in a crowd of people. I felt an indescribable emotion. I had thought about her so often during all those months, imagining so many things, that when I saw her I didn't know what to do.

The truth is that many times I had thought carefully about what I would do if I ever saw her again. I may have said that I am very timid, and because of that I had thought, and rethought many times, about a possible encounter, and what I would do if it occurred. The biggest difficulty I had in those imaginary encounters was always how to start a

conversation with her. I know many men who would have no problem if they started to talk to some unknown woman. I confess that I once envied them a lot, since, because I had never been ladies man, or since I hadn't been one on two or three different occasions, I feared this meant that I was going to always be alone in my life. Unfortunately, I was condemned to be separated from the life of any woman.

In these imaginary encounters I had thought about different possibilities. I know what I am like, and I know that sudden, unexpected situations make me loose, control because of bewilderment and timidity. For that reason I had prepared various options that were logical, or at least possible. (It is not logical that an intimate friend would send you an insulting anonymous letter, but we all know it is possible.)

Evidently the woman often went to art galleries. If I saw her at one of them I would go and stand by her side, and it wouldn't be too difficult to start a conversation about some painting we saw.

After thinking more about this possibility, I rejected it. *I never went to art galleries.* That may seem like a strange attitude for a painter, but in fact there is an explanation, and if decided to reveal it, everyone would say that I was right. Well, perhaps I exaggerate by saying "everyone." No, *I'm definitely exaggerating.* Experience has taught me that what seems clear and evident for me almost never is for the rest of my fellow men. I am so burned that I now usually hesitate before trying to explain or justify one of my attitudes, and I almost always end up shutting myself off and not saying anything. This has been precisely the reason that I have waited so long before finally deciding to reveal the story of my crime. Nor do I know if, in the final analysis, it would be worth it to try to explain the way I feel about art galleries, but I am afraid that if I don't explain it people will think it is just some mania when, in fact, there are some very serious reasons for it.

As a matter of fact, in this case there is more than one reason. I will say, to begin with, that I detest all groups, sects, associations, corporations, and in general, all the groups of vermin that join together for professional reasons, for profits, or for some similar whim. These conglomerates have a great number of grotesque attributes: a repetition of styles, a jargon, or the vanity of feeling they are better than all the rest of us.

I can see that this is complicating the problem, but I don't see any way to simplify it. On the other hand, anyone who wants to stop reading this account only has to do just that. Once and for all I want to make it clear that they can count on my complete agreement.

What do I mean by this "repetition of styles"? Everyone knows how annoying it is to meet someone who constantly winks their eye, or twists their mouth. But imagine if they were all united in one group. However it is not necessary to go to such an extreme; it is enough to observe those families where certain habits, certain gestures, or a certain tone of voice are repeated. I have fallen in love with a woman (anonymously, of course) and then ran away, frightened by the possibility of meeting her sisters. Something that was horrible also happened to me on another occasion: I found some interesting aspects in a woman, but when I met her sister I became depressed and ashamed for a long time. The same attributes that seemed pleasing in her, seemed accentuated and deformed in her sister, a sort of a caricature. And the view of the deformed nature of the first woman in her sister produced in me, in addition to that, a feeling of shame as though in a way I was responsible for this ridiculous aspect that the sister cast over the woman that I had at first admired so much.

Perhaps these things happen to me because I am a painter, because I notice it when people don't consider these ugly and unpleasant family characteristics important. I ought to add that something similar happens to me when other painters try to imitate the grand masters like, for example, those unfortunates who try to paint like Picasso.

Next, there is the matter of jargon, another one of the things I can't stand. It is enough to examine any one of the examples: psychoanalysis, communism, fascism, journalism. I don't have any preferences; all of them seem repugnant to me. Doctor Prato has a lot of talent and I considered him a good friend, until the time when I was very disappointed when everyone started to criticize me and he joined that rabble; but let's forget about that. One day when I had just arrived at the office, Prato said he had to leave, and he invited me to come with him:

"Where are you going?" I asked him.

"To a cocktail party at the Society."

"What kind of Society?" I asked with hidden irony, since it irritates me when someone uses the definite article that they all have: *the* Society for the Psychoanalytic Society, *the* Party for the Communist Party, *the* Seventh for Beethoven's Seventh Symphony.

Prato looked at me with surprise, but I withstood his look with apparent innocence.

"The Psychoanalytic Society, man," he answered me with those penetrating eyes that Freudians think are obligatory in their profession, as though they are asking themselves, "what other craziness is this guy going to demonstrate?"

I remember reading something about an assembly, or a congress, presided over by a doctor Bernard, or Bertrand. With the certainty that it couldn't be that, I asked him if it was. He looked at me with contemptuous smile.

"They are only a bunch of charlatans," He responded. "The only nationally recognized psychoanalytic society is ours."

He went to his desk and opened a drawer; then after looking through it for some time, he finally showed me a letter in English. I looked at it out of politeness.

"I don't know English," I said.

"It's a letter from Chicago. It accredits us as being the only Psychoanalytic Society in Argentina."

I feigned an expression of admiration, and profound respect.

Then we left and went by car to the location. There were lots of people. I knew some people, like doctor Goldenberg who had recently become well-known; as a result of trying to cure a woman they were both sent to a psychiatric hospital. He had just been released. I looked at him attentively, but he didn't seem any worse than the others, in fact he seemed calmer, perhaps, as a result of his confinement. He praised my paintings in a way that made me understand that he despised them.

Everything was so elegant that I felt ashamed of my old suit, and my baggy pants. However, the grotesque feeling I had wasn't actually because of that, but because of something else I can't define. It culminated when a stylish servant offered me some sandwiches, while speaking with a man about some problem of anal masochism. It is probably the striking difference between the very clean, functional, modern furniture, and well-clad men and women talking about genitourinary problems.

I tried to look for refuge in some corner, but that was impossible. The place was full of the same type of people who were constantly saying the same type of things. I finally left there and went out in the street. And when I found myself out there with ordinary people,

(a newspaper salesman, a child, a chauffeur), it seemed unconceivable that I had just been in a room with such a disgusting group of individuals.

Nevertheless, of all the different groups of people, the one I detest the most is the one of painters. In part of course, it is because it's the one I know best, and it's obvious that it is easier to detest something one is more familiar with. But I also have another reason: the art critics. It is a scourge I could never understand. If I was a great surgeon and a man who had never used a scalpel, who was not a doctor, nor had ever put a cat's foot in a splint, came and tried to explain the mistakes in my operation, what would one think? It's the same with a painting. The strange thing is that people don't realize that, and although they would laugh at that critic of the surgeon, they would listen with great respect to the opinion of those charlatans. One could listen with some respect to the opinions of a critic who had painted, even if they were mediocre paintings. But even in that case it would still be absurd, because how could a mediocre painter be qualified to judge the work of a great painter.

V

But I have gotten off track. It's because of my accursed habit of wanting to justify all of my actions. Why should I try to explain why I never go to art galleries? It seems to me that everyone has the right to go, or not go, without having to give a long reason of justification. What good is it to have of a mania like that? But although I have already done it, I still could have a great deal to say about expositions, the gossip of colleagues, the blindness of the public, the stupidity of those who set up the gallery and display the paintings. Fortunately (or unfortunately) that no longer interests me; otherwise, I might write a long essay titled, *Concerning the way a painter must defend himself against the friends of painting*.

Therefore will have to ignore the possibility of finding her in an art gallery.

However, it could be that she might have a friend, who was also a friend of mine. In that case, a simple introduction would be enough. Influenced by the cruel effect of my timidity, I threw myself into the arms of that possibility. A simple introduction! How easy, and how nice, that would be. My enthusiasm kept me from realizing right away how absurd that idea was. It never occurred to me at the time that finding a friend of hers would be just as difficult and finding her, because it's obvious that it would be impossible to find her friend without knowing who she was. But if I knew who she was, why look for someone else? It's true that there was still the advantage of an introduction which I did not dismiss. But, obviously, the main problem was finding her and then looking for a mutual friend to introduce us. There was also the opposite path: to see if one of my friends might be a friend of hers. And that could definitely be done without finding her, since all I would have to do is ask each of my friends about a woman of her size, with the color of her hair, and so forth. However, all that would be the kind of frivolousness that I despised. It made me feel ashamed just to think about asking that type of question to someone like Mapelli, or Lartigue.

I think I ought to make it clear I didn't discard that idea because it was preposterous; I only did it for the reasons I have just explained. Some might believe, in fact, that it is preposterous to imagine the remote possibility that one of my friends could be a friend of

hers. Perhaps that is what one who is superficial might think, but not one who was used to thinking about human problems. In our society there is a *horizontal strata* formed by people with similar tastes, and in that kind of strata chance encounters are not unusual, especially when the cause of stratification is a characteristic of minorities. I have once met a person in a suburb of Berlin, then in a remote place in Italy, and finally in bookstore in Buenos Aires. Is it logical to think that fate is the cause of all of those encounters? But I am just saying something trivial; anyone interested in music, Esperanto, or spiritualism, knows that.

That means, therefore, that I will have to turn to the most feared choice. An encounter in the street. How in the devil are some men able to get a woman to start a conversation, and even start a relationship? After that I gave up on any procedure that would include some personal intervention of mine. My lack of knowledge of how to handle something like that, plus my timidity, made me accept that sad and definitive reality.

There was no other choice but to wait for some lucky circumstance, one that happens only once in a million times: that she would speak first. So my chance of happiness was freed from that risky lottery where I would have to win once, in order to have the right to play a second time, and only receive the prize, if I won the second time. That meant that I would have to wait for the possibility of encountering her in the street, and the even more unlikely possibility that she would speak to me. I felt a sort of vertigo, sadness, and desperation; nevertheless, I was determined continue planning for a chance encounter.

I imagined, therefore, that she would speak to me in order to ask me for an address, or a bus stop, or something like that. After that, I tried for months of reflection, of sadness, of frustration, of loneliness, and hope, to think of various ways I might respond. In one I was loquacious and witty (something I've never been); in another I was self-controlled; in others I imagined myself smiling and cheerful. What is very odd is that sometimes I would answer her question brusquely, as though I was trying to cover my anger; in some of those imaginary encounters it turned out that the meeting was unsuccessful because of my stupid irritation, and for rudely disagreeing with her about for a remark that I felt was useless or ill-considered. These unsuccessful encounters left me full of bitterness, and for several days I rebuked myself for having lost the opportunity to establish relations with her. Fortunately I finally remembered that all this was imaginary, and that at least there was still a chance it would turn out all right. After that, once again I started to have more enthusiasm, and to imagine more successful sidewalk conversations. But the greatest difficulty was in trying to link her question with something as far removed from ordinary matters as artwork, or the impression she had after seeing my little window. Of course, if there is enough time and patience, it's always possible to make make a logical connection without much difficulty. In most meetings with someone there is more than enough time to link most matters with things that are totally different. But in the hustle and bustle of a street in Buenos Aires among people who form large groups and carry you along with them, it is clear that it would be necessary forget about a conversation like that. On the other hand, I could not give up the possibility of finding her without making me feel frustrated and unhappy. So I went back to imagining conversations when it would be possible to go as efficiently and as rapidly as possible from a question like "Where is the Post Office?" to certain problems of expressionism and surrealism. That was not an easy thing to imagine.

One night when I couldn't sleep I came to the conclusion that it was useless and futile to try to start conversation like that and that it was preferable to go right to the main point with a direct question, putting all my bets on a single number. For example, asking: "Why did you only look at the window?" It's not unusual, on nights when you can't sleep, to be more certain about things than you feel during the day. The next day when I thought about that possibility I realized I would never have the courage to ask that question point blank. As always the lack of confidence made me go to the other extreme, and I realized that some kind of indirect question that would eventually lead to the thing I was interested in (the window), almost always required a long friendship: a question like "Are you interested in art?"

I don't remember now how many other things I thought about. I only remember that there were some so complicated that they were basically useless. It would be far too marvelous: like trying to open something by creating a key without knowing beforehand the shape of the lock. But when I considered so many complex possibilities I forgot the order of the questions and the replies, or else I mixed them, like what happens in a game of chess when you try to make all of the moves by memory. And sometimes it happened that I substituted one phrase for another in a way that was ridiculous, or discouraging. For example: to stop her and give her an address and then ask her immediately "Are you interested in art?" That was absurd.

When that situation finally arrived, I had rested for several days without considering different combinations.

VI

When I saw her walking down the opposite sidewalk all of the different things I had thought about began to pop into my head. With confusion, I felt all of those complicated phrases I had experimented with surge into my mind: "Are you interested in art?" "Why did you only look at the window?", and so forth. And even more insistent than any other, I thought about a question I had discarded out of shame, that also made me feel ridiculous: "Do you like Castel?"

The confused ideas spun around in my head creating a complicated, moving crossword puzzle, until I realized it was useless to worry like that. Then I remembered that it was her that should take the initiative in any conversation. And from that moment on I felt stupidly tranquilized, and I think I even also thought stupidly, "Now we're going to see how that will work."

Meanwhile, in spite of that reasoning, I felt so nervous and emotional that I wasn't able to do anything but follow while she walked down the opposite sidewalk without thinking that, if she was ever going to ask me any of those hypothetical questions, I had to cross over to the other side and approach her. Nothing more absurd, in fact, than supposing she would shout at me from a distance, asking for an address.

So what could I do? How long was this situation likely to continue? I felt totally confused and unhappy. We walked for several blocks, and she continued walking with no sign of stopping.

It was very sad, but I was going to have to finish this thing because it was impossible, after waiting months for this opportunity, to let it escape without taking advantage of it.

And walking so rapidly while my spirit vacillated produced a very strange sensation, as though my mind was like a stupid, blind worm in an automobile that was traveling at great speed.

She turned the corner on San Martin and then started walking toward a large building. I realized that I was going to have to act quickly, and I followed her when she entered the building, feeling like I was doing something monstrous and disproportionate.

She waited for the elevator. There was no one else. Inside my mind someone more bold than I asked her a question that was incredibly stupid:

“Is this building the Technology Company?”

There was a large and very obvious sign outside the building which said exactly what building this was.

Nevertheless she turned around and politely told me, yes it was. (Later, thinking about my question, and the simplicity and calmness with which she answered, I came to the conclusion that after all it must be quite common that people don't look at these large signs and that, therefore, the question was not totally stupid, as I had thought at first.)

But right away, when she looked at me, she started smiling so strongly that I realized she had recognized me. That was a possibility that had never occurred to me, however it was quite logical since my photograph had often appeared in reviews and newspapers.

I was so emotional that I only was able to ask another awkward question; I asked her abruptly:

“Why are you smiling?”

She smiled even more and perhaps was going to answer me when, having completely lost control of myself, I added quickly:

“You are smiling because you recognized me. You think this is a coincidence, but it is not a coincidence; there are never coincidences. I have thought about you for months. Today I saw you in the street and I followed you here. I have something important to ask you, something concerning the little window, do you understand?”

She was puzzled:

“The window?” she stammered. “What window?”

I felt my legs growing weak. Was it possible she didn't remember it? Then it must not have mattered to her, and she had only looked at it out of curiosity. I felt ridiculous, and I thought dizzily that everything I had thought and done for months (including this scene) was the height of disproportion and ridiculousness, like one of those reconstructions of a dinosaur from the discovery of a broken vertebra.

The woman was on the verge of tears. I felt the world collapsing on me without being able to stop it. I found myself saying something that I'm now ashamed to write:

“I see that I have been mistaken. Good afternoon.”

I left precipitously and I continued walking, almost running, without thinking where I was going. I had walked for a block when I heard a voice behind me saying:

“Sir, sir!”

It was her; she had been following me without daring to stop me. There she was, and she didn't seem to know how to explain what had happened. With a soft voice she said:

“Forgive me, sir... Forgive my stupidity... I was frightened...”

A moment ago the world had seemed like a chaos of useless things and people. I felt like it was now beginning to take shape and recover its sense of order. I listened silently.

“I didn’t realize that you were asking me about that scene in the painting,” she said anxiously.

Without thinking, I grabbed her by the arm.

“Then you do remember it?”

She stood there for a moment without speaking, looking at the ground. Then she said slowly:

“I remember it constantly.”

After that something strange happened: she seemed to regret what she had said because she suddenly turned around and began to run away. After a moment of surprise, I ran after her, until I realized how ridiculous this was; I looked around and continued walking quickly, but normally. I made this decision for two reasons: first, because it was absurd for a well-known man to chase a girl down the street, and second, *because it was not necessary.* That was what mattered most. I could see her any time when she went into or came out of her office. So why run like a madman? The important thing, the really important thing, was that she remembered the window scene “She remembered it constantly.” I was very happy, I felt capable of grand things; I only reproached myself for having lost control there by the elevator and now, again, for running after her like a fool, when it was obvious that I could see her at any time in her office.

