Leaf Storm

But Polyneices' corpse who died in pain
they say he has proclaimed to the whole town
that none may bury him and none bewail,
but leave him unwept, untombed, a rich sweet sight
for the hungry birds' beholding.
Such orders they say the worthy Creon gives
to you and me—yes, yes, I say to me—
and that he's coming to proclaim it clear
to those who know it not.
Further: he has the matter so at heart
that anyone who dares attempt the act
will die by public stoning in the town.

Antigone

—Suddenly, as if a whirlwind had set down roots in the center of the town, the banana company arrived, pursued by the leaf storm. A whirling leaf storm had been stirred up, formed out of the human and material dregs of other towns, the chaff of a civil war that seemed ever more remote and unlikely. The whirlwind was implacable. It contaminated everything with its swirling crowd smell, the smell of skin secretion and hidden death. In less than a year it sowed over the town the rubble of many catastrophes that had come before it, scattering its mixed cargo of rubbish in the streets. And all of a sudden that rubbish, in time to the mad and unpredicted rhythm of the storm, was being sorted out, individualized, until what had been a narrow street with a river at one end and a corral for the dead at the other was changed into a different and more complex town, created out of the rubbish of other towns.

Arriving there, mingled with the human leaf storm, dragged along by its impetuous force, came the dregs of warehouses, hospitals, amusement parlors, electric plants; the dregs made up of single women and men who tied their mules to hitching posts by the hotel, carrying their single piece of baggage, a wooden trunk or a bundle of clothing, and in a few months each had his own house, two mistresses, and the military title that was due him for having arrived late for the war.

Even the dregs of the cities' sad love came to us in the whirlwind and built small wooden houses where at first a corner and a

half-cot were a dismal home for one night, and then a noisy clandestine street, and then a whole inner village of tolerance within the town.

In the midst of that blizzard, that tempest of unknown faces, of awnings along the public way, of men changing clothes in the street, of women with open parasols sitting on trunks, and of mule after abandoned mule dying of hunger on the block by the hotel, the first of us came to be the last; we were the outsiders, the newcomers.

After the war, when we came to Macondo and appreciated the good quality of its soil, we knew that the leaf storm was sure to come someday, but we did not count on its drive. So when we felt the avalanche arrive, the only thing we could do was set a plate with a knife and fork behind the door and sit patiently waiting for the newcomers to get to know us. Then the train whistled for the first time. The leaf storm turned about and went out to greet it, and by turning it lost its drive. But it developed unity and mass; and it underwent the natural process of fermentation, becoming incorporated into the germination of the earth.

Macondo, 1909

I.

I've seen a corpse for the first time. It's Wednesday but I feel as if it was Sunday because I didn't go to school and they dressed me up in a green corduroy suit that's tight in some places. Holding Mama's hand, following my grandfather, who feels his way along with a cane with every step he takes so he won't bump into things (he doesn't see well in the dark and he limps), I went past the mirror in the living room and saw myself full length, dressed in green and with this white starched collar that pinches me on one side of the neck. I saw myself in the round mottled looking glass and I thought: *That's me, as if today was Sunday.*

We've come to the house where the dead man is.

The heat won't let you breathe in the closed room. You can hear the sun buzzing in the streets, but that's all. The air is stagnant, like concrete; you get the feeling that it could get all twisted like a sheet of steel. In the room where they've laid out the corpse there's a smell of trunks, but I can't see any anywhere. There's a hammock in the corner hanging by one end from a ring. There's a smell of trash. And I think that the things around us, broken down and almost falling apart, have the look of things that ought to smell like trash even though they smell like something else.

I always thought that dead people should have hats on. Now I can see that they shouldn't. I can see that they have a head like wax and a handkerchief tied around their jawbone. I can see

that they have their mouth open a little and that behind the purple lips you can see the stained and irregular teeth. I can see that they keep their tongue bitten over to one side, thick and sticky, a little darker than the color of their face, which is like the color of fingers clutching a stick. I can see that they have their eyes open much wider than a man's, anxious and wild, and that their skin seems to be made of tight damp earth. I thought that a dead man would look like somebody quiet and asleep and now I can see that it's just the opposite. I can see that he looks like someone awake and in a rage after a fight.

Mama is dressed up as if it was Sunday too. She put on the old straw hat that comes down over her ears and a black dress closed at the neck and with sleeves that come down to her wrists. Since today is Wednesday she looks to me like someone far away, a stranger, and I get the feeling that she wants to tell me something when my grandfather gets up to receive the men who've brought the coffin. Mama is sitting beside me with her back to the closed door. She's breathing heavily and she keeps pushing back the strands of hair that fall out from under the hat that she put on in a hurry. My grandfather has told the men to put the coffin down next to the bed. Only then did I realize that the dead man could really fit into it. When the men brought in the box I had the impression that it was too small for a body that took up the whole length of the bed.

I don't know why they brought me along. I've never been in this house before and I even thought that nobody lived here. It's a big house, on the corner, and I don't think the door has ever been opened. I always thought that nobody lived in the house. Only now, after my mother told me, "You won't be going to school this afternoon," and I didn't feel glad because she said it with a serious and reserved voice, and I saw her come back with my corduroy suit and she put it on me without saying a word and we went to the door to join my grandfather, and we walked past the three houses that separated this one from ours,

only now do I realize that someone lived on the corner. Someone who died and who must be the man my mother was talking about when she said: "You have to behave yourself at the doctor's funeral."

When we went in I didn't see the dead man. I saw my grandfather at the door talking to the men, and then I saw him telling us to go on in. I thought then that there was somebody in the room, but when I went in I felt it was dark and empty. The heat beat on my face from the very first minute and I got that trash smell that was solid and permanent at first and now, like the heat, comes in slow-spaced waves and disappears. Mama led me through the dark room by the hand and seated me next to her in a corner. Only after a moment could I begin to make things out. I saw my grandfather trying to open a window that seemed stuck to its frame, glued to the wood around it, and I saw him hitting his cane against the latches, his coat covered with the dust that came off with every blow. I turned my head to where my grandfather was moving as he said he couldn't open the window and only then did I see there was someone on the bed. There was a dark man stretched out, motionless. Then I spun my head to my mother's side where she sat serious and without moving, looking off somewhere else in the room. Since my feet don't touch the floor and hang in the air half a foot away, I put my hands under my thighs, placing the palms on the chair, and I began to swing my legs, not thinking about anything until I remembered that Mama had told me: "You have to behave yourself at the doctor's funeral." Then I felt something cold behind me. I turned to look and I only saw the wall of dry and pitted wood. But it was as if someone had said to me from the wall: *Don't move your legs. The man on the bed is the doctor and he's dead.* And when I looked toward the bed I didn't see him the way I had before. I didn't see him lying down, I saw him dead.

From then on, as much as I try not to look, I feel as if someone is forcing my face in that direction. And even if I make an effort

to look at other places in the room, I see him just the same, everywhere, with his bulging eyes and his green, dead face in the shadows.

I don't know why no one has come to the wake. The ones who came are us, my grandfather, Mama, and the four Guajiro Indians who work for my grandfather. The men brought a sack of lime and emptied it inside the coffin. If my mother hadn't been strange and far away I would have asked her why they did it. I don't understand why they have to sprinkle lime inside the box. When the bag was empty one of the men shook it over the coffin and a few last flakes fell out, looking more like sawdust than lime. They lifted the dead man by the shoulders and feet. He's wearing a pair of cheap pants tied at the waist by a wide black cord, and a gray shirt. He only has his left shoe on. As Ada says, he's got one foot a king and the other one a slave. The right shoe is at one end of the bed. On the bed the dead man seemed to be having trouble. In the coffin he looks more comfortable, more peaceful, and his face, which had been like the face of a man who was alive and awake after a fight, has taken on a restful and secure look. His profile is softer. It's as if in the box there he now felt he was in his proper place as a dead man.