VII

“In her office?” I asked myself suddenly in a loud voice, almost shouting, feeling like my legs were going to collapse again. And who told me she worked in an office there? Are people who work there the only ones who enter? The idea of losing her for many months, or perhaps forever, made me feel dizzy, and now, without thinking, I started running desperately. Soon I was back at the door of the Technology Company and I couldn’t see her anywhere. Had she already taken the elevator? I thought about asking someone, but what could I ask them? Many women might have gone up, and I would have to say something more specific; what would the elevator operator think? I walked back down the sidewalk, feeling undecided. I walked over to the other side and looked at the front of the building, I’m not sure why. Perhaps with the vague hope of seeing her look out through a window? However, it was absurd to think that she would look out and give a sign, or something like that. All I saw was a gigantic sign that said:

Technology Company

I figured that I should keep an eye on at least twenty meters of the front of the building, but that calculation just made me feel more upset. But now I didn’t have time to let myself be consumed by that anxiety; I would have to let it torture me later, with tranquility. At the moment I didn’t see any other solution except entering the building. So I went in and waited for the elevator to come down; but while it was coming down I noticed that my courage was lessening at the same time as my timidity was increasing tumultuously. So when the elevator door opened, I had already decided exactly what I was going to do: *I would not say a single word.* Of course, in that case, why take the elevator? Though it would be difficult not to do that after waiting so long in front of

several other people. What would they think about something like that? I couldn't find any solution other than getting on the elevator which I did, maintaining my determination *not to say a single word*, as it was easy, and even seemed more normal than the opposite. The fact is that nobody is required to say anything when they get in the elevator, unless one happens to be a friend of the elevator operator, in which case it would be natural to mention the weather, or ask him about his sick son. But since I had no relation with this man and, in fact, had never seen him before this moment, it was easy not to say anything. The fact that there were several other people made it easier for me to pass by unnoticed.

So I got on the elevator calmly, and things happened just as I had expected, without any problem. Someone talked with the elevator operator about the humid weather, and that made it easier for me, since it confirmed my expectations. I was a bit nervous when I said "eighth," but that could have only been noticed by someone who knew what I was trying to do at the moment.

When I got to the eighth floor, I saw that another person was getting off with me which complicated the situation a bit. Walking slowly, I waited until the other person entered one of the offices as I was still walking down the hallway. Finally I was able to breathe more calmly; I turned around several times and then I went to the end of the corridor and looked out the window at the grand panorama of Buenos Aires, before going back to call the elevator again. A little later I was in the doorway to the building without any of the bad things I worried about happening (a difficult question of the elevator operator, or something like that). I started to light a cigarette and I hadn't got it lit yet when I realized that my tranquility was absurd: it was true that nothing had happened, but it was also true that *absolutely nothing had happened*. In other words, the woman was lost for me, unless she regularly worked in one of those offices; but if she had only entered the building for a simple business deal she could have gone up and come back down without coming in contact with me. "Of course," I thought, "if she was making a business deal, it was possible that she wasn't finished yet, in such a short time." This possibility encouraged me again, and I decided to wait at the foot of the building.

I waited for an hour, with no success. I went over the different things that might have happened:

1. The business deal would take a long time to be finished; in this case I would have to continue waiting.
2. After what had happened, maybe she was upset and had decided to go take a walk before going to make the deal; this also meant that I should wait.
3. She was working there and, if so, I would have to wait until the time when she was done working.

"So waiting until that time would cover all three of those possibilities," I thought.

This idea seemed the best thing to do, and it calmed me down enough to make me decide to go and wait in a café on a nearby corner where I could watch the people coming out of the door. I asked for a beer and looked at my watch: it was fifteen minutes after three.

While I waited, as the time passed I decided on the last hypothesis: she worked there. At six o'clock I got up since I thought it would be best if I waited there in the door of the building as the people came out. If a lot of people came out at the same time, it would be difficult to pick her out from the café.

A few minutes after six the workers started to leave.

By six thirty almost everyone had left, which meant that each time it was less likely. By a quarter to seven almost no one was coming out, only once in a while an upper level employee. Unless she was an upper level employee (“Absurd,” I thought), or perhaps the secretary of some upper level employee (“That could be,” I thought with weak hope.)

By seven o’clock everything had ended.

VIII

While I was going home feeling deeply depressed, I tried to think clearly. My mind was a whirlwind, but when I am nervous my ideas tend to move in a dizzy dance, in spite of which, or perhaps because of it, I have become accustomed to control and organize them rigorously. Without that, I would soon go mad.

As I said, I went home feeling deeply depressed, but it didn’t stop me from arranging and classifying my ideas, because that was the only way to think clearly, if I didn’t want to lose forever the only person who had evidently understood my painting.

Either she had entered that building to make a deal, or she worked there; there was no other possibility. Of course, it was the last hypothesis that was most likely. In that case, when we separated she must have been very upset, and she decided to go back home. So it would be necessary to wait for her on another day. It would also be best to wait for her in the entrance to the building.

These were the two best possibilities. The other was the worst: the business deal had been made while I was coming to the building, and finished during the time when I was going up and coming down in the elevator. That is to say that our paths had crossed without us seeing each other. All that time was quite short, and it was unlikely that those things could have happened like that; but it was possible. The business deal could have just been to make an offer, for example. If that were the case, it would be useless for me to go back the next day.

Nevertheless, there were those two favorable possibilities, and I hung on to them with desperation.

I arrived at my house with a mixture of feelings: on the one hand, each time I thought of the phrase she had said (“I remember it constantly”), my heart beat violently, and I felt like a dark, but vast, possibility was opening before me; it didn’t matter that such a great power had been asleep until that moment and suddenly awakened in me. At the same time, I realized that it could be a long time before I would see her again. So it would be necessary to go and try to find her. I kept on repeating to myself out loud, several times, “It is necessary, it is necessary!”

IX

Early the next morning I was already standing in front of the main entrance to the Technology Company. All of the employees had entered, but she never came. It was becoming clear that she must not work there, though there was still the weak possibility that she had become sick and would not return to her office for several days.

But there was still the other possibility of the business deal, so I decided to wait all morning in the café on the corner.

By around eleven thirty I had already lost all hope, when I saw her come out of entrance to the subway. Terribly anxious, I jumped up and went to meet her. When she saw me, she stopped as if she had suddenly been turned to stone; it was evident that she had not expected anything like this. It was strange, but the feeling that had been so powerful in my mind until now gave me an unusual sense of energy; I felt strong, I felt virile, and ready for anything. So much so, that I grabbed her by the arm, almost with brutality, and I pulled her down San Martin in the direction of the plaza. She seemed deprived of will, and did not say anything.

When we had traveled for a couple blocks, she finally asked me:

“Where are you taking me?”

“To the San Martin Plaza. I have a lot to ask you about,” I answered, while I kept on walking determinedly, holding onto her arm.

She murmured something about the Technology Company, but I continued pulling her and didn't hear what it was she said.

I added:

“There are many things I want to discuss with you.”

She didn't try to resist; I felt like a swollen river that was dragging the branch of a tree. We reached the plaza, and I looked for an isolated bench.

“Why did you run away?” was the first thing I said. She looked at me with the same expression that I had seen the day before when she told me, “I remember it constantly.” It was a strange look, fixed, penetrating, that seemed to come from inside her. That look reminded me of something, some eyes with a similar expression, but I couldn't remember where I had seen them.

“I don't know,” she finally said. “I would like to run away again right now.”

I squeezed her arm. “Promise me you will never run away again. I need you. I need you a lot,” I told her.

She looked at me again as if she were scrutinizing me, but without saying anything. After that she fixed her eyes on a tree in the distance.

From the side she didn't remind me of anything. Her face was pretty, but it had some stiffness. She had long brown hair. Physically, she didn't look more than twenty-five years old, but there was something about her that seemed older, something typical of a person that had lived a lot; no grey hairs or any of those purely material aspects, but there was something undefined, and certainly spiritual in nature; perhaps her expression, but then how could one say that the expression of a human being was something physical?; perhaps because of the way she tightened her mouth, but although her mouth and lips are physical elements, the way she tightened them, and certain wrinkles, are also spiritual elements. I couldn't be sure at that moment, nor could I be certain even now, exactly what it was that gave her the impression of age. I thought it might also have been her way of speaking.

“I need you a lot,” I repeated.

She didn't answer and continued looking at the tree.

Then, without stopping to look at it, she said:

“I am no one, and you are a great artist. I don't see any reason why you need me.”

I shouted at her “I told you I need you! Do you understand me?”

Still looking at the tree, she mumbled:

“Why is that?”

I didn't answer right away. I let go of her arm and started thinking. Why, in fact? Until that moment I hadn't really thought about it, and I had been following some sort of instinct. With a branch I began to draw geometric images on the ground.

"I don't know," I murmured after a while. "I still don't know."

I thought about it seriously for a moment, and with the branch I made my drawings more complicated.

"My mind is like an obscure labyrinth. Sometimes there are flashes in some corridors. I never seem to know why I do certain things. No, it's not that..."

I felt like a fool; this was definitely not my normal character. I made a great mental effort; am I not always rational? On the contrary, my mind is always reasoning like a calculating machine; for example, this very problem, hadn't I spent months reasoning and considering possibilities, and classifying them? And, in a way, hadn't I found Maria finally thanks to my logical capacity? I felt I was close to the truth, very close, and I was afraid I was going to lose it. I made an enormous effort and shouted:

"It's not that I don't know how to reason! On the contrary, I'm always reasoning. But imagine a captain who always sets his course mathematically and then follows it toward this objective with implacable rigor. But who *does not know why he is going toward that objective*, do you understand?

She looked at me for a moment with perplexity, and then looked back at the tree again.

"I know that you must have an essential part to play in what I have to do, although I still don't know what it is."

I continued drawing with the branch, and I made a great mental effort. After a while I added:

"I know for sure that it has something to do with the scene in the little window. You have been the only person who has taken an interest in it."

"I'm not an art critic," she said.

I became furious and shouted:

"Don't talk to me about those idiots!"

She looked at me with surprise, and then I lowered my voice and explained to her why I didn't believe in any of the art critics; in short, the theory of the scalpel and everything else. She listened to me without looking at me, and when I finished she said:

"You complain, but the critics have always praised you."

I was indignant.

"All the worse for me! Can't you understand? It is one of the things that has always disgusted me, making me feel like everything is headed down the wrong path. Just think, for example, what happened in that art gallery. Not one of those charlatans ever realized the importance of that scene. There is only one person who has given it any importance: you. And you are not a critic. No, actually there was one other person who had given it importance, but it was negative; he scolded me, saying it made him feel apprehensive, almost disgusted. On the other hand, you..."

Always looking in the other direction, she said, slowly:

"And could it not have been because I had the same opinion?"

"What opinion?"

"The same as that person."

I looked at her anxiously, but from the side her face, with her tight lips was inscrutable. I responded with great insistence:

“You think the way I do.”

“And what is it that you think?”

“I don’t know; I couldn’t answer that question either. I should have said that you *feel about things* like I do. You looked at the scene like I would have done in your place. I don’t know what you think, nor do I know what I think, but I know you think like I do.”

“But then don’t you think about things when you design your paintings?”

“Beforehand I thought about them a lot, and I constructed them in the way you would construct a house. But not that scene; I thought I ought to paint it without knowing why. And I still don’t know. In reality, it has nothing to do with the rest of the painting, and I even think that one of those idiots made me think about it. I am stumbling around in the dark, and I need your help because I know you think like I do.”

“I’m not sure what you think.”

I began to be impatient, and I answered curtly: “Didn’t I tell you I don’t know what I think? If I could tell you with clear words what I think, it would be almost like thinking clearly. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

I was silent for a moment and thought about it, trying to see clearly. Then, I added:

“I suppose it could be said that all of my previous work is more superficial.”

“What previous work?”

“My work previous to the window.”

I concentrated for a moment, and then I said:

“No, it’s not that exactly, not that. It’s not that it was more superficial.”

So what was it then? Until now, I had never really thought about that problem. Now I realized that I had painted that scene in the window like a somnambulist.

“No, it’s not that it was superficial,” I added, like I was talking to myself. “I don’t know, all this has something to do with humanity in general, you know? I remember that a few days before I painted it I had read that in a concentration camp someone asked for something to eat, and they made him eat a live rat. Sometimes I think that nothing makes sense. On a miniscule planet that for millions of years has traveled toward nothingness where we are born in the middle of pains, we grow, we struggle, we sicken, we suffer, we make others suffer, we shout, we die, and others die, while people are being born to go ahead and start this useless comedy all over again.”

Was it really like that? I continued to wonder about the idea of the lack of meaning. Could our life be only a series of anonymous shouts, in a desert of indifferent stars?

She was still silent.

“That scene of the beach frightens me,” I said finally, “although I know that it is something more profound. No, what I mean to say is that it represents *me*, profoundly. That’s it. It’s still not a clear message, but it profoundly represents *me*.”

I heard her say:

“A message of desperation, perhaps?”

“Yes,” I agreed, “it seems to be a message of desperation. You see how you think the way I do?”

After a moment, she asked:

“Do you believe a message of desperation is commendable?”

I looked at her with surprise.

“No,” I answered, “I don’t think that. And what do you think?”

She waited a long time without saying anything. Finally, she turned her face to look at me fixedly.

“The word commendable has nothing to do with me,” she said as if she was answering her own question. “What matters is the truth.”

“And do you think that scene is realistic?” I asked.

“Of course it’s realistic,” she answered almost cold-heartedly.

I looked at her stern face and her stern expression. “Why that sternness,” I wondered. “Why?” Perhaps she felt my anxiety and my need of togetherness, because for a moment her expression softened and seemed to offer me a bridge; but I knew it was a transitory and fragile bridge, stretched out over an abyss. With a different tone of voice I added:

“But I don’t what you gain by seeing me. I do harm to everyone who comes near me.”

X

We agreed to see each other again soon. It made me ashamed to tell her that I hoped to see her again, or that I wanted see her always, and that she should never ever leave me. In spite of the fact that I have a good memory, I every now and then I have inexplicable gaps. Right now I don’t know what I said then, but I remember that she responded that she had to go.

That same night I called her on the telephone. A woman answered, and when I told her that I wanted to speak to Maria Iribarne she seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then she said she would go and see if she was there. Almost immediately I heard Maria’s voice, but with an almost business-like tone that made my heart miss a beat.

“I need to see you, Maria,” I said. “Since we left each other, I have thought about you constantly, all the time.”

“I stopped, trembling. But she didn’t respond.

“Why don’t you say something?” I asked her with increasing nervousness.

“Wait a moment.” she answered.

I heard her set down the phone. Then a few moments later I heard her voice again, but this time it was her real voice. Now, she also seemed to be trembling.

“I couldn’t talk then,” she explained.

“Why not?”

“There too many people coming and going here.”

“Then how come you can talk now?”

“Because I closed the door. When I close the door, they know that they shouldn’t bother me.

“I need to see you, Maria,” I repeated insistently. “I’ve done nothing but think of you ever since this morning.”

She didn’t respond.

“Why don’t you say something?”

“Castel...” she began hesitantly.

“Don’t call me Castel,” I shouted indignantly.

“Juan Pablo...” she said then, timidly.

I felt an indescribable happiness began with those two words.

But then Maria was silent again.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Why don’t you speak?”
“Me too,” she murmured.
“Me too what?” I asked anxiously.
“I have also done nothing else but think about it.”
“But think about what?” I continued asking, insistently.
“About everything.”
“Why about everything? About what?”
“About how strange all this is... our encounter yesterday... what’s happening to day... I don’t know...”
This sort of imprecision has always irritated me.
“Yes, but I told you that I have not stopped thinking about *you*” I responded. “But you didn’t say you have thought about *me*.”
A moment passed. Then she responded:
“I told you I had thought about *everything*.”
“But you haven’t mentioned any details.”
“It’s just that this has all been so strange... I am so confused... Of course I thought about you...”
My heart pounded. I needed details; details make me happy, not generalities.
“But how, how?...” I asked with increasing anxiety. “I have thought about each one of your aspects, your profile when you looked at the tree, your brown hair, your stern eyes, and how quickly they become soft, the way you walk...”
“I have to stop talking,” she interrupted suddenly. “People are coming.”
“I’ll call you the first thing tomorrow,” I managed to say with desperation.
“Good,” she answered quickly.

XI

I spent the night feeling very upset. I wasn’t able to draw or paint, though I tried many times to begin something. I went out to take a walk, and soon I found myself on Corrientes. Then something strange happened to me; I was looking at everyone with a feeling of sympathy. I think I said that I was going to tell this story in a very impartial way. Now I’ll give the first proof of that, and confess one of my worst defects: I have almost always looked at people with antipathy, and even with disgust, especially the people in a crowd. I have never been able to stand looking at beaches in the summer. A few men and women were dear to me; for others I felt admiration (I’m not envious); for some I felt real sympathy. I have always felt tenderness and compassion for children, (especially when I tried very hard to forget that they would eventually grow up like everyone else); but I always felt that *on the whole* humanity was detestable. I don’t mind saying that sometimes, after seeing some character trait I am not able to eat all day, or paint for a week. It is incredible how greed, envy, petulance, vulgarity, covetousness, and all the kind of attributes that constitute the human condition, can be seen in a face, in a way of walking, or in a gaze. I feel like it is natural that after such an encounter I have no desire to eat, or to paint, or even live. However, I want to make it clear that I’m not proud of this attitude; I know it’s a sign of arrogance, and I also know that my own

soul has been guilty of greed, envy, petulance, vulgarity, and covetousness. But I have said that I intend to write this story with impartiality, and that is exactly what I will do.

That night, therefore, my contempt for humanity seemed to disappear, or at least was temporarily absent. I entered Café Marzotto. I suppose you know people go there to hear tangos, but to hear them like a believer in God listens to the *Passion of Saint Matthew*.

XII

The next morning about ten o'clock I made a telephone call. The person who answered was the same woman as the day before. When I asked to speak with Maria Iribarne, she told me that just that morning she had left for the country. I felt distress.

"To the country?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. Are you Mr. Castel?"

"Yes, I'm Castel."

"She left a letter for you here. I hope you will forgive me, but I didn't have your address."

I had counted on seeing her today, and I had hoped for so many important things that I heard this news it left me stunned. A number of questions occurred to me: why had she decided to go to the country? Evidently she had made that decision following our telephone conversation the night before, because if that was not the case she would have told me something about her plan and, even more important, she would not have agreed to let me call her the next morning. So then, if that decision was made after we talked on the phone, was it also *because of that conversation*? And if so, why?; was she trying to run away from me again like she did before?; was she afraid after agreeing to see me the next day?

That unexpected trip to the country awakened the first doubt. As I always do, I started to recall previous suspicious things that I hadn't thought were important. Why did the tone of her voice change when she spoke on the phone the day before? Who were the people who were coming and going and stopped her from speaking normally? Beside the fact that *this proved that she was capable of simulating*, why did that woman hesitate the first time I asked to speak with Maria Iribarne? But there was one phrase that was stuck in my mind like glue: "When I close the door, they know they shouldn't bother me." I couldn't help but think that around Maria there were many shadows.

I thought about all these things while I was rushing to her house. It was strange that she didn't know my address, since I knew her address, as well as her telephone number. She lived on Posadas, almost at the corner of Seaver.

When I got to the fifth floor and rang the bell, I was filled with emotion. The door was opened by a housemaid who must have been Polish, or something like that. And when I told her my name, she asked me to enter a sitting room that was full of books. The walls were covered with shelves all the way to the ceiling, but there were also piles of books on top of two tables, and even on a chair. Such a large collection of books made me wonder.

When I got up to look at the library, I had the feeling there was someone watching me from behind. I turned around and saw a man standing on the other side of the room; he was tall and slender, and he had a pleasant face. He was smiling as he looked at me but, *as far as far as I could tell*, without seeing me. In spite of the fact his eyes were open, I

realized that he was blind. After that I understood the reason for the abnormal number of books.

“You must be Castel, right?” he said to me cordially, extending his hand.

“Yes, Senor Iribarne,” I answered, offering my hand with confusion, while I tried to imagine what kind of relation there could be between him and Maria.

As he was motioning for me to go and take a seat, I noticed that he was smiling, with a slight expression of irony, and he added:

“My name isn’t Iribarne, and don’t call me senor. I am Allende, the husband of Maria.

Accustomed to listening and then, after interpreting silences, he immediately added: “Maria always uses her maiden name.”

I was petrified.

“Maria has often talked about your painting. Although I became blind a few years ago, I can still imagine fairly well how things look.”

It seemed as though he was trying to excuse himself for being blind. I didn’t know what to say. What I wanted was to be by myself, somewhere out in the street, so that I could think about all of this.

He took a letter out of his pocket and handed it to me.

“Here is the letter,” he said with straightforwardness, as if it was nothing important.

I took the letter and was about to put it away when Allende added, as if he had seen what I was going to do:

“Go ahead and read it. Although, since it’s from Maria, it is probably not anything urgent.”

I was trembling. I opened the envelope while he lit a cigarette, after offering me one. I took out the letter; there was only one sentence:

I also am thinking of you.

Maria

When Allende heard me fold the paper, he said:

“Nothing urgent, I suppose.”

“No, nothing urgent.”

I felt like some kind of monster, seeing that man smile as though he was looking at me with his eyes wide open.

“That’s the way Maria is,” he said like he was talking to himself. “Many confuse her impulses with urgencies. Maria has a habit of doing things quickly, things that don’t change anything. How should I put that?”

He looked at the ground abstractedly, as if he were searching for a clearer explanation. After a moment, he said:

“Like someone who is lost in the desert and quickly finds themselves in a completely different place. You understand? The speed doesn’t matter, since she is always in the same setting.”

He smoked for a moment, as if I was not there, and then he added:

“Although I don’t know whether that’s exactly what it is either. I am not very good at metaphors.

I couldn’t wait to get out of that accursed place, but that blind man didn’t seem to be in any hurry. “What an abominable comedy this is!” I thought.

“Now, for example,” Allende went on, “she gets up early and tells me that she is going to the farm.”

“To the farm?” I asked unconsciously.

“Yes, our country farm. That is, the farm of my grandfather. But now it is the hands of my first cousin, Hunter. I suppose you know him.”

This new revelation filled me with anxiety, and at the same time with disgust: what interest could Maria have in that cynical womanizer? I tried to calm down, thinking that Maria wasn't going to the country because of Hunter but, rather, because she liked to be alone out in the country, and because the country farm belonged to her family. But I still felt quite depressed.

“Yes, I have heard things about him,” I said, with bitterness. And before Allende was able to continue talking, I added, brusquely:

“I have to leave.”

“Good gracious, that's too bad,” Allende said. “I hope we will see each other again some time.”

“Yes, of course, naturally,” I replied.

He accompanied me to the door. I shook his hand and left immediately. While I was in the elevator, I said to myself again with anger: “What an abominable comedy this is!”

XIII

I needed to clear things up and try to think calmly. I walked down Posadas to the side of Recoleta.

My mind was in pandemonium: several different ideas, feelings of love and hate, questions, resentments, and memories, were all mixed together and kept on reappearing.

For example, why on earth did she want me to go to her house to get a letter and then meet her husband? And why hadn't she told me she was married? And what the devil did she want to do on the farm with that degenerate Hunter? And why hadn't she waited for my telephone call? And that blind man, what sort of a creep was he? I already said I had a poor opinion of humanity and, as for blind people, *I could care less*. I feel about them like I do for some animals, cold, slimy, and silent, like snakes. Then, if I add the experience of me reading there in front of him this letter from a woman who was saying, *I am also thinking of you*, it would not be difficult to guess the revulsion I was feeling at that moment.

I tried to organize my thoughts and feelings and proceed methodically, as I always do. I needed to start at the beginning, and the beginning (at least right now) was evidently when we talked on the telephone. And in that conversation there were various things that were unclear.

To start with, if the fact was that she was having relations with other men, as that letter in front of her husband seemed to indicate, why was her voice so impersonal and business like until the door was closed? Then what did it mean when she told me that “when the door is closed they know they shouldn't bother me”? Evidently, she must often close the door when she talks on the telephone. But it wasn't likely that she would shut herself off to have an trivial conversation with friends of the family; that must mean that it was when she spoke with other people like me. How many were there? And who were they?

First, I thought about Hunter, but then I excluded him; why speak to him on the phone, if she could see him whenever she wants at the farm? In that case, who were the others?

I wondered if that took care of the matter of telephone calls. No, it wasn't finished; there was still the problem of her answer to my specific question. I thought bitterly that when I asked her if she had thought about me, after so many vague things, she only said, "didn't I tell you that I thought about everything? That business of answering a question with a question did not help very much. In fact, the proof that her answer was not clear was that she herself felt it was necessary the next day (or that same night) to respond in a more precise way, with a letter.

"So let's think about the letter," I said to myself. I took the letter out of my pocket and read it again:

I also think about you.

Maria

That letter was nervous or, at least the person who wrote it was nervous. That's not the same thing, because if the first was true, it showed a real emotion and, therefore, it was a positive solution for my problem. Whatever it was, I was deeply moved by the signature: Maria. This simplicity gave me the vague idea of closeness, a vague idea that she was already a member of my family and so, in a way, she belonged to me.

Alas! My feelings of happiness are so short-lived... For example, that feeling did not stand up to even the slightest analysis: and didn't her husband also call her Maria? And certainly Hunter would call her that too; what else could he call her? And what about the rest of the people she talked to with the door closed? With the door closed there certainly wouldn't be anyone who would call her, "Miss Iribarne."

"Miss Iribarne!" Now I understood why the housemaid had hesitated that time I made the telephone call. How ridiculous! When you thought about it, it was another sign that that sort of call wasn't completely new. Probably the first time someone asked for "Miss Iribarne" she would have corrected them, stating that it was *Mrs.* But then after getting more calls like that, the housemaid would just shrug her shoulders, and think that it wasn't worth it to correct it. She hesitated, of course, but she didn't correct me.

Turning back to the letter, I thought that there were several possible interpretations. I started with the most unusual thing: the way in which I received the letter. I remembered the way the housemaid apologized: "I'm sorry, but I didn't have your address." It was true, she never asked me for my address, nor had I ever thought about telling her what it was. But the first thing I had done, was to look for her address in the phone book. It was not possible to think that her attitude was attributable to an inconceivable laziness. So the only reasonable conclusion was that *Maria wanted me to go to her house and see her husband.* But why? That fact led to a very complicated situation. It could be she liked to use her husband as an intermediary. It could be it was her husband who liked it that way. Or it could be both of those things. Besides those pathological possibilities, there was a natural one: Maria had wanted me to know that she was married so that I would see that it would be difficult to let things go any further.

I am sure many of those who are now reading this will prefer this last hypothesis and think that only a man like me could choose one of the others. When I had a few friends, they often laughed at my mania of always choosing the most complicated possibility.

And I ask myself, *why does reality have to be simple*. My experience has taught me that, on the contrary, it is almost never that way. And when there is something that seems to be very clear, something that seems to have a simple cause, behind it there are always more complicated motives. An ordinary example: people who give alms usually feel that it makes more generous and better than those who do not give. I can't help but feel disdain for such a simplistic theory. Any one knows, you will never solve a beggar's problem (any real beggar) with a peso, or a piece of bread. All it does is solve the problem of the person who buys some spiritual tranquility and his title of generosity for almost nothing. Just think how stingy these people are when they only give one peso a day to reassure their spiritual tranquility, and the comforting vanity of their kindness. How much more spiritual purity, and how much more courage it takes to overcome the existence of human misery than this hypocritical (and frequent) way of behaving!

But let's get back to the letter.

Only a superficial spirit could be satisfied with a hypothesis like this, since it would be shattered by the simplest analysis. "Maria had wanted me to know that she was married so I would see that it would be difficult to have things progress further." Very nice. But in that case, why resort to such an awkward and cruel method? Couldn't she have told me about it herself, on the phone? And if she didn't want to tell me personally, couldn't she have written to me? There was still another serious argument: in that case, why didn't the letter say that she was married, and ask me to accept just being friends? No sir. On the contrary, the letter was supposed to strengthen our relations, to encourage them, and lead them down a more dangerous path.

So evidently that left the pathological hypotheses. Was it possible that Maria enjoyed using Allende as an intermediary? Or was it him that looked for these opportunities? Or had fate been playing games by causing two people with similar characters to meet?

But then I began to regret having considered these possibilities with my habit of having to endlessly analyze all words and deeds. I remembered how Maria had looked at that tree in the plaza while she listened to what I was saying; I remembered her timidity, and how she fled after our first encounter. And I began to be overcome by an overwhelming feeling of tenderness. It seemed like I was a fragile creature in a world that was cruel and so full of ugliness and misery. I felt the same as I had felt many times since that moment when, in the art gallery, there was a person who felt the same way I did.

I forgot about my futile arguments, and my cruel deductions. I tried hard to imagine her face, her look—that look that reminded me of something I could not define—her profound and melancholy form of reasoning. I felt like the strong desire for love that I had felt during so many years of solitude had now centered on Maria. How could I have thought about so many absurd things?

So then I tried to forget about all of my stupid deductions regarding the phone call, the letter, the country farm, and Hunter.

But I could not do that.

XIV

The following days were hectic. In my haste I had not asked when Maria would return from the country farm. Later on the same day that I went to her home and spoke with

Allende, I made another call to find out. When I spoke with the housemaid, she told me she didn't know when Maria would return. So I asked her for the address of the farm.

That same night I wrote a desperate letter, asking her when she would come back from the farm, and asking her to call me, or write to me, when she returned to Buenos Aires. I went to the Post Office and I had it certified to make sure she would get it.

As I said, those days were very hectic and, over and over again, those negative ideas that tormented me after my encounter with Allende kept coming back to upset me. I also had a dream: one night I visited an isolated old house. It was a house that somehow was familiar to me and that I had longed for since I was born, and when I entered it some old memories returned. But at times I felt lost in the darkness, or I was afraid that there were hidden enemies who might attack me from behind, or people that were whispering and making fun of my naivety. Who were those people and what did they want? And yet, in spite of everything, in that house I felt the love I had as a child come back again, with the same tremors, and that gentle sensation of madness, as well as the feeling of happiness. When I woke up, I realized that the house in my dream was Maria.

XV

In the days before the her letter arrived my thoughts resembled those of a lost explorer in a misty landscape; here and there, with great effort, he was able to make out the vague outlines of people and things, the vague silhouette of dangers and abysses. The arrival of the letter was like when the sun came out.

But it was a black sun, a nocturnal sun. I don't know if one can say that but, although I am not a writer and I am not sure of my precision, I wouldn't change the word nocturnal. Among all of the words that are part of our imperfect language, that word was, I think, the most appropriate one for Maria

This is the letter she sent me:

I have spent three very strange days: the sea, the beach, the roads, were bringing back memories of others days. Not only images, but also voices, shouts and long silences of other days. It is strange, but living is constructing future memories. Right now, here in front of the sea, I know that I am creating small memories that someday will bring me melancholy and despair.

The ocean out there is permanent and enraged. My former tears, useless; the times I waited on an isolated beach looking tenaciously at the sea, also useless. Have you ever felt and painted this memory of mine, or have you painted the memory of many other people like you and me?

But now your figure steps in between; you are there, between the sea and me. My eyes meet yours. You are silent, a little disconsolate, and you look at me asking for help.

Maria

How well I understood, and what wonderful feelings this letter awakened in me! Also, the fact that she used the familiar word "tu," instead of the more formal "usted," gave me the certainty that she was mine. And only mine: "you are there between the sea and me;"

there was no one else, only the two of us, like I had intuited since she looked at the scene in the window. In fact, how could she not use the familiar form of speech if we had always known each other since more than a thousand years ago? If she stopped in front of my painting and looked at that little scene without either seeing or hearing the crowd of people around us, it had to be because we had always known each other, and I immediately knew who she was and what she was like, just like I needed her and she also needed me.

Ah, and however I killed you! It was I who killed you, I who saw your silent and anxious face, as though through a wall of glass, without being able to touch it. It was I, so stupid, so blind, so egotistical, so cruel!

But that's enough outpouring of emotion. I said I would tell this story very concisely, and that's what I will do.

XVI

I loved Maria desperately, and nevertheless the word *love* was never spoken between us. I anxiously awaited her return from the country so I could say it.

But she didn't return. While the days were passing, a strange sort of madness began to grow inside me. Then I wrote a second letter where I told her simply: "I love you, Maria, I love you, I love you."

After two more days, I finally received a reply that said only this: "I am afraid of doing you great harm." I wrote back right away: "I don't care what you could do to me. If I could not love you, I would die. Every second I spend without seeing you is an endless torture for me."

More dreadful days passed, but there was no response from Maria. Desperate, I wrote: "You are trampling on our love."

The next day on the telephone I finally heard her voice, distant and tremulous. Except for the word *Maria*, which I said over and over, I couldn't say anything else, nor would I have been able to, since my throat was so choked up I could not say anything distinctly. She told me:

"I am coming back to Buenos Aires tomorrow. I'll talk to you when I get back."

The next day in the afternoon she called me from her house.

"I want to see you right away," I told her.

"Yes, we can see each other right away," she responded.

"I'll wait for you at San Martin plaza," I said.

Maria seemed to hesitate. Then she answered:

"I would prefer Recoleta. I'll be there at eight o'clock."

How I had longed for that moment!; and how I wandered around through the streets so that time would pass more quickly! What tenderness I felt in my heart, how beautiful the world seemed to me, the summer afternoon, the children playing on the sidewalk! Now I realize how much love blinds us, and what a magical power of transformation it has. The great beauty of the world! Yes, it's enough to make you die of laughter.

It was just a few minutes after eight when I saw Maria approaching, looking for me in the darkness. It was already too dark to see her face, but I could tell it was her by the way she walked.

We sat down on a bench. I squeezed her arm and repeated her name stupidly, many times. I was not able to say anything else, and she remained silent.

Finally, I asked her forcefully, "Why did you go to the farm?" "Why did you leave me alone? Why did you leave that letter in your house? Why didn't you tell me that you were married?"

She didn't answer. I pressed on her arm. She moaned.

"You're hurting me, Juan Pablo," she said softly.

"Why don't you say anything? Why didn't you answer my questions?"

She still didn't say anything.

"Why? Why?"

She finally answered:

"Why does everything have to have an answer? Let's not talk about me. Let's talk about you, about your work, and your preferences. I have constantly thought about your painting, and about what you told me in San Martin Plaza. I want to know what you are doing now, if you have painted anything or not."

I pressed on her arm again with anger.

"No," I responded. "I do not want to talk about me, I want to talk about the two of us; I want to know if you love me. Only that: if you love me."

She didn't answer. Frustrated by her silence and by the darkness that didn't let me see her expression and guess her thoughts, I lit a match. She quickly turned around and hid her face. I grabbed her head with my other hand and forced her to look at me; she was crying silently.

"Ah... So then you don't love me," I said bitterly.

However, as the match was going out I saw she was looking at me tenderly. Then, in total darkness, I felt her hand caress my face. She told me softly:

"Of course I love you... Why do we have to say things like that?"

"Yes," I answered, "but how do you love me? There are many ways to love. One can love a dog, or a child. I am talking about *love, true love, do you understand?*"

I had a rare intuition; I quickly lit another match. Just like I had intuited, Maria's face was smiling. That is, she wasn't smiling then, but she had been smiling a millisecond before that. I have often turned around when I had the feeling that someone is spying on me from behind only to find nobody was there; and still, I could tell that the emptiness surrounding me was recent, and that something had just disappeared, as if a slight tremor was vibrating nearby. This was something similar.

"You were smiling," I insisted angrily.

"Smiling?" she asked, with astonishment.