My grandfather's been moving around the room. He's picked up some things and put them in the box. I look at Mama again hoping that she'll tell me why my grandfather is tossing things into the coffin. But my mother is unmoved in her black dress and she seems to be making an effort not to look where the dead man is. I try to do the same thing but I can't. I stare at him. I examine him. My grandfather throws a book inside the coffin, signals the men, and three of them put the lid over the corpse. Only then do I feel free of the hands that were holding my head toward that side and I begin to look the room over.

I look at my mother again. For the first time since we came to the house she looks at me and smiles with a forced smile, with nothing inside; and in the distance I can hear the train whistle as

it disappears around the last bend. I hear a sound from the corner where the corpse is. I see one of the men lift one edge of the lid and my grandfather puts the dead man's shoe into the coffin, the shoe they had forgotten on the bed. The train whistles again, farther off, and suddenly I think: *It's two-thirty.* I remember that it's the time (when the train whistles at the last bend in town) when the boys line up at school to go in for the first class in the afternoon.

Abraham, I think.

I shouldn't have brought the child. A spectacle like this isn't proper for him. Even for myself, turning thirty, this atmosphere thinned out by the presence of the corpse is harmful. We could leave now. We could tell Papa that we don't feel well in a room where the remains of a man cut off from everything that could be considered affection or thanks have been accumulating for seventeen years. My father may be the only one who's ever shown any feeling for him. An inexplicable feeling that's been of use to him now so he won't rot away inside these four walls.

I'm bothered by how ridiculous all of this is. I'm upset by the idea that in a moment we'll be going out into the street following a coffin that won't inspire any feeling except pleasure in anyone. I can imagine the expression on the faces of the women in the windows, watching my father go by, watching me go by with the child behind a casket inside of which the only person the town has wanted to see that way is rotting away, on his way to the cemetery in the midst of unyielding abandonment, followed by three people who decided to perform a work of charity that's been the beginning of his own vengeance. It could be that this decision of Papa's could mean that tomorrow there won't be anyone prepared to walk behind our funeral processions.

Maybe that's why I brought the child along. When Papa told me a moment ago: "You have to go with me," the first thing that occurred to me was to bring the child so that I would feel

protected. Now here we are on this suffocating September afternoon, feeling that the things around us are the pitiless agents of our enemies. Papa's got no reason to worry. Actually, he's spent his whole life doing things like this; giving the town stones to chew on, keeping his most insignificant promises with his back turned to all convention. Since that time twenty-five years ago when this man came to our house, Papa must have imagined (when he noticed the visitor's absurd manners) that today there wouldn't be a single person in the whole town prepared even to throw his body to the buzzards. Maybe Papa foresaw all the obstacles and measured and calculated the possible inconveniences. And now, twenty-five years later, he must feel that this is just the fulfillment of a chore he's thought about for a long time, one which had to be carried out in any case, since he would have had to haul the corpse through the streets of Macondo by himself.

Still, when the time came, he didn't have the courage to do it alone and he made me take part in that intolerable promise that he must have made long before I even had the use of reason. When he told me: "You have to go with me," he didn't give me time to think about how far his words went; I couldn't calculate how much shame and ridicule there would be in burying this man whom everyone had hoped to see turn to dust inside his lair. Because people hadn't just expected that, they'd prepared themselves for things to happen that way and they'd hoped for it from the bottom of their hearts, without remorse, and even with the anticipated satisfaction of someday smelling the pleasant odor of his decomposition floating through the town without anyone's feeling moved, alarmed, or scandalized, satisfied rather at seeing the longed-for hour come, wanting the situation to go on and on until the twirling smell of the dead man would satisfy even the most hidden resentments.

Now we're going to deprive Macondo of its long-desired pleasure. I feel as if in a certain way this determination of ours has

given birth in the hearts of the people not to a melancholy feeling of frustration but to one of postponement.

That's another reason why I should have left the child at home; so as not to get him mixed up in this conspiracy which will center on us now the way it did on the doctor for ten years. The child should have been left on the sidelines of this promise. He doesn't even know why he's here, why we've brought him to this room full of rubbish. He doesn't say anything, sitting, swinging his legs with his hands resting on the chair, waiting for someone to decipher this frightful riddle for him. I want to be sure that nobody will, that no one will open that invisible door that prevents him from going beyond the reach of his senses.