"Yes, smiling; I am not someone you can deceive easily. I always pay close attention to little details."

"And what details have you noticed?"

"There was still something in your face. The after-affect of a smile."

"And what was there that I could smile at?" she insisted sharply.

"At me, at my naivety, at my question if you really loved me, or only like a child, what do I know... But you were smiling. Of that I have no doubt."

Maria suddenly stood up.

"What are you doing?" I asked anxiously.

"I am leaving," she answered tersely.

I jumped up like a spring.

“What do you mean you’re leaving?”

“I said I am leaving.”

“What do you mean you’re leaving? Why?”

She didn’t answer. I grabbed her arms and started to shake her.

“Tell me why you are leaving?”

“I am afraid you wouldn’t understand me.”

I was furious.

“What? I ask you something which, for me, is a matter of live or death, and instead of answering me, you smile, and then you’re annoyed. Of course I wouldn’t understand.”

“You are imagining that I smiled,” she answered tersely.

“I am sure of it.”

“Well, you are mistaken. And it hurts me terribly that you would think that.”

I didn’t know what to think. In truth, I had not seen a smile, but something like a trace of one, on a face that was now serious.

“I don’t know, Maria. Forgive me” I said despondently. “But I was so sure that you had smiled.”

After that I was silent, still feeling despondent. After a moment I felt her hand take hold of my arm tenderly. Then I heard her say, weakly, and painfully:

“But how could you think that?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” I said, almost weeping.

She made me sit down again, and she caressed my face tenderly, like she had done before.

“I warned you I would do you great harm,” she said after a few moments of silence. “Now you can see that I was right.”

“It was my fault,” I responded.

“No, perhaps it has been my fault,” she said pensively, as if she was talking to herself.

“How strange,” I thought.

“What is strange?” Maria asked.

I was astonished, and I even thought (many days afterward) that she had even been able to read my thoughts. Now, today, I am no longer sure that I might not actually have said those words out loud without realizing it.

“What is strange?” she asked me again since, in my confusion, I hadn’t answered her.

“It is strange about your age.”

“My age?”

“Yes, your age. How old are you?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“That’s exactly what is strange,” I answered. “The first time I saw you, I thought you were a girl who was about twenty six years old.”

“And now?”

“No, not now; at first I was puzzled, because something about your appearance made me think...”

“What did it make you think?”

“I made me think of something many years ago. Sometimes I feel like I must have known you when I was a child”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty eight.”

“You’re really quite young.”

I was puzzled again. Not because she thought my age was unusual, but because, after all, I ought to be much older than her; because, in any case, she couldn’t have been more than twenty six.

“You’re quite young,” she said again, perhaps noticing my surprise.

“And what about you, how old are you?” I insisted.

“What does that matter?” she answered seriously.

“Then why did you ask me about my age?” I said, almost irritated.

“This conversation is absurd,” she replied. “All this is foolishness. I am astonished that you worry about things like this.”

Me worried about things like this? Having a conversation like this? In truth, how was it possible that we were talking about all this? I was so confused that I had forgotten the cause of the first question. Only many hours later when I was home was I able to realize the significance of this apparently trivial conversation.

XVII

For almost a month we saw each other almost every day. I don’t want to think about all the things that happened then that were both wonderful, and horrible. There were too many sad things, for me to want to think about them again.

Maria started coming to my studio. The incident of the matches, with a few small variations, had reoccurred two or three times, and I was obsessed with the idea that her love was, at best, the love of a mother or a sister. So, physical union seemed to me the only guarantee of real love.

I will admit now that that was only one of the foolish ideas that must have made Maria smile at me behind my back. Far from calming me down, physical love made me even more disturbed; it brought more tortuous doubts, painful scenes of incomprehension, and cruel experiments with Maria. The hours we spent in my studio are hours that I will never forget. My feelings during those times oscillated between the purest form of love and the most unbridled form of hate as a result of the contradictions and the inexplicable attitudes of Maria, and I began to believe that all of this was just a pretense. At times she seemed like a chaste adolescent, at others just an ordinary woman, and then a long list of doubts flashed through my mind: where? how? who? when?

At such times I couldn’t escape the idea that Maria was acting out one of the most subtle and most cruel comedies and that, in her hands, I was like an ingenuous child whom she deceived with superficial stories so he would eat or sleep. Sometimes I was overcome by a frantic sense of shame and would rush to get dressed and go out in the street to feel the fresh air and think about my doubts, and my apprehensions. At other times, my reactions were acerbic and brutal; I would throw myself over her, grab her arms like with pincers and twist them while I stared her in the eyes, trying to force her to guarantee that she loved me, *with real love*.

But none of that is what I really want to say. I must confess that I do not really know what I mean by saying “with real love.” And the strange thing is that although I often use that expression in my interrogations, until now I never tried to think what it really meant.

What does it mean? A love that includes physical passion? Perhaps I was longing for it in my desperation to communicate more deeply with Maria. I was certain that, on some occasions, we did achieve togetherness, but in a manner so subtle, so fleeting, so tenuous, that afterwards I felt more desperately alone than before, like the vague dissatisfaction one feels after trying to recreate the love felt during a dream. I knew that we sometimes seemed to achieve some moments of communion. And being together helped to heal the sadness that always accompanies those feelings, certainly caused by the essential incompatibility of those elusive moments of loveliness. It was enough for us to look at each other to know that we were thinking, or better yet feeling, the same thing.

But experiencing those moments cost us dearly, because everything that happened after that seemed coarse and awkward. Anything we did (talking, having a cup of coffee), was painful because it demonstrated how fleeting those moments of communion were. And, what was even worse was that it caused new gaps between us because, while desperately trying to somehow consolidate this merging, I forced her to have physical relations. But this only served to confirm the impossibility of prolonging or finalizing it, with a physical union. But she made things worse because, perhaps in an effort to make me forget about trying to solidify things, she acted as though she felt a real, and almost unbelievable, pleasure. And then I either rushed to get dressed and run out into the street, or else I grabbed her brutally by the arms and tried to force her to reveal the truth of her sentiments and feelings. And it was all so upsetting that when she sensed we were about to have physical relations, she would try her best to run away. I finally reached the point of complete skepticism, and I tried to make myself understand that not only was it useless for our love, but also harmful.

With this attitude I only managed to increase my doubts about the nature of her love, since I wondered if she was only doing this so she could argue that physical relations had a negative effect on our love so that she could avoid it in the future, when the truth was that she hated it from the beginning and, therefore, was only pretending to feel pleasure. Of course, there were other disagreements too, and it was useless for her to try to convince me. It only managed to drive me crazy, with new and more subtle doubts, that resulted in more difficult interrogations.

What bothered me most, thinking of this hypothetical deceit, was that I had handed myself over to her completely defenseless, as helpless as a baby.

“If I ever suspect that you have deceived me,” I told her, “I will kill you like a dog.”

I would twist her arms and stare into her eyes, trying to see if I could discover anything suspicious, or some brief glint of irony. But whenever that happened, she looked at me like a frightened child, or with sad resignation, while she silently got dressed.

One time our discussion was more violent than usual, and I shouted at her, calling her a whore. Maria became paralyzed and mute. Then, slowly and silently she went to get dressed behind the folding screen for the models. And after struggling with my hate and my regret, when I went to tell her I was sorry, I saw that her face was covered with tears. I didn't know what to do: I kissed her tenderly, I asked her to forgive me, I also started to cry, and I accused myself of being a cruel, unjust monster. This happened while she still showed some sign of sadness but then, just as soon as she calmed down, she began to smile happily and it seemed unnatural that she didn't continue being sad. She could calm down, but it was very suspicious that she would be so happy after what I had called her. It seemed to me that any woman would feel humiliated after being called something like

that, even prostitutes, but no woman would have been able to be happy again so quickly, *unless there was some truth in that qualification.*

Similar things happened almost every day. Sometimes they ended with relative calm and we went out to walk in the Plaza like two enamored adolescents. But those moments of tenderness were becoming more seldom, and more brief, like unstable moments of sunlight in a sky that was more and more stormy and cloudy. My doubts and questions were enshrouding everything, like clouds that were covering and smothering the trees of a park in a monstrous shroud.

XVIII

My interrogations, which became more and more frequent and tortured, were caused by her silence, her looks, her puzzling words, a trip to the farm, and the things she loved. One time I asked her why she called herself “Miss Iribarne,” instead of “Mrs. Allende.”

She smiled and said: “What a child you are. What importance could that have?”

“For me it is very important,” I responded, trying my best to scrutinize the expression in her eyes.

“It’s a custom in our family,” she replied, as she stopped smiling.

“Nevertheless,” I argued, “the first time when I called and asked for Miss Iribarne, the housemaid hesitated for a moment.”

“It just seemed that way.”

“It could be, but then why didn’t she correct me?”

Maria smiled again, this time more strongly.

“I already told you,” she said, “it is a custom in our family, and the housemaid knows that. Everyone calls me Maria Iribarne.”

“Maria Iribarne seems natural, but its not nearly as natural that she did not seem to be surprised when I called you “Miss.”

“Ah... I didn’t realize that that’s what it was that surprised you. Well, that is not what they usually call me, and that’s probably why she hesitated.”

She became thoughtful, as if this was the first time she had considered this problem.

“And yet, she never corrected me,” I insisted.

“Who?” she asked, as if she had just become conscious again.

“The housemaid. She didn’t correct me when I said Miss.”

“But, Juan Pablo, all this has absolutely no importance, and I don’t know what you are trying to prove.”

“I want to prove that it is probably not the first time someone has called you Miss. If it was the first time, the housemaid would have corrected it.”

Maria started laughing.

“You are absolutely fantastic!” she said, caressing me with tenderness.

I was still serious.

“Besides,” I continued, “when I called the first time and you answered, your voice was neutral, almost businesslike, until you closed the door. Then you spoke to me with a tender voice. Why did you change like that?”

“But, Juan Pablo,” she replied, now speaking more seriously, “how could I talk to you that way in front of the housemaid?”

“Yes, that makes sense, but you said ‘when I close the door they know they shouldn’t bother me.’ That remark couldn’t just have referred to me, since it was the first time I called. Neither could have it referred to Hunter, since you can talk to him whenever you visit the farm. It seems obvious to me that there must be others who call you, or have called you. Isn’t that right?”

Maris looked at me with sadness.

“Instead of looking at me sadly, you could answer me,” I replied with irritation.

“But, Juan Pablo, all this you’re saying is childish. Of course I talk to other people: cousins, friends of the family, my mother, what else can I say...”

“But it seems to me that if they were conversations like that, they wouldn’t need to be hidden.”

“And who gives you the authority to say that I am trying to hide myself?” she responded angrily.

“Don’t get excited. You once mentioned someone named Richard, who was neither a cousin, a friend of the family, or your mother.”

“Poor Richard,” she said softly.

“Why poor?”

“You know very well that he committed suicide, and that, in a way, it was partly my fault. He wrote me terrible letters, but I couldn’t ever do anything for him. Poor, poor Richard.”

“I would like to see some of those letters.”

“Why, if he is already dead?”

“It doesn’t matter, I would still like to see them.”

“But I burned all of them.”

“You could have said that in the beginning. Instead you asked, ‘Why, if he is already dead?’ It’s always the same. Besides, why did you burn them, if it’s really true that you did that? You told me once that you always keep love letters. The letters of Richard must have been very incriminating for you to have done that. Isn’t that right?”

“I didn’t burn them because they were incriminating, I did it because they were so sad. They made me depressed.”

“Why did they depress you?”

“I don’t know... Richard was a depressing man. He was a lot like you.”

“Were you in love with him?”

“Please, Juan Pablo...”

“Please what?”

“But no, Juan Pablo. You imagine too much...”

“I don’t think it’s unreasonable. He falls in love with you, he writes letters so terrible that you thought it better to destroy them, he commits suicide, and you think my idea is unreasonable. Why?”

“Because, in spite of everything, I was never in love with him.”

“Why not?”

“I really don’t know. Perhaps because he wasn’t really my type.”

“You just said he seemed like me.”

“For God’s sake, I meant he was like you, in some ways, but not that he was *identical*. He was a man who believed in nothing, he was destructive, he had a lethal mind, he was nihilistic. Something like the negative side of you.”

“That’s all right. But I still don’t understand the reason why you felt like you had to destroy his letters.”

“I already told you, they made me feel depressed.”

“But you could have kept them without reading them. And that only proves that you read them again, until you burned them. And if you read them again, it must have been because there was something in them that attracted you.”

“I never said that he wasn’t attractive.”

“You said he wasn’t your type.”

“My God, My God. Death isn’t my type either, but just the same it often attracts me. Richard attracted me something like the way I am attracted by death, or the void. But I think one shouldn’t turn themselves over passively to feelings like that. Maybe that is the reason I didn’t love him. That’s why I burned his letters. When he died, I decided to destroy everything that prolonged his existence.”

She still felt depressed, and I could get another word from out of her about Richard. But I should also say that it wasn’t really Richard that bothered me most, since by now I knew enough about him. It was the unknown persons, the shadows she never mentioned that, nevertheless, I felt were still moving about silently and mysteriously in her life. The worst things I imagined about her were those anonymous shadows. They tortured me, and today I am still tortured by a word that escaped from her lips in a moment of physical pleasure.

But of all those complicated interrogations, there was one that threw tremendous light on Maria and her love.

XIX

Obviously, since she had married Allende, it was logical to think that once she must have felt something for that man. I should say that this problem, that we could call “the Allende problem,” was one that obsessed me the most. There were several enigmas that I wanted very much to clarify, but especially these two: had she loved him before?, and did she still love him? These two questions could not be considered all by themselves, since they were related to others: if she didn’t love Allende, who did she love? Me? Hunter? One of those mysterious persons on the telephone? Or, was it possible that she loved different people in different ways, like it happens with certain men? But it was also possible *that she didn’t love anyone*, and that, one after another, she told each one of us poor devils that we were *the only one*, and that the others were nothing more than shadows with whom she had only a superficial, or apparent, relationship.

One day I decided to clarify the Allende problem. I began by asking her why she had married him.

“I loved him,” she said.

“So now you don’t love him.”

“I didn’t say that I stopped loving him,” she responded.

“You said ‘I loved him.’ You didn’t say, ‘I love him.’”

“You always questions words, and then you twist them so they’re unbelievable,” Maria protested. “When I said I married him because I loved him, I didn’t mean I no longer love him.”

“Ah, then you do love him,” I said quickly, as though I was trying to catch her saying something that contradicted something she had told me earlier.

She remained silent, looking hurt.

“Why don’t you say anything?” I asked.

“Because it seems useless. We’ve had this same discussion many times in almost the same form.”

“No, it’s not the same as other times. I asked you if you loved Allende now, and you told me you did. I seem to remember that once before, here in the doorway, you told me that I was the first person you had loved.”

Maria was silent again. I was irritated not only because she was contradictory, but also because it was always so difficult to get her to make any declaration.

“So what’s your answer?” I asked her again.

“There are many ways to love, and be loved,” she answered, exhausted. “You will think that now I can no longer love Allende in the same way I did when we were married many years ago.”

“In what way was that?”

“What do mean, in what way? You know what I mean.”

“I don’t know anything.”

“I have told you many times.”

“You have told me, but you have never explained.”

“Explained!” she said bitterly. “You have said many times there are many things that you can’t explain, and now you tell me to explain something so complicated. I have told you quite often that Allende is a great companion for me, that I love him like a brother, that I take care of him, that I feel a great tenderness for him, a great admiration for his calm spirit that, in many ways, is superior to me in every way and that, in comparison to him, I feel ungenerous and guilty. How could you ever imagine that I don’t love him?”

“I’m not the one who said you don’t love him. You yourself have told me that now it is not like it was when you were married. Perhaps I ought to conclude that when you were married you loved him like you say you now love me. On the other hand, several days ago, in the port, you told me I was the first person you had truly loved.”

Maria looked at me sadly.

“All right let’s forget this contradiction,” I continued. “And let’s go back to Allende. You said you loved him like a brother. Now I need to have you answer a single question: Do you sleep with him?”

Maria looked at me with even greater sadness. She was silent for a while, and then she asked me with a sad voice:

“Is it necessary that I also have to answer that?”

“Yes, it’s absolutely necessary,” I insisted.

“It seems horrible that you are interrogating me like this.”

“It’s quite simple: you only have to say *yes* or *no*.”

“The answer is not that simple: one can do it, and not do it.”

“All right,” I said coldly. “That means yes then.”

“All right: yes.”

“Then you desire him.”

I made that affirmation carefully watching her eyes; I did it with a bad intention; it was the best way to make several conclusions. It’s not that I thought that Maria really desired

him (although that was possible given Maria's temperament), but that I wanted to clarify the business of "brotherly love." As I expected, Maria took a long time to answer. She must have been trying hard to figure out what to say. Finally, she said:

"I have said that I sleep with him, not that I desire it."

"Ah!" I said triumphantly. "That means you do it without wanting to, but *making him believe that you desire it.*"

"I have not said that," she murmured slowly.

"Because it's evident," I went on implacably. "If you acted like you didn't feel anything, and didn't desire him, if you acted like the physical union is something you only do because he loves you, because you admire his higher spirit, and so forth, Allende would never sleep with you again. In other words, the fact that you continue doing it shows that you are capable of deceiving him, not only about your feelings, but also about your sensations. And that you are capable of a perfect imitation of pleasure."

Maria wept silently, and stared at the ground.

"You are incredibly cruel," she was finally able to say.

"All right, let's set aside the consideration of ways of acting: I only want to know the reason. The reason is that you are capable of deceiving your husband for years, not only about your feelings, but also about your sensations. The conclusion could be that this is only the first time; if so, how do I know that you haven't also been deceiving me? Now you can understand why I have so often tried to ascertain your true feelings. I can always remember how the father of Desdemona warned Othello that a woman who had deceived her father was also able to deceive another man. And nothing has been able to make me forget this fact: that you have been constantly deceiving Allende for years."

For a moment I felt the desire to increase the level of cruelty, and though I realized the vulgarity and the stupidity, I added:

"Deceiving a blind man."

XX

Even before I said that phrase, I felt a little sorry. Behind the fact that I wanted to say it and feel a sort of perverse satisfaction, a purer, more tender self was resolved to take the initiative once the cruelty of these words took their effect and, in a way, I had already silently taken the part of Maria, even before I said those stupid, useless words (what good could possibly come of them?). So, before they started to come out of my lips that other self was horrified as if, in spite of everything, it hadn't really believed that I would say them. And as they were being said, it started to take control of my consciousness and my will, and almost arrived at its decision in time to keep the phrase from being finished. And by the time I finished it (because in spite of everything, I did finish it), it had taken control of me and was making me ask for Maria's forgiveness, to humiliate myself before her, and admit my stupidity and my cruelty. How many times that accursed division between my different selves had been guilty of atrocious things! While one part of me wanted to take a positive attitude, the other one denounced the fraud, the hypocrisy, and the false generosity; while one wants to insult a human being, the other feels sorry for him, and accuses me of being guilty of the same things I am criticizing in others. While one makes me see the beauty of the world, the other points out its ugliness and the

ridiculousness of all feelings of happiness are. Unfortunately, it was already too late to close the open wound in Maria's soul (and this is what my other self, sunken of a sort of filthy cave was sure of with malevolent satisfaction), it was now irremediably late. Maria bent over in silence, with complete exhaustion, while her look (how well I knew it!) raised the drawbridge that sometimes stretches between our spirits; it was now the hard look of two impenetrable eyes. The idea that, this bridge had been raised for good, suddenly occurred to me, and in my sudden desperation I did not hesitate to submit myself to the greatest humiliations: to kiss her feet, for example. All I accomplished was for her to look at me with pity, and for her eyes to soften. But out of pity, only with pity.

As she left the studio, she assured me once again that she did not have hard feelings toward me, and I immersed myself in a total annihilation of willpower. I remained there without being able to do anything, in the middle of the studio, thinking of that permanent bridge like a fool. Until I suddenly realized there were several things that I had to do.

I ran out into the street, but Maria was nowhere in sight. I took a taxi to her house, because I thought she wouldn't go there right away, and I hoped to meet her before she arrived. However, I waited there in vain for more than an hour. I called on the telephone from the café, and they told me she wasn't there, and hadn't returned since she left at four (the time she left to go to my studio). I waited for several more hours. Then I called on the telephone again, and they told me Maria wouldn't come home until later that night.

Feeling desperate, I went out to look for her everywhere, that is, in the places where we usually went, or where we met each other: the Recoleta, the Avenida Centenario, the Plaza Francia, or Puerto Nuevo. I didn't find her in any of those places, and I finally realized that the most likely thing was exactly that she would go anywhere, except for those places. I started to go back to her house again, but it was already very late and she probably would have already entered. So I called on the telephone again and, in fact, she had returned; but they told me that she was already in bed and that she would not be able to speak on the phone. She had mentioned my name, however.

Something had broken between us.

XXI

I went home, feeling totally alone.

Usually, that feeling of being alone in the world came mixed with an arrogant feeling of superiority. I felt scorn for other people; I pictured them as filthy, ugly, incompetent, stupid, and mean. My solitude didn't bother me, it felt practically Olympian.

But at that moment, as in many other similar ones, I found myself alone as a result of my own worst attributes and the base things I had done. At times like that I felt the world was despicable, but I understood that I was also part of it. In those moments I was invaded by a fury of annihilation and was tempted by the idea of suicide, I drank until I was drunk, and I looked for prostitutes. And I feel a certain satisfaction in proving my baseness, and in verifying that I am no better than the foul creatures around me.

That night I got drunk in a little café. I was in the worst of my drunkenness when I felt so much disgust for the woman I was with, and for the sailors around me, that I ran out of the café. I walked down Viamonte until I came to the docks. I sat down there and wept. The dirty water below me constantly tempted me. Why should I have to suffer like this?

Suicide is tempting because the annihilation is so easy; in one second all this absurd universe collapses like a gigantic simulation, as if the solidity of the skyscrapers, of the battleships, the tanks, and the prisons, were nothing more than a phantasmagoria without any more solidity than the skyscrapers, battleships, tanks, and prisons of a nightmare.

In the light of this reasoning, life seems like a long nightmare from which one can free oneself with death, which would then be like a kind of awakening. But awakened to what? The unwillingness to throw myself into absolute and eternal nothingness is what has kept me from all these attempts at suicide. In spite of everything, man has such an attachment to all that exists that he prefers to put up with its imperfection and the pain of its ugliness, rather than destroy the phantasmagoria with an act of his own will. And it also usually happens that, when we have arrived at the edge of the desperation that precedes suicide for having completed the inventory of all that is wrong, and having arrived at the point at which this evil is unbearable, any good element, no matter how small, acquires a disproportionate value, and ends up being decisive. So we hold onto it desperately, rather than fall into the abyss.

It was almost dawn when I decided to go home. I don't remember how, but in spite of this decision (that I remember perfectly), I suddenly found myself in front of the house of Allende. The strange thing is that I don't remember what happened in between. I see myself sitting at the docks, looking at the dirty water and thinking: "Now I need to go to bed," and then I see myself in front of the house of Allende, looking at the fifth floor. Why was I looking at it? It was absurd to imagine that, at that time, I would be able to see her somehow. For a long time I was undecided, until an idea occurred to me: I went down the street, looked for a café, and called on the telephone. I did that without any thought for what I would say to justify calling at that hour. When someone answered, after having waited for about five minutes, I remained paralyzed without opening my mouth. Shaken, I hung up the phone and left the café, starting to walk randomly. But then, suddenly, I found myself back in the café and, so as not to call attention, I asked for a gin, and while I was drinking, I decided to go back to my house.

Some time after that I was finally back in my studio. I fell into bed with my clothes on and went to sleep.

XXII

I woke up trying to shout and found myself standing on my feet in the middle of my studio. I had had a dream: I and several other persons had to go to the house of a man who had invited us. I arrived at his house which, from the outside, was like all the others and went inside. After I entered, I realized that it was different from all the others. The owner said to me:

"I have been waiting for you."

I felt like I had fallen into a trap and tried to flee. I made a great effort, but for some reason I couldn't control my body. I resigned myself to wait and see what happened, as if it were something that had nothing to do with me. The man began to transform me into a human sized bird. He began with the feet, and I saw how they changed, little by little, into chicken feet, or something like that. After that, the transformation of the rest of my body continued from bottom to top, like water filling a tank. My only hope now was my

friends who, for some reason, were not there. When they finally arrived, something horrible occurred: they didn't notice my transformation. They treated me the same as always and must have seen me the same as always. Thinking the sorcerer must have somehow controlled them so they would see me as a normal person, I decided to tell them what had happened. Although I intended to explain everything calmly so I wouldn't make the sorcerer have a violent reaction (and make him do something even worse), I somehow started shouting. Then I noticed two astonishing things: the words I wanted to say were like the sharp screech of a bird, a strange, desperate screech, perhaps because it was locked inside a human being. And what was even worse, my friends did not hear that screech, just like they didn't see me as a large bird. On the contrary, they seemed to hear my ordinary voice, saying ordinary things, because at no time did they show the slightest astonishment. Frightened, I stopped talking. The owner of the house looked at me with a sarcastic gleam in his eyes, which I was the only one who noticed. Then I realized that *no one, ever* would know that I had been converted into a bird. I was lost forever, and the secret would go with me to the grave.

XXIII

As I said, when I woke up I was on my feet in the middle of the room, bathed in cold sweat.

I looked at the clock: it was ten o'clock in the morning. I ran to the telephone, and when someone answered they told me she had gone to the farm. I was stunned. I laid down on the bed and stayed there for a long time without knowing what to do, until I decided I would write her a letter.

I don't remember the exact words of that letter, but it was very long. I do know that I tried to tell her I was sorry, that I was a fool who did not deserve her love, and that I was condemned, with good reason, to be completely alone until I die.

Several painful days passed with no word from her. I sent her a second letter, and then a third, and a fourth, always saying the same thing, but each time with greater desolation. In the final letter I decided to tell her about everything that happened that night following our separation. I didn't leave out any of the vile things I had done, and I even went so far as mentioning my urge to commit suicide. It made me ashamed to use that weapon, but I did it just the same. I should also add that while I was describing my despicable actions and the feeling of aloneness in front of her house on Posadas Street, I felt sorry for myself, and I even wept with compassion. I was hopeful that Maria would feel something similar when she read my letter, and with that hope, I became much happier. By the time I sent the certified letter, I was feeling quite optimistic.

In the return mail a letter came from Maria that was filled with tenderness. I felt like some of the moments of love were reoccurring, if not with all the marvelous innocence of our first meeting, at least with some of the original feelings, just like a king is always a king, even though his unfaithful vassals have momentarily betrayed and debased him.

She wanted me to come to the farm. I packed my bag like a madman, I grabbed a box of paintings, and hurried to Constitution Station.

XXIV

The station where I arrived was one of those rural stations with a few country folks, a chief in shirtsleeves, a large wheel, and some jars of milk.

Two things irritated me: the absence of Maria, and the presence of a driver.

As soon as I stepped out, he came up and asked me:

“Are you Mr. Castel?”

“No,” I answered calmly. “I am not Mr. Castel.”

But right away I thought that it was going to be difficult to wait for the return train; it might take half a day, or something like that. I reluctantly decided to admit my identity.

“Uh, yes,” I added, almost right away, “I am Mr. Castel.”

The driver looked at me uncertainly.

“Here take these,” I said, handing him my suitcase, and the box of paintings.

We walked over to the car.

“Mistress Maria has had an indisposition,” the man informed me.

“An indisposition!” I murmured with derision. How well I recognized these tricks! Again I thought about returning to Buenos Aires, but now, besides the necessity to wait for another train, there was something more: the need to convince the driver that, in fact, I was not Mr. Castel, or maybe, the need to convince him that if in fact I was Mr. Castel, I was not out of my mind. I quickly thought about the different possibilities that faced me, and I arrived at the conclusion that no matter what I did, it was going to be difficult to convince the driver. I finally decided to let myself be driven to the farm. Besides, what would happen if I went back? It was easy to imagine, because it would be a repetition of the type of things I had done before; I would end up being angry, increased by the impossibility of not being able to direct it toward Maria, I would suffer horribly because of not seeing her, I would not be able to work, and all for the hypothetical punishment of Maria. I say *hypothetical* because I would never be able to know if I truly punished her with this kind of reprisals.

Hunter looked a lot like Allende (I think I have said they were cousins); he was tall, dark, and rather thin, but with an elusive look. “That man is a weakling and a hypocrite” I thought. That thought made me happy (at least it’s what I thought at that moment).

He welcomed me with an ironic politeness, and he introduced me to a thin woman who was smoking with a very long cigarette holder. She had a Parisian accent, and her name was Mimi Allende; she was also repulsive and myopic.

But where in the devil was Maria? Is she really indisposed then? I was so anxious that I almost forgot there were other people there. But when I quickly remembered where I was, I turned toward Hunter abruptly, in order *to control him*. It is a method that gets excellent results with individuals of that type.

Hunter was scrutinizing me with an ironic expression, which he tried to change right away.

“Maria was not feeling well and has gone to bed,” he said. “But I think she will come down very soon.”

I cursed myself for being distracted: with those people; it’s always necessary to be on the alert. Also, I was determined to pay attention to his ways of thinking, his jokes, his reactions, and his sentiments. All that would help me a great deal with Maria. So I started to *look and listen*, and do it in the clearest possible state of mind. I had thought I

would be cheered by the hypocrisy of Hunter, and the woman. Nevertheless, my state of mind was gloomy.

“So you are a painter,” the myopic woman said, looking at me with half-closed eyes like someone does when there is dust in the wind. This gesture, certainly caused by her effort to help her myopia without glasses (as if glasses would make her look more ugly), only increased her state of insolence and hypocrisy.

Yes, senora,” I answered with anger. Although I was certain that she was only a senorita.

“Castel is a marvelous painter,” Hunter remarked.

After that, as a way of praise he added several idiocies, repeating some of the stupid comments that the critics make every time there was an exhibition. I can’t deny that the repetition of some of those clichés showed he had a certain sense of humor. I noticed that Mimi was still watching me with her half-closed eyes, and I became rather nervous, expecting that she would probably say something about me. I still didn’t know much about her.

“Which painters do you prefer?” she asked me as though I were taking an exam.

No, now that I’m thinking about it, she asked me that after we went outside. I had paid little attention to that woman who was sitting in the garden next to a table where they had put the things for her tea. Hunter took me inside to show me the room where I was to stay. While we were going up (the house had two stories), he explained to me that the house, with some improvements, was almost the same as the one his grandfather had built in the old quarters of the farm that belonged to his great-grandfather. “And what does that matter to me?”, I thought. It was obvious that the guy wanted to show that he was simple and forthright, although I don’t know for what reason. While he was saying something about the sundial, or something about the sun, I was thinking that Maria ought to be in one of these upstairs rooms. Perhaps, due to my curious expression as I looked around, Hunter told me:

“There are several bedrooms here. In fact it is a very comfortable house, although it is built in a very amusing fashion.”

I remembered that Hunter was an architect. It remained to be seen what he considered buildings that were not amusing.

“This is my grandfather’s old bedroom, and it is now the one I am using,” he explained to me, indicating the one that was at the top of the stairs.

Then he opened the door of another bedroom.

“This is your room,” he said.

He left me alone in the room, and said he would wait for me downstairs at tea time. I was barely alone when my heart began beating rapidly, because I assumed that Maria was in one of those bedrooms, perhaps in the room next to mine. Standing in the middle of the room, I didn’t know what to do. Then I had an idea: I walked over to the wall between the next bedroom (not the one belonging to Hunter), and I knocked softly with my fist. I waited for a reply, but nothing came. I went out in the hall and looked to see if anyone was there; when I saw there was no one, I walked over to door and raised my hand to knock. But then I lost my courage, and I ran back into my room. After that I decided to go back down to the garden. I was very disoriented.

I sat down at the table, and once again the foolish woman asked me which painters I preferred. I awkwardly mentioned a couple names: Van Gogh, el Greco. She looked at me with irony and said to herself:

“Well.”

Then she added:

“I can’t stand people who are too great. I’ll tell you,” she went on, looking at Hunter, “that those fellows like Michael Angelo, or el Greco annoy me. Their grandeur and their dramatics are so aggressive! Don’t you think that’s really bad taste? I believe that an artist ought to accept the duty of not drawing too much attention. Their excesses of dramatism and uniqueness disgust me. Just think, wanting to be unique is to imply that everything else is mediocre, which to me is a very dubious form of art. I think if I were to paint or to write, I would do things that never draw attention.

“I am sure of that,” Hunter commented sarcastically.

After that, he added:

“I am very sure that you would never want to write something like, for example, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

“*Quelle horreur!*” Mimi exclaimed, directing her tiny eyes toward the sky. After that she finished her thoughts saying, “that included all those *nouveaux riche* of the mind, including that *moine*, what was his name?... *Zozime?*”

“Why don’t you say Zozimo, Mimi? Unless you decide to say it in Russian.”

“Now you’re starting your perfectionist foolishness again. You know Russian names can be said in many different ways. Like that character in a *farce*: “Tolstoy or Tolstua,” that can, and ought to be said in two different ways.”

“That must be why,” Hunter said, “that in a Spanish translation I read (from Russian, according to the editorial) they put Tolstoy with an umlaut on the second o.”

“Yes, I love these kind of things,” Mimi declared happily. “I once read a French translation of Chekhov where, for example, you find some word like *ichvochnik* (or something like that) and there is a footnote. You go to the bottom of the page and find out it means, I’ll say, for example, *porteur*. Imagine, then they don’t explain why, in that case, they do not have, in Russian, words like *malgré* or *avant*. Isn’t it strange? I’ll tell you that I love things like this in translations, especially when they are Russian novels. Could you stand to read a Russian novel?”

“She directed that question all of a sudden at me, not expecting an answer and looking again at Hunter, she continued saying:

“The fact is that I have never been able to finish reading a Russian novel. There are thousands of characters, and yet it turns out that there are only four or five. When you start out, you get accustomed to a man called Alexandre, but then he is called Sacha, then Sachka, Sachenka, until he has a grandiose name like Alexandre Alexandrovich Bunine, and finally, it is only Alexandre Alexandrovich. Whenever you get used to something, it changes again. It never stops, and each character is like a whole family. You can’t tell me that it isn’t the same for you too.”

“I’ve already told you, Mimi, that there is no reason to say Russian names in French. Instead of saying Tchékhev, why don’t you say Chekhov, which seems more normal? Besides, that “same” is a terrible Gallicism.”

“Please, don’t be so boring, Luisito,” Mimi begged. “When are you going to learn not to say what you think? You’re so boring, so *épuisant*... don’t you think so?” she said, looking at me.

“Yes,” I answered, hardly knowing what I was saying.

Hunter looked at me ironically.