He's looked at me several times and I know that he finds me strange, somebody he doesn't know, with this stiff dress and this old hat that I've put on so that I won't be identified even by my own forebodings.

If Meme were alive, here in the house, maybe it would have been different. They might have thought I came because of her. They might have thought I came to share in a grief that she probably wouldn't have felt, but which she would have been able to pretend and which the town could have explained. Meme disappeared about eleven years ago. The doctor's death has ended any possibility of finding out where she is or, at least, where her bones are. Meme isn't here, but it's most likely that if she were—if what happened and was never cleared up hadn't happened—she would have taken the side of the town against the man who warmed her bed for six years with as much love and humanity as a mule might have had.

I can hear the train whistling at the last bend. *It's two-thirty,* I think; and I can't get rid of the idea that at this moment all of Macondo is wondering what we're doing in this house. I think about Señora Rebeca, thin and looking like parchment, with the touch of a family ghost in her look and dress, sitting beside her

electric fan, her face shaded by the screens in her windows. As she hears the train disappearing around the last bend Señora Rebeca leans her head toward the fan, tormented by the heat and her resentment, the blades in her heart spinning like those on the fan (but in an opposite direction), and she murmurs: "The devil has a hand in all of this," and she shudders, fastened to life by the tiny roots of everyday things.

And Águeda, the cripple, seeing Solita coming back from the station after seeing her boyfriend off; seeing her open her parasol as she turns the deserted corner; hearing her approach with the sexual rejoicing that she herself once had and which changed inside her into that patient religious sickness that makes her say: "You'll wallow in your bed like a pig in its sty."

I can't get rid of that idea. Stop thinking that it's two-thirty; that the mule with the mail is going by cloaked in a burning cloud of dust and followed by the men who have interrupted their Wednesday siesta to pick up the bundles of newspapers. Father Ángel is dozing, sitting in the sacristy with an open breviary on his greasy stomach, listening to the mule pass and shooting away the flies that are bothering his sleep, belching, saying: "You poisoned me with your meatballs."

Papa's cold-blooded about all this. Even to the point of telling them to open the coffin so they could put in the shoe that was left on the bed. Only he could have taken an interest in that man's meanness. I wouldn't be surprised if when we leave with the corpse the crowd will be waiting for us with all the excrement they could get together overnight and will give us a shower of filth for going against the will of the town. Maybe they won't do it because of Papa. Maybe they will do it because it's something as terrible as frustrating a pleasure the town had longed for over so many years, thought about on stifling afternoons whenever men and women passed this house and said to themselves: "Sooner or later we'll lunch on that smell." Because that's what they all said, from the first to the last.

It'll be three o'clock in a little while. The Señorita already knows it. Señora Rebeca saw her pass and called her, invisible behind the screen, and she came out from the orbit of the fan for a moment and said to her: "Señorita, it's the devil, you know." And tomorrow it won't be my son who goes to school but some other, completely different child; a child who will grow, reproduce, and die in the end with no one paying him the debt of gratitude which would give him Christian burial.

I'd probably be peacefully at home right now if twenty-five years ago that man hadn't come to my father's home with a letter of recommendation (no one ever knew where he came from), if he hadn't stayed with us, eating grass and looking at women with those eyes of a lustful dog that popped out of their sockets. But my punishment was written down from before my birth and it stayed hidden, repressed, until that fateful leap year when I would turn thirty and my father would tell me: "You have to go with me." And then, before I had time to ask anything, he pounded the floor with his cane: "We have to go through with this just the way it is, daughter. The doctor hanged himself this morning."

The men left and came back to the room with a hammer and a box of nails. But they hadn't nailed up the coffin. They laid the things on the table and they sat on the bed where the dead man had been. My grandfather seems calm, but his calmness is imperfect and desperate. It's not the calmness of the corpse in the coffin, it's the calmness of an impatient man making an effort not to show how he feels. It's a rebellious and anxious calm, the kind my grandfather has, walking back and forth across the room, limping, picking up the clustered objects.