I felt terribly sad. Some say I am impatient. Even now, I am amazed that I listened with so much attention to those idiocies and, also, that I can still remember them so well. The strange thing is that while I listened to them I tried to cheer myself, thinking, “These people are frivolous, and superficial. People like this can’t be of much interest to Maria. This kind of people could never be rivals.” And, nevertheless, I was still not able to feel happy. In a very serious way, I felt that someone was telling me that I should be sad. And when I couldn’t figure out what it was that was, I became ill-humored and nervous, no matter how much I tried to calm down, promising myself that I would figure this out once I was alone. I thought for a while that the cause of my sadness could be the fact that Maria was not there, but then I thought that this absence irritated me more than it made me sad. *No, it wasn’t that.*

Now they were talking about detective novels. While that was happening, I heard the woman ask Hunter if he had read the latest novel, *The Seventh Circle*.

“What for?” Hunter answered. “All detective novels are the same. Once a year is all right, but one every week makes me think that the reader has very little imagination.”

Mimi was indignant. What I mean is *she only pretended to be indignant*.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “They are the only kind of novels that I can read now. I have to say that I really find them fascinating. Everything is so complicated, and the *detectives* are so marvelous, and they know all the facts of the Ming dynasty, graphology, Einstein’s theory, baseball, archeology, chiromancy, political economy, statistics of the growth of rabbits in India, etc. And they are so infallible it is amazing. “Isn’t that right,” she asked, looking at me again.

She asked me so unexpectedly that I didn’t know what to say.

“Yes, that’s right,” I said anyway.

Hunter looked at me ironically again.

“I am going to tell Georgie that detective novels disgust you”, Mimi added, looking at Hunter with severity.

“I didn’t say they disgusted me; I said they’re all the same.”

“I’ll tell Georgie anyway. It’s a good thing that not everyone has your pedantry. For example, senor Castel likes them, isn’t that right?”

“Me?” I asked, horrified.

“Of course,” Mimi carried on, not even waiting for my answer, and turning to Hunter again, “if everyone were as *savant* as you are, I couldn’t live with it. I am sure you must have some theory about detective novels.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Hunter agreed, smiling.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Mimi insisted, looking at me again, as though she was using me as an example, “I know him quite well. Come on, you have no scruples about saying what you think. You must be dying to explain everything about it.”

Hunter didn’t have to be begged to do just that.

“My theory,” he explained, “is the following: the detective novel represents the same thing as the novel of chivalry at the time of Cervantes. And even more: I think one could

write something equivalent to *Don Quijote*: a satire of the detective novel. Imagine an individual who has spent his life reading detective novels and who has come to believe the crazy idea that the world functions like in a novel of Nicholas Blake, or Ellery Queen. Imagine then, that this poor fool finally starts discovering crimes and starts acting in real life, like a *detective*, in one of these novels. I think that could be something amusing, tragic, symbolic, satirical, and beautiful.”

“Then, why don’t you do something like that?” Mimi asked, mockingly.

“For two reasons,” Hunter answered. “I am not Cervantes, and I suffer from laziness.”

“I thing the first reason would be enough,” Mimi insisted.

And after saying that, she unfortunately looked at me again:

“This man,” she said, pointing at Hunter with the corner of her mouth, “speaks against detective novels because he is incapable of writing one, even if it were the most boring novel in the world.”

“Give me a cigarette,” Hunter said, turning to his cousin. Then he said: “When are you going to stop being so overstated? I the first place, I have not spoken against detective novels; I just said that it would be possible to write something like *Don Quijote* in our time of life. In the second place, you are mistaken about my incapacity with that type of work. I once had a great idea for a detective novel.”

“*Sans blague!*” was all that Mimi said.

“Yes, that’s what I said. Just imagine: a man has a mother, a wife, and a child. One night someone mysteriously kills the mother. The police investigations don’t come up with anything. Some time later the wife is killed; the police still can’t find who did it. Finally, the child is killed. The man is driven crazy, because he loved them all, especially the child. Feeling desperate, he decides to try and solve it himself. With the same methods used in a detective novel—inductive, deductive, analytical, synthetic, etc.—he comes to the conclusion that a fourth person will be killed on the same day, at the same time, in the same place. His conclusion is that the murderer will now kill him. On the day, and at the exact time, the man goes to the place where the forth murder should occur and waits for the murderer to arrive. But the murderer never comes. He reexamines his deductions, thinking he may have picked the wrong place; no place is right; then he could have chosen the wrong time; no the time is also right. Then, the horrible conclusion: *the murderer must already be there*. In other words, *he is the murderer* who committed these crimes, in a state of unconsciousness. The *detective* and the murderer are the same person.”

“Too extravagant for my taste,” Mimi said. “And how does it end? Didn’t you say there would be a fourth murder?”

“The conclusion is obvious: the man commits suicide,” Hunter said.

“It seems entertaining, but it’s one thing to tell a story like that, and another to write it as a novel.”

“That’s true,” Hunter admitted calmly.

After that Mimi began to talk about a palm reader she had known in Mar del Plata, and about a female clairvoyant. Hunter laughed, and Mimi was annoyed.

“You think it has to be something serious,” she said. “Her husband is a professor in the Department of Engineering.”

They continued, talking about telepathy, and I was becoming desperate because Maria did not appear. When I paid attention again, they were talking about the status of labor.

“What’s happening,” Mimi concluded, clenching her cigarette holder like a baton, “is that people no longer want to work.”

Toward the end of the conversation I had a sudden insight that calmed my unexpected sadness: I came to the conclusion that Mimi had arrived a short time ago, and that Maria had not come down because she couldn’t stand the opinions (which she had listened to often enough) of Mimi and her cousin. But now that I remember it, that conclusion was partly the consequence of something said by the driver who brought me to the farm which, at the time, I hadn’t paid much attention to. It was something about a cousin of the owner of the farm who had just arrived from Mar del Plata to have tea. That had to be it: Maria was so disturbed by the unexpected arrival of that woman that she feigned an illness, and locked herself in her bedroom. It was clear she couldn’t put up with people like that. And the sadness I had felt dissipated with that realization and explained the cause of my sad feelings. On arriving at the farm and finding out that Hunter and Mimi were some frivolous hypocrites, the most superficial part of my soul cheered up because it saw that there was no way that Hunter could be a threat to our relationship. But a deeper level saddened, thinking (or rather, feeling), that Maria was a member of this group of people and that, in some ways, she might have similar attributes.

XXVI

When we got up from the table to take a walk, I saw that Maria was walking toward us, confirming my hypothesis: she had waited for this moment to join us in order to avoid the boring conversation at the table.

Each time Maria approached me in the middle of a group of other people, I thought: “there is a secret link between me and this marvelous person,” and then when I thought about my feelings, I realized that she had become indispensable to me (like someone one encounters on a desert island). But then, after the fear of total aloneness had passed, she had become a sort of luxury that filled me with pride, and it was in this second phase of our relationship when difficulties began to occur. In the same way that someone who is dying of hunger accepts something unconditionally and, once his most urgent needs are satisfied, begins to complain constantly about its defects and disadvantages. In the last few years I have seen immigrants, who come here with the humility of someone who has been freed from a concentration camp and happily performed the most humiliating jobs. But it is quite unusual when a man is not satisfied with having escaped torture and now is able to live happily; that when he starts to enjoy this new sense of security, arrogance, pride and vanity, which seemed to have been lost forever, come back again like animals who fled after being frightened; and in some ways they reappear with greater petulance, as if they were ashamed of having sunken so low. It is quite possible that in such circumstances this man will commit acts of ingratitude and disregard.

Now that I am able to analyze my feelings with tranquility, I think there was something like that in my relations with Maria, and I feel that in some way I am paying for the stupidity of not having been satisfied with the part of Maria that saved me (momentarily) from loneliness. This feeling of pride, this growing desire for total possession, should have told me that I was going down the wrong road, assisted by vanity and arrogance.

When I saw Maria this time this feeling of pride was almost completely eradicated by a sense of guilt and shame caused by the memory of the awkward incident in my studio, by my stupid, cruel, and even vulgar, accusation of “deceiving a blind man.” I felt my legs weakening, and a cold paleness spread over my face. Feeling like that in the presence of these people! And not being able to throw myself humbly at Maria to ask her forgiveness to calm the horror and the disgust I felt for myself!

Maria, though, didn’t seem to lose control, and I immediately began to be filled again with the vague sadness that had possessed me before.

She greeted me with a very neutral expression, as if she were trying to show the two cousins that there was nothing more between us than a simple friendship. I remembered, with a feeling of contempt, the way I had treated her a few days before. In one of my moments of desperation I told her that some day at dusk, I would like to go and look at the towers of San Gimignano from the hilltop. She looked at me with enthusiasm and said: “Oh, that would be great, Juan Pablo!” But when I suggested we could slip away that evening, she was disturbed and looked at me somberly, saying: “We have no right to think we’re alone here. This situation is very complicated.” When I asked her what she meant by that, she answered in an even more serious tone of voice: “Happiness is surrounded by pain.” Then I left her abruptly, without saying goodbye. More than ever I felt that I could never be completely one with her, and that I would have to resign myself to have fragile moments of communion which were as wistfully elusive as the memory of certain dreams, or the happiness of some musical passages.

And now she appeared completely controlled, calculating every word, and each expression on her face. She was even capable of smiling at that other woman!

She asked me if I had brought the drawings.

“What drawings?” I exclaimed with anger, knowing I was spoiling some complicated maneuver, even if it was in our favor...

“The drawings of the harbor you promised to show me,” she answered calmly.

I looked at her hatefully, but she accepted my glower calmly, and for just the tenth of a second her eyes softened, and she seemed to ask me: “Have pity on me for all of this.” Dear, dear Maria! How I suffered in that moment of her request, and my humiliation! Then I looked at her with tenderness, and I answered:

“Of course I brought them. I have them in my bedroom.”

“I would like very much to see them,” she said, once again with the coldness of before.

“We could see them right now,” I said, figuring out what she was trying to do.

I trembled with the thought that Mimi might join us. But Maria knew her better than I, and right away she added something that would hamper any intention of joining us:

“We’ll be right back.” she said.

After she said that she took firmly me by the arm and led me toward the house. I looked back at those who remained there, and I seemed to notice a sense of purpose in the way that Mimi looked at Hunter.

XXVII

It had been my original intention to spend several nights at the farm, but as it turned out, I only spent one night. The very next day, the sun had just begun to come out when I

slipped out of the house, carrying my suitcase and my box. This fact might seem like madness, but it will soon be clear that this action was justified.

Right after we left Hunter and Mimi and went inside, we went upstairs to look for the supposed drawings. Shortly after that we came back down with my box of paintings, and a folder that supposedly contained the drawings. This trick was Maria's idea.

When we arrived the cousins had disappeared. After that Maria seemed to be in very good humor, and while we walked through the woods toward the coast, she was quite enthusiastic. She was a different woman from the one I had known before that moment of sadness in the city; she was now more energetic, more full of vitality. She seemed to have a sensitivity I had never seen before, a sensitivity for colors, and smells. She was strangely enthusiastic (strangely for me, since I have an introspective sensitivity, almost purely imaginary) about the color of a tree trunk, of a dry leaf, of some little bugs, and the fragrance of the eucalyptus mixed with the odor of the sea. And far from making me happy, it made me sad and desperate, because I felt that this aspect of Maria was almost totally unknown to me, and that it must have something to do with Hunter and Mimi, or someone else.

That sadness gradually increased; perhaps also because of the sound of the waves that was more and more audible. When we came out of the woods and I saw the sky above the sea coast, I felt like the sadness was unavoidable; it was the same as always with beauty, or at least with a certain type of beauty. Is everyone like that, or is it just another defect of my unfortunate state of mind?

We sat down on some rocks and, for a long time we were silent, listening to the loud breaking of the waves, and feeling the drops of foam that occasionally flew all the way to the top of the cliff and landed on our faces. The stormy sky reminded me of the work of Tintoretto in *The Rescue of a Saracen*.

"How many times I have dreamed of sharing the view of this sky and the sea with you," Maria said.

After a while she added:

"Sometimes it seems like we had always seen this view together. When I saw that solitary woman in the window of your painting, I felt you were like me and that you were also looking blindly for someone, some sort of silent interlocutor. Since that day, I thought about you constantly; I dreamed about you being here, in this same place where I have spent so much of my life. Once, I even thought about looking for you to tell you about it. But I was afraid of being mistaken, like I had been mistaken before, so I waited with the hope that it would be you who looked for me. But I did everything I could to make that happen, I called for you every night and I became so sure of meeting you that, when it happened in front of the elevator, I was paralyzed with fear and could not say more than something stupid. When you left because you thought it was something else, I ran after you like a madwoman. Then, there were those moments in San Martin Plaza when you thought it was necessary to explain everything, and I tried to lead you astray, wavering between the anxiety of losing you forever, and the fear of hurting you. I tried to discourage you, however, to make you think that I didn't understand what you were trying to say."

I didn't say anything. Beautiful feelings and somber ideas circled around in my mind, as I listened to her voice, her wonderful voice. I was plunging into a sort of enchantment. The setting sun was lighting up a gigantic expanse between the clouds in the west. I felt

that this magic moment was *never* going to happen again. “Never again, never again,” I thought, while I began to feel the vertigo of being on the edge of a cliff and to think how easy it would be to drag her into the abyss with me.

I heard bits and pieces: “My God... many things in this eternity in which we are one... horrible things... not only are we this world, but also fragile creatures of flesh and bone, full of ugliness, and insignificance...”

The sea had begun to change into a dark monster. Soon the darkness was complete and the sound of the waves below us acquired a somber attraction. To think that it would be so easy! She said we were creatures full of ugliness and insignificance; but although I knew the point to which I was capable of ignoble things, it filled me with despair to think that she could be the same, and that she *surely* was. “But how?” I thought, “and with whom, and when?” And a dark desire was growing in me to fall on her and tear her apart with my nails, then choke her and throw her into the sea. Then I heard a few other fragments: she talked about a cousin, Juan, or something like that; she talked about her childhood in the country; I thought I heard something about ‘cruel and torturous things’ that had happened between her and this other cousin. It seemed to me that Maria was making an important confession to me and that I, like a fool, had missed it.

“What cruel and torturous things!” I shouted.

But, strangely, she didn’t seem to hear me; she had also fallen into a sort of stupor, and she also seem to be all by herself.

A long time passed, perhaps a half hour.

Then I felt that she was caressing my face like she had done on other similar occasions. I still couldn’t speak. Like with my mother when I was a child, I put my head in her lap, and we stayed that way for some time, silent and without contact, caused by infancy, and by death.

What a pity that underneath it there were so many inexplicable and suspicious things! How I wished that I was mistaken, and how I wished that Maria was nothing more than in this moment! But that was impossible. While I heard the beats of her heart together with my own, and while her hand caressed my hair, somber thoughts were passing through my mind like in a swampy basement; they were waiting for the time to come out, sloshing and grunting, sluggishly in the mud.

XXVIII

Strange things happened. When we got back to the house, we found Hunter very upset (although he is one of those who think it is bad taste to show your feelings); he tried to hide it, but it was evident that something had happened. Mimi had left and in the dining room things were prepared for dinner. It was clear that we were late, since we had hardly arrived when the food was brought out, very rapidly and efficiently. While we were eating almost nothing was said. I paid close attention to Hunter’s words and gestures, because I hoped they might shed light on some of the things I was thinking, and that some other other things might be clarified. I also watched Maria’s face carefully, but it was impenetrable. In order to decrease the tension, Maria said that she was reading a novel by Sartre. Obviously irritated, Hunter commented:

“Novels from that period. Let them come and go... but they’re not worth reading!”

We were silent for a while, and Hunter made no effort to tone down the effect of those words. I concluded that he must have something against Maria. But, like it was before we went out to the coast, there was nothing that indicated what that *something* was. Maria had appeared during our long conversation, and it was not hard to imagine it could have been something said during that time, or maybe the long time we spent at the coast. My conclusion was that it must be Hunter was jealous, and this proved that there was something more than friendship between them, and being relatives. Of course that didn't mean that Maria was in love with him; on the contrary, it was more likely that Hunter was irritated when he saw that Maria was interested in other people. Whatever it was, if Hunter's irritation was caused by jealousy, that would have to be why he was angry with me, since there was nothing else between us. That's the way it was. If there hadn't been other things, I would have been happy to think it was nothing more than a dirty look Hunter gave me when Maria spoke of the time we had spent on the cliff.

Just as soon as we got up from the table, I said I was tired and went up to my room. My intention was to go over as many reasons as possible for this problem. I went up the stairs, I opened the door to my room, I turned on the light, I banged on the door to make it sound like it had been closed, and I stayed in the hallway where I could listen. Right away I heard Hunter's voice saying something agitated, although I couldn't distinguish exactly what he was saying. I didn't hear Maria say anything, and I heard Hunter say something longer and even more agitated than before. Maria said a few words that were superimposed over the last things he said, and then I heard the sound of chairs moving. Right away after that I heard the steps of someone coming up the stairs, and I quickly entered my room and closed the door so I could listen through the key hole. A few moments later I heard footsteps pass in front of my door, and they were a woman's steps. I stayed awake for a long time, thinking about what had happened, and trying to hear if anything else was happening. But I didn't hear anything all night long.

I wasn't able to sleep, and I began to be tormented by a number of thoughts that hadn't occurred to me before. I soon realized the my first conclusion was naïve; I had thought, correctly, that it wasn't necessary for Maria to be in love with Hunter for him to feel jealous, and that conclusion had calmed me. Now I realized, even if it was not necessary, *neither was it impossible*. Maria could love Hunter, and he could still feel jealousy.

So, were there reasons to think that Maria felt something for her cousin? Of course there were reasons! In the first place, if Hunter annoyed her with his jealousy and she didn't love him, then why did she come to the farm so often? Evidently there was no one else beside Hunter living on the farm; I didn't know if he was unmarried, a widower, or divorced, but I seemed to remember that once Maria had said he and his wife were separated. But still, the important thing was that he was living by himself on the farm. In the second place, Maria never showed any particular interest in Hunter, and she spoke of him like he was just another member of the family. And she also had never insinuated that Hunter was in love with her, nor that he was also jealous. In the third place, that afternoon Maria had spoken of her weaknesses. What did she mean by that? In my letters to her I had mentioned several despicable things (about my drunken sprees, about prostitutes), and she had told me that she understood, that she was also not completely innocent. Did that mean that in her life there were things as hidden, and as despicable, as there were in mine? Couldn't this whole business about Hunter be some sort of weak passion like that?

I pondered these conclusions for a long time and considered them from different points of view. My final conclusion, which I was absolutely certain was correct, was that *Maria and Hunter were lovers*.

It had just gotten light when I came down the stairs with my suitcase and my box of paintings. I met one of the housemaids who had started opening the doors and windows to do some cleaning. I asked her to tell the owner for me that I had to leave immediately for Buenos Aires. The housemaid looked at me with an expression of surprise when I told her that I was going to the train station on foot.

Once I got there, I had to wait for several hours in the small station. I had thought that perhaps Maria might appear; I waited for that possibility with the same bitter feeling one feels as a child, when one has hidden somewhere thinking that something is wrong, and is waiting for the arrival of an adult to come and find him and recognize the mistake. *But Maria never came*. When the train finally arrived, I looked down the road once more with the hope that she would appear at the last minute, and I felt an infinite sadness when I did not see her.

I looked out the window while train was traveling toward Buenos Aires. We passed by a farmhouse, and a woman standing outside looked at the train. Then, a stupid thought occurred to me: "I am seeing this woman for the first time. And I will never see her again in my life." This thought floated like a cork in an unknown river. For a moment it continued floating by that woman at the farmhouse. What did that woman matter to me? But I couldn't stop thinking that she had existed for a moment, and she would never exist again. From my point of view, it was as if she had died. If the train had come a bit later and someone had called her from inside, she would never have existed in my life.

Everything seemed fleeting, transitory, useless, imprecise. My mind was not working properly, and Maria appeared to me from time to time like something sad and uncertain. Not until some hours later did my thoughts finally began to recover their ordinary precision and strength.

XXIX

The days before the Maria's death were the most terrible days of my life. It is not possible for me to give a thorough account of everything I felt since, though I remember many of the things with incredible clarity, there are hours, and even days, that seem like formless dreams. I think I spent entire days under the effect of alcohol, lying in my bed, or on a bench in Puerto Nuevo. When I arrived at Constitution Station I remember I entered the bar and asked for whisky several times, then I vaguely remember I got up and took a taxi to another bar on Cinco de Mayo street, or perhaps on Leandro Alem. After that there were noises, music, shouts, a laugh that annoyed me, broken bottles, and very penetrating lights. Sometime later, I remember feeling very sluggish, with a terrible headache, in a cell in the police station, when a guard opened the door and an officer told me something; afterward I was walking down the street, getting drunk again. I think I went into another bar. Hours (or days) later someone brought me to my studio. Then I had a nightmare when I was walking across the roof of a cathedral. I also remember waking up in my dark room with the frightening idea the room had become so large that, no matter how hard I tried, I would never be able to get outside its walls. I don't know

how many days passed until I woke up seeing the early morning light shining through the skylight. Then I drug myself into the bathroom and got into the bathtub with my clothes on. The cold water began to calm me down, and a few separate things came to my mind, although they were broken and scattered, like things one sees after a flood: Maria on the cliff, Mimi smoking with her long cigarette holder, the train station with a restaurant called The Trust, or maybe The Farm, Maria asking about the drawings, me shouting “what drawings!”, Hunter looking at me deviously, me listening anxiously to the cousins from upstairs, a sailor tossing a bottle, Maria walking toward me with penetrating eyes, Mimi saying Tchékhov, a filthy woman kissing me and me hitting her in the face, Hunter complaining about detective novels, the driver from the farm. There were also small parts of my dreams: the cathedral roof on a dark night, and the unbelievably large room.

Then, while I was getting cold those isolated fragments joined with others that entered my mind, but with the same desolation of things that emerged from flood waters.

I got out of the tub and took off my wet clothes; I put on dry clothes, and I started writing a letter to Maria. First, I said I wanted to give her an explanation for my flight from the farm (I crossed out “flight” and wrote “departure”). I added that I was very grateful for the interest she had in me (I crossed out “in me” and wrote “for me as a person”). I thought she was very kind-hearted and was full of pure sentiments, in spite of the fact she said she sometimes followed her “base impulses.” I said that I appreciated the good intention of the things she had said, but as she could imagine (I crossed out “imagine” and wrote “calculate”), it was not sufficient to maintain or prove there was a feeling of love. It was not possible to understand how a woman like her could tell her husband and me that she loved us and, at the same time, was sleeping with Hunter. With the additional problem—I added—that she was also sleeping with her husband, and with me. I concluded saying that, as she could realize, this kind of things gave a lot to think about, and so forth.

I reread the letter and it seemed to me that, with the changes I had made, it was hurtful enough. I sealed it and went to the Post Office and sent it certified.

XXX

Right after I left the Post Office I realized two things: I had not told her in the letter why I assumed she and Hunter were lovers; and I didn’t know why it was that I wanted to hurt her so mercilessly. Perhaps to force her to change, in case my conjectures were true. That was clearly ridiculous. To force her to run after me? It was not credible that would happen after what I had said. However, I thought about the fact that in the depths of my soul, what I really wanted was for Maria to come back to me. But in that case, why not tell her straight away, without hurting her, explaining that I had left the farm suddenly because I had noticed that Hunter was jealous. In the final analysis, my conclusion that she was Hunter’s lover not only was hurtful, but was completely gratuitous. However, it was the only hypothesis that I could devise to help me be certain of what was happening in the future.

So once again I had made a foolish mistake with my custom of writing spontaneous letters without thinking, and sending them right away. *Important letters must kept for at least one day*, until you can see clearly what the possible consequences might be.

There was only one possible last resort: the receipt for the certified letter. I searched in all of my pockets, but I could not find it; I must have stupidly thrown it away back there. Nevertheless, I ran back to the Post Office and I got in the line for certified letters. When my turn finally came, I asked the female employee, while I made a horribly hypocritical effort to smile:

“Don’t you recognize me?”

The woman looked at me with astonishment, certainly thinking I was crazy. To make her realize her mistake, I told her I was the person who had just sent a letter to the farm called *Los Ombúes*. The astonishment of that stupid woman only seemed to increase, and perhaps wanting to share it, or ask for advice, she turned her face to another employee for a moment, and then looked back at me.

“I lost the receipt,” I explained.

She didn’t say anything.

“What I mean is that I want the letter back, but I don’t have the receipt” I added.

The woman and the other employee looked at each other for a moment like two friends in a dog fight. Finally, with the expression of a person who is totally amazed, she asked:

“You mean that you want us to return you a letter?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And you don’t even have a receipt?”

I had to admit that in fact I did not have that important document. The astonishment of the woman had now reached its limit. She muttered something I didn’t understand while looking again at her fellow worker.

“You want us to return you a letter?” she stammered.

The woman smiled very stupidly, but with the purpose of wanting to appear to have more vivacity. She looked at me and said:

“That’s completely impossible.”

“I can show you my notes,” I said, removing some papers.

“There is nothing you can do. The rule is final.”

“As you can understand, the rule must be based on reason” I exclaimed violently, while I was more irritated by a mole with long hairs the woman had on her cheek.

“Do you know the rule?” she asked me sarcastically.

“I do not need to know the rule, Miss,” I answered coldly, knowing that the word *Miss* ought to make her feel mortally wounded.

The eyes of the nasty woman were now shining with indignation.

“You know, Miss, that the rule cannot be illogical. It must have been created by an intelligent person, not by a madman. If I mail a letter and right away come back and ask that it be returned because I have forgotten something important, the logical thing is to comply with my request. Or does the mail insist on delivering letters that are incomplete, or misstated? It is quite clear and logical that the mail is a means of communication, not means of compulsion. The mail is not *obligated* to send a letter if I don’t want it sent.

“But you wanted to,” she responded.

“Yes,” I shouted, “but I repeat, *now I don’t want to send it!*”

“Don’t shout at me, and don’t be ill-mannered. Now it’s too late”

“It’s not too late because the letter is still here,” I said, point at the hamper of letters.

People behind me began to protest noisily. The spinster’s face trembled with rage. With total repugnance, I felt that all my hate had now focused on her mole.

“I can prove that I am the person who has sent the letter,” I insisted, showing her my personal papers.

“Don’t shout at me, I’m not deaf,” she said again. “I am not the one who can make a decision like that.”

“Ask the person in charge, then.”

“I can’t do that. There are too many people here waiting. You must understand that we have a lot of work to do here.”

“This matter is part of that work,” I insisted.

Some of those who were waiting wanted her to give me the letter and just get it over with. The woman hesitated for a moment, while she acted like she was working on something else. Finally, she went inside and after a while came back, looking like an angry dog. She started searching through the hamper.

“What was the name of the farm?” she asked with hissing sound like that of a viper.

“*Los Ombúes*” I answered with venomous calm.

After a search which she purposely made take longer than necessary, she took the letter in her hands and began to examine it as if it was offered for sale and she was doubting the advantage of buying it.

“It only has some initials and the address.”

“So what would you expect?”

“What documents do you have to prove to me that you are the one who sent this letter?”

“I have the first draft,” I said, showing it to her.

She took it and looked at it, and gave it back to me.

“And how do we know that this is the same as the letter?”

“Very easy, we open the envelope and verify that they are the same.”

The woman doubted for a moment; she looked at the sealed envelope and then she said to me:

“And how can we open this letter if we’re not sure that it’s yours. I can’t do that.”

The people who were waiting behind me began to protest again. I had the urge to do something nasty.

“This document is not enough,” the harpy concluded.

“Do you think that perhaps an identity card would be sufficient?” I asked with ironic politeness.

She thought about it for a moment, looked at the envelope once more, and then said:

“No, not just an identity card, because here there are only the initials. You would also have to show me some address certificate. Or if not, a driver’s license, because a driver’s license has an address.”

She thought for a moment, and then added:

“Although it is difficult to suppose that you have not moved to another address since you were eighteen years old. Because of that, we are definitely going to also need an address certificate.

An uncontrollable fury exploded in me which I felt also reached Maria and, strangely, also Mimi.

“Just send it then, and go to hell!” I shouted as I left. I walked out of the Post Office in a foul mood, and I even wondered if somehow I might go back and set the hamper of letters on fire. But How could I do that? Tossing a Match? Most likely it would go out

before it got there. If I could pour gasoline over it first, that would certainly work, but it made things much more complicated. Anyway, I wanted to wait until the time people got off work and insult the pathetic imbecile.

XXXI

After waiting for an hour, I decided to leave. What would I actually gain by waiting to insult that imbecile? On the other hand, during that time I thought about a number of things that helped to calm me down: the letter was just fine, and it should be sent to Maria. (Something like this had happened to me very often; I have struggled senselessly against some obstacle that doesn't let me do something that I consider necessary and then with anger I accept defeat and finally, sometime later, I realize that it was the right thing to do after all.) In reality, when I wrote the letter, I did it without thinking about the fact that some of the hurtful things seemed to be undeserved. But then I started to think again about all the things that had happened before the letter, and then I remembered a dream that I had on one of the nights when I was drinking: looking out from a hiding place I saw myself, sitting on a chair in a dark room without furniture or decorations, and behind me there were two people who were watching me with diabolical expressions of irony; one was Maria, and the other Hunter.

When I remembered that dream, a heart-rending sadness took control of me. I turned away from the door of the Post Office and began to walk slowly.

Some time later I found myself in Recoleta, seated on a bench under a gigantic tree. The places, the trees, the paths of our best moments began to transform my ideas. What was it, after all, that I had *against* Maria? The best times of our love (her face, a tender look, the feeling of her hand brushing my hair) began to gently take control of my soul, with the same care with which one embraces a loved-one who has had an accident and couldn't bear any foul treatment. Taking control of me little by little, my sadness changed into anxiety, the feeling hate toward Marin into hate toward myself, and my sluggishness into a need to run home to my house. On the way back to my studio I began to realize what I needed to do: to speak with her, to call her on the telephone at the farm right away, without wasting time. Why hadn't I thought about that possibility earlier?

When they answered the phone, I almost didn't have the strength to say anything. It was the housemaid who answered it. I told her that I needed to speak with Miss Maria right away. A little later the same voice returned and told me that the lady would call me back in about an hour.

The wait seemed interminable.

I don't remember very well what was said in that conversation on the phone, but I do recall that instead of asking her for forgiveness for what I said in the letter (the reason for which I had made the call), I actually said things that were even stronger than what I had said in the letter. Of course that didn't happen without reason; the truth is that I started out speaking to her with humility and tenderness, but I began to be upset by the sorrowful tone of her voice, and the fact that, as she often did, she wouldn't respond to any of my questions. The dialogue, or better, monologue, was becoming more violent, and the more violent it was, the more sorrowful she seemed, and the more that upset me because I was very aware of the reason, and the injustice of her pain. I ended by shouting at her that she

was killing me, (which play-acting, of course), and that I needed to meet with her immediately in Buenos Aires.

She didn't give a precise answer to any of my questions, but finally after my insistence and my threats to kill myself, she promised to come to Buenos Aires the next day, "although she didn't know why."

"The only thing we will achieve," she added with a weak voice, "is to hurt each other cruelly once again."

"If you don't come, I will kill myself," I repeated. "Think about it carefully before you make a decision."

I hung up the phone without saying anything else, and the truth is that at that moment I had in fact made up my mind to kill myself if she didn't come and clarify the situation. I was strangely satisfied when I said that. "She will see," I thought, as though it was a way to get revenge.

XXXII

That day was abominable. I left my studio full of anger. In spite of the fact that I was going to see her the next day I was disconsolate, full of a suppressed and imprecise hate. Now, I think it was myself I hated, because in my heart I knew that my cruel insults were not justified. But it angered me that she made no effort to defend herself, and her pained and humble voice, far from appeasing me, inflamed me even more.

I despised myself. That afternoon I drank too much, and I ended up looking for trouble in a bar on Leandro Alem. I grabbed a woman who I thought was the most degenerate, and I challenged a sailor who made an obscene joke about her. I don't remember what happened after that, except that we began to fight, and that people separated us just when I was enjoying myself. Afterward, I remember being with that woman in the street. The fresh air did me good. By dawn I had taken her to my studio. When we arrived she began to laugh at a painting that was on an easel. (I don't know if I have said that since the scene of the window my painting was gradually changing. It was as if the people and things of my old painting had suffered a cosmic cataclysm. I will speak more of that later because now I want to tell what happened after those crucial days.) The woman laughed while she looked at the painting and then looked at me as if she was asking for some explanation. As you might guess, I didn't give a damn about what opinion that wretched woman had of my art. I told her she shouldn't waste our time on trivial things like that.

We were in bed when I suddenly had a disturbing idea: the expression on the face of that woman reminded me of one that I had observed on Maria's face.

"Whore!" I shouted at her, separating myself from her with disgust. Of course she is a whore!"

The woman jumped up like a snake and bit me on the arm so hard it made me bleed. Of course she thought I was referring to her. Full of scorn and hate for all of humanity, I kicked her out of my studio, telling her I would kill her if she didn't leave immediately. She left shouting insults, in spite of all the money I tossed her as she left.

For a long time I remained in the middle of my studio without knowing what to do, and without being able to organize my feelings or my thoughts. Finally, I made a decision: I went into the bathroom, I filled the bathtub with cold water, I took off my clothes and got

in the tub. I needed to clarify my thoughts, so I stayed there until I felt more refreshed. Little by little, I was able to get full control of my thoughts. I tried to think with absolute precision because I had the feeling I had arrived a crucial point. Which thoughts were the starting point? The ideas were: perverse woman, Maria, prostitute, pleasure, simulation. These words, I thought, must represent the essential point, the main truth from which I must begin. I made repeated efforts to place them in the right order until I was able to put them together in this terrible, but unmistakable, fashion: *Maria and the prostitute had shown a similar expression; the prostitute simulated pleasure; Maria ,therefore, simulated pleasure; Maria was a prostitute.*

“Whore!” I shouted repeatedly several times, jumping out of the bathtub with my body still dripping.

My mind was now functioning with the lucid ferocity of my best days. I saw clearly that it was necessary to end things, and that I must not let myself be fooled by her sorrowful voice, or her simulations. I had to let myself be guided by logic, and I must continue without fear of the final results, the suspicious expressions, the pained gestures, and the ambiguous silences, of Maria.

It was as though the images of a nightmare were moving rapidly under the glow of a monstrous spotlight. As I quickly got dressed, I thought about all the suspicious things: our first conversation on the phone with the amazing capacity of simulation, and the way she did it with her change of voice; the dark shadows surrounding Maria that were revealed by so many enigmatic things; what she said about her fear of “hurting me” that could only mean “I will hurt you with my lies, with my inconsistency, with my ulterior motives, and with the simulation of my sentiments and feelings,” since she could not hurt me by really loving me; the painful scene of the matches; and how at first she had shied away from my kisses, and how she had only agreed to physical love when it would have forced her to admit her aversion or, at best, her maternal, or brotherly, feeling of love, and kept me from believing her spurts of pleasure, or her words and expressions of ecstasy; and besides, her real attitude toward sex could hardly have come from her experience with a stoic person like Allende; and her expression of love for her husband only revealed once more her capacity to deceive with apocryphal feelings and sensations; and the family circle formed by a group of hypocrites and liars; and the self-possession and the efficiency with which she had deceived her two cousins with the nonexistent stains on the door; and actions during supper at the farm as well as the jealousy of Hunter; and those words she had admitted on the edge of the cliff: “once she had been mistaken”; but how?, and with whom?, then “the cruel and tormenting actions” of that other cousin, words that came from her lips unconsciously, when she didn’t answer my request for an explanation since she didn’t hear me, she did not listen to me, because she was caught up in the memory of her childhood, in what was perhaps the only authentic confession she had ever made when I was there; and, finally, that horrendous expression of that perverted or degenerate woman, or whatever she was. Then, that filthy bitch who had laughed at my paintings and the the fragile creature who had encouraged me to paint them, both had the same expression at different times! My God, to think that between certain passages of Brahms and a sewer, there are only hidden and sinister underground passages!

XXXIII

Many of the assumptions I drew from that lucid, but phantasmagoric evaluation were hypothetical, things that I couldn't prove, although I was still certain I was not mistaken. However, I suddenly realized that until then I had ignored one important possibility of finding what I wanted to know: the opinion of other people. With great satisfaction and with more intense clarity, I thought for the first time about the procedure, and also the perfect person: Lartigue. He was an intimate friend of Hunter. It is true that he was also a despicable person: he had written a book of poems about the vanity of human nature, and he complained about the fact that he hadn't been awarded the National Prize. But my scruples were not going to stop me. With repugnance, but with determination, I called him on the phone and told him I urgently had to speak with him. I went to see him at his house and praised his book; and then (with his great disgust, because he wanted to keep on talking about his book), I asked him, point blank, a question I had already prepared:

"How long has Maria Iribarne been Hunter's lover?"

My mother never asked if we had eaten an apple, since she was sure that we would deny it; she asked *how many* have you eaten, wisely acting like she already knew what she wanted to find out: then, subtly drawn by her quantitative tone, we would say that we *only* had eaten one apple.

Lartigue was vain and self-centered, but he was not stupid: he suspected there was some strange reason for my question, and he tried to avoid it by answering:

"I don't know anything about that."

And he went back again to say more about the book and the prize. With great disgust, I shouted:

"What a great injustice has been done to your book!"

I started running away. As I said, Lartigue was not stupid, but he didn't realize that what he said was already enough to let me know what I wanted.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. Maria should now be back in Buenos Aires. I called her on the phone from a café (I didn't have the patience to wait until got back to my studio). As soon as she answered, I said:

"I need to see you right away."

I tried not to show my hate, because I was afraid that she would suspect something and would not come to see me. We agreed that we would meet in Recoleta, in the place we usually met.

"Although I don't know what we will gain by this," she added, sadly.

"Many things," I insisted; "Many things."

"You think so?" she asked with a tone of desperation.

"Of course."

"Well, I'm afraid that we will only do ourselves a little more harm, and destroy even more the fragile bridge that connects us, and hurt us with even more cruelty. I have come back to Buenos Aires since you asked me to so often, but I really should have stayed on the farm. Hunter is ill."

"Another lie," I thought.

"Thank you very much," I said curtly. "Then we agree we will see each other at five o'clock."

Maria assented, with a sigh.

XXIV

Before five o'clock I was in Recoleta, sitting on the bench where we usually met. My mood, already darkened, fell into total depression when I saw the trees, the paths, and the other benches that were witnesses of our love. With desperate sadness, I thought about the times we had spent in the gardens of Recoleta and the Plaza Francia and how, in those days which seemed to be unmeasurably far away, I had believed in the permanence of our love. Everything had been miraculous and joyful; and now it was dismal and frozen, in an indifferent world without meaning. For a moment the fear of destroying the little that remained of our love, and leaving me completely alone, made me hesitate. I thought that maybe it might be possible to put aside all the doubts that tortured me. What did it matter to me what Maria was, except for our relationship? On seeing those benches, and those trees, I thought that I could never resign myself to losing her support, since there was nothing more than those moments of communication, and mysterious love, that united us. The more I thought about these things, the more I had the idea of accepting her love as it is with no conditions, and the more I was terrified by the idea of ending up with nothing, absolutely nothing. And as a result of this fear I began to have a feeling of modesty that only those who have no choice can feel. Before long I began to be possessed by an overwhelming feeling of happiness as I realized that nothing had been lost, and that after this moment of clarity, a new life could begin.

Unfortunately Maria failed me one more time. By five thirty, worried and maddened, I called on the phone again. I was told that she had gone back to the farm. Not thinking what I was doing, I shouted:

"But we had agreed to meet at five o'clock!"

"I don't know anything about that, sir," she answered sounding rather frightened. "I only know that the lady left by car some time ago, and she told me that she would be there for a week at least."

At least a week! The world seemed to collapse, and everything seemed incredible and useless. I walked out of the café like a sleepwalker. I saw ridiculous things: streetlights, people walking side by side as if that was worth something. And how much I had wanted to see her this afternoon, and how much I needed her! And how little I was willing to ask and beg her! "However," I thought with ferocious bitterness, "between consoling me in a park, and sleeping with Hunter, there could no longer be any doubt." And thinking about that, I had an idea. No, not just an idea, I was certain about something. I ran the few blocks it took me to reach my studio, and again I called Allende's house. I asked if his wife had received a phone call from the farm before she left.

"Yes," the housemaid answered after a moment of hesitation.

"A call from Mr. Hunter, right?"

The housemaid hesitated once again. I made note of those two hesitations.

"Yes," she answered finally.

A bitter feeling of triumph possessed me now, like the devil himself. Just as I had suspected. For a moment I had a feeling of complete aloneness, and a senseless feeling of pride: the pride of not having been mistaken.

I thought about Mapelli.

I was about to leave at once, when I had an idea. I went into the kitchen and picked up a knife, then went back into my study. How little remained of the old painting of Juan

Pablo Castel! Now those idiots who had once compared me to architect had a reason to be surprised! As if a man could ever really change! How many of the idiots would have guessed that underneath my architecture and “the intellectual quality,” there was also a volcano about to erupt? None. They would have more than enough time to see these columns broken in pieces, these mutilated statues, these smoldering ruins, these infernal staircases. There they were, like a museum of petrified nightmares, like a Museum of Desperation and Shame. But there was something I wanted to destroy without leaving a trace. I looked at it for the last time, I felt that my throat was choking painfully, but I did not hesitate; through my tears I saw that beach, that distant anxious woman, that waiting, breaking up and falling apart. I stomped on the shreds and then I picked them up and converted them into filthy rags. That senseless wait would never, ever, produce a response! Now I knew more than ever that my wait was completely useless!

I hurried to Mapelli’s house, but he wasn’t home. They told me he probably was in the Viau Bookstore. I went to the bookstore, I found him, and I took him by the arm and told him that I needed his car. He looked at me with astonishment; he asked me if something bad had happened. Nothing bad had happened, but I decided to tell him that my father was gravely ill and there was no train until the next day. He offered to drive me himself, but I refused; I told him I preferred to go by myself. He looked at me with astonishment again, but ended by giving me the keys.

XXXV

It was six o’clock. I calculated that with Mapelli’s car I could be there in four hours, so I should arrive by ten o’clock. “That’s a good time,” I thought.

When I started off on the road to Mar del Plata, I sped up to 130 kilometers an hour, and I began to feel a rare sense of pleasure that I attributed to the certainty that I would finally accomplish something concrete with her. With her, who had been like someone behind an impenetrable wall of glass, who I could see, but not touch; so that with that wall of glass between us we had lived anxiously, and melancholically.

During this period of satisfaction, appearing and disappearing, were feelings of guilt, of hate, and love: I had lied about an illness, and that saddened me; I had gone so far as to call Allende for the second time, and that embittered me. She, Maria, could laugh at all this frivolity, she could surrender herself to that cynic, to that womanizer, to that false and presumptuous poet! What scorn I felt for her! I tried to feel the sorrowful pleasure of imagining this last decision of hers in the most repulsive way: on the one hand was her agreement to see this afternoon; what for?, to talk about more obscure unpleasant things, to place ourselves once again face to face on either side of a wall of glass, to see our anxious and desperate looks, to try to understand each other’s purpose, to vainly try and touch each other, to feel each other, to caress each other through the wall of glass, to once more dream this impossible dream. On the other hand, there was Hunter, and a telephone call from him had been enough to make her run to get in bed with him. How grotesque, and how sad, everything was!

I arrived at the farm at ten fifteen. I stopped the car on the main road in order not to call attention with the noise of the motor, and I walked from there. The heat was unbearable, there was an overwhelming calmness, and I only heard the sound of the sea.

At times the moonlight filtered through the clouds and I was able to walk without difficulty along the entry road between the eucalyptus trees. When I got to the farm house, I saw the lights were on in the ground floor. I thought they must still be in the dining room.

I felt the same static and threatening heat one feels before the arrival of a violent storm during the summer. It was likely they would want to go outside after they ate, so I hid in a place in the yard where I could watch them come down the steps, and I waited.

XXXVI

It was an interminable wait. I don't know how much time passed on the clocks, that anonymous and universal time of clocks that is extraneous to our feelings, to our destiny, to the formation or the collapse of love, to the wait for a death. But my own sense of time was intense and complicated, full of things and changing decisions, an obscure river that was sometimes tumultuous, and sometimes strangely calm, almost immobile, where Maria and I, face to face, were contemplating each other motionlessly. Then other times it was like a river that dragged us, like in a childhood dream where I saw her galloping wildly on a horse with her hair floating in the wind, with her eyes boggled, and I saw myself in my southern town, in my sickroom with my face stuck to the window watching the snow fall with eyes that were also boggled. And it was like the two of us had been living in separate parallel passages or tunnels, without knowing that we were traveling, one next to the other, like similar souls in similar times, to find ourselves finally at the end of the passage, in front of a scene painted by me, like a key meant only for her, like a secret announcement that I was already there and that the passages had finally joined, and that the time for our meeting had arrived.

The time for our meeting had arrived? But had the passages really joined, and had our souls really communicated? What a stupid illusion of mine all that had been! No, the passages were still like they were before, although now the wall that separated us was a wall of glass, and I could see Maria like a silent, untouchable figure... No, not even that wall was always there; sometimes it was once again a dark stone wall, and then I didn't know that, on the other side, which was hers during those anonymous intervals, strange things were happening. And I even thought that in those moments her face changed and that a mocking expression deformed it, that perhaps there was mixed laughter, and that all the history of those passages was only a ridiculous invention, or belief, of mine, and that *after all there was only one dark and solitary tunnel, mine, the tunnel through which my infancy had passed, as well as my youth, and all the rest of my life.* And in one of those transparent places in the wall of stone I had seen that woman and had thought naively that she was moving through another tunnel parallel to mine when, in reality, she was out in the open world, the limitless world of those who do not live in tunnels; and perhaps out of curiosity she had approached one of my strange windows and had glimpsed the spectacle of my insurmountable aloneness, or she had been intrigued by the silent language of my painting. And then, while I was always traveling through my solitary passage, she was outside, living her ordinary life, the excited life of those who live in the open, that strange and absurd life where there are dances and fiestas, as well as happiness and frivolity. And it happened that, as I was passing one of my windows, she was waiting for me anxiously

(and why was she waiting, and why anxiously?); but then sometimes it happened that she didn't arrive on time, or she forgot about this poor isolated person, and then, with my face pressed against the wall of glass, I saw her in the distance where she was smiling or dancing unconcernedly or, which was even worse, I didn't see her at all and I imagined she was in some inaccessible or inconvenient place. And then I realized that my destiny was infinitely more solitary than I had ever imagined.

XXXVII

After an endless time of speculations and tunnels, they finally came down the stairs. When I saw them arm in arm, I felt my heart become hard and cold, like a chunk of ice.

They descended slowly like those who are not in a hurry; "Hurry to what?" I thought with bitterness. And still, she knew I needed her, that his afternoon I had waited for her, that I had suffered terribly during each one of the minutes of that useless wait. And just the same, she *knew* at that very moment when she was basking in calmness, that I would be tormented in a minute inferno of thoughts and speculations. What implacable, what cold, foul beast could have taken possession of the heart of that weak woman? She could look at the stormy sky, as she was doing at that moment, and walk arm in arm with him (arm in arm with that grotesque animal!), walking slowly with him through the yard, enjoying the pleasant smell of the flowers, and sit by his side on the grass, while she knew that, at that same time I, who had waited for her in vain, who had called her house and knew about her trip to the farm, would be lost in a dark abyss, tormented by a swarm of hungry worms that were quickly devouring each one of my entrails.

And here she was, talking to that ridiculous beast! What could Maria be talking about with that disgusting individual? And in what language?

Or was I the ridiculous monster? For all I knew, they could be laughing at me at that moment. And wasn't I the imbecile, the ridiculous man in the tunnel, who had sent secret messages?

They walked around the farmyard for a long time. A thunderstorm was now upon us, dark, and torn by lightening flashes and thunderclaps. The wind began to blow and the first drops began to fall. They had to run quickly to take refuge in the house. My heart began to beat with painful violence. From my hiding place between the trees, I was sure that I would finally witness the abominable secret that I had imagined many times.

I kept an eye on the lights of the second floor which at that moment were completely dark. A short time later I saw that the light had been turned on in the central bedroom which belonged to Hunter. Until then everything was normal. Hunter's bedroom was at the head of stairs and it was natural that it would be the first to be illuminated. Now the light of another bedroom should be turned on. The seconds that passed while Maria should be coming up the stairs to her room were tumultuously filled with the savage beats of my heart.

But the other light never came on.

My God, I don't have the strength to describe the sensation of empty loneliness that entered my heart! I felt like the only boat that could have rescued me from my desert island had passed by without noticing my signal of abandonment. My body collapsed slowly, as if it had reached the time of its death.

XXXVIII

Standing between the trees rocked by the strong wind and soaked by the rain, I felt that an implacable amount of time had passed. Until, through my eyes drenched by the rain and by my tears, I saw that a light had finally been lit in another bedroom.

I remember what happened then like a nightmare. Struggling against the storm, I was able to climb up to the upper floor by hanging onto the bars of a window. Then, I walked along the balcony until I found a door. I walked down a hallway and looked for her bedroom; a strip of light under the door showed me which one it was. Trembling, I took hold of my knife and opened the door. And when she looked at me with astonishment, I was standing in the doorway. I walked over to her bed, and when I was by her side, she said, sadly:

“What are you planning to do, Juan Pablo?”

Placing my left hand over her hair, I answered:

“I have to kill you, Maria. You have left me alone.”

Then, weeping, I pushed the knife into her chest. She gritted her jaw and closed her eyes, and when I pulled out the knife dripping with blood, she opened them again, and she looked at me with pained and humble expression. A sudden rage spread through my heart, and I stabbed the knife repeatedly into her chest and her belly.

Afterwards, I went back out on the balcony and descended with great impetus, as if the Devil had taken permanent possession of my spirit. The lighting flashes showed me the landscape we had shared for the last time.

I hurried back to Buenos Aires. I got there about four or five o'clock in the morning. From a café I called Allende's house, I had them wake him up, and I told him that I must see him immediately. Then I ran to Posadas. The Polish servant was waiting for me at the front door. When I reached the fifth floor, I saw Allende in front of the elevator, with his useless eyes wide open. I grabbed him by the arm and dragged him inside. Like an idiot, the Pole followed behind me, staring at me with astonishment. I told him to leave and, as soon as he was gone, I shouted at the blind man:

“I have come from the farm! Maria was Hunter's lover!”

Allende's face became mortally rigid.

“Imbecile,” I muttered under my breath, with cold hate. And exasperated by his lack of understanding, I shouted:

“You're an imbecile. Maria was also my lover, and the lover of many others!”

I had a horrendous feeling of pleasure while Allende stood there looking like he was made of stone.

“Yes!” I shouted again. “I deceived you, and she deceived all of us! But now she will deceive no one. Do you understand? No one! Not anybody!”

“Stupid!” Allende howled with a voice of fire, and ran toward me with hands that looked like claws.

I moved aside, and he bumped into a table, falling over. With incredible rapidity he rose up again and started chasing me through the room, bumping into chairs and tables, while he cried with a dull moan, but with no tears, and shouted that one word: “stupid!”

I escaped down the stairs and went out in the street after knocking down the housemaid who tried to stop me. I was possessed by hate, by scorn, and by compassion.

By the time I turned myself in at the police station it was almost six o'clock.

Through the little window of my jail cell I saw that a new day had dawned with a sky that now had no clouds. I thought about how by now many men and women would be waking up, and then they would eat breakfast, read the newspaper and go to work, or maybe they would feed their children, or the cat, or they would talk about the movie they had watched the night before.

I felt a dark cavern enlarging inside my body.

XXXIX

During these months of incarceration I have tried many times to figure out that last work of Allende, the word "*stupid*." A great weariness, or perhaps some dark instinct, kept me from ever doing that. Some day perhaps I will be successful, and then I will also be able to understand the motives that Allende had to commit suicide.

At least I am able to paint, although I suspect that the doctors are laughing behind my sback, as I suspect that they laughed during the trial when I told them about the scene with the window.

There was only one person who understood my painting. Meanwhile, these paintings must be confirming their stupid point of view more every day. And day by day the walls of this hell will become more and more hermetic.

The End