When I discover that there are flies in the room I begin to be tortured by the idea that the coffin's become full of flies. They still haven't nailed it shut, but it seems to me that the buzzing I thought at first was an electric fan in the neighborhood is the swarm of flies beating blindly against the sides of the coffin and the

face of the dead man. I shake my head; I close my eyes; I see my grandfather open a trunk and take out some things and I can't tell what they are; on the bed I can see the four embers but not the people with the lighted cigars. Trapped by the suffocating heat, by the minute that doesn't pass, by the buzzing of the flies, I feel as if someone is telling me: *That's the way you'll be. You'll be inside a coffin filled with flies. You're only a little under eleven years old, but someday you'll be like that, left to the flies inside of a closed box.* And I stretch my legs out side by side and look at my own black and shiny boots. *One of my laces is untied,* I think and I look at Mama again. She looks at me too and leans over to tie my shoelace.

The vapor that rises up from Mama's head, warm and smelling like a cupboard, smelling of sleeping wood, reminds me of the closed-in coffin again. It becomes hard for me to breathe, I want to get out of here; I want to breathe in the burning street air, and I use my last resort. When Mama gets up I say to her in a low voice: "Mama!" She smiles, says: "Umm?" And I lean toward her, toward her raw and shining face, trembling. "I feel like going out back."

Mama calls my grandfather, tells him something. I watch his narrow, motionless eyes behind his glasses when he comes over and tells me: "That's impossible right now." I stretch and then remain quiet, indifferent to my failure. But things start to pass too slowly again. There's a rapid movement, another, and another. And then Mama leans over my shoulder again, saying: "Did it go away yet?" And she says it with a serious and solid voice, as if it was a scolding more than a question. My stomach is tight and hard, but Mama's question softens it, leaves it full and relaxed, and then everything, even her seriousness, becomes aggressive and challenging to me. "No," I tell her. "It still hasn't gone away." I squeeze in my stomach and try to beat the floor with my feet (another last resort), but I only find empty space below, the distance separating me from the floor.

Someone comes into the room. It's one of my grandfather's men, followed by a policeman and a man who is wearing green denim pants. He has a belt with a revolver on it and in his hand he's holding a hat with a broad, curled brim. My grandfather goes over to greet him. The man in the green pants coughs in the darkness, says something to my grandfather, coughs again; and still coughing he orders the policeman to open the window.

The wooden walls have a slippery look. They seem to be built of cold, compressed ash. When the policeman hits the latch with the butt of his rifle, I have the feeling that the shutters will not open. The house will fall down, the walls will crumble, but noiselessly, like a palace of ash collapsing in the wind. I feel that with a second blow we'll be in the street, in the sunlight, sitting down, our heads covered with debris. But with the second blow the shutter opens and light comes into the room; it bursts in violently, as when a gate is opened for a disoriented animal, who runs and smells, mute; who rages and scratches on the walls, slavering, and then goes back to flop down peacefully in the coolest corner of the cage.

With the window open things become visible, but consolidated in their strange unrealness. Then Mama takes a deep breath, takes me by the hand, and tells me: "Come, let's take a look at our house through the window." And I see the town again, as if I were returning to it after a trip. I can see our house, faded and run down, but cool under the almond trees; and I feel from here as if I'd never been inside that green and cordial coolness, as if ours were the perfect imaginary house promised by my mother on nights when I had bad dreams. And I see Pepe, who passes by without seeing us, lost in his thoughts. The boy from the house next door, who passes whistling, changed and unknown, as if he'd just had his hair cut off.

Then the mayor gets up, his shirt open, sweaty, his expression completely upset. He comes over to me all choked up by the ex-

citement brought on by his own argument. "We can't be sure that he's dead until he starts to smell," he says, and he finishes buttoning up his shirt and lights a cigarette, his face turned toward the coffin again, thinking perhaps: *Now they can't say that I don't operate inside the law.* I look into his eyes and I feel that I've looked at him with enough firmness to make him understand that I can penetrate his deepest thoughts. I tell him: "You're operating outside the law in order to please the others." And he, as if that had been exactly what he had expected to hear, answers: "You're a respectable man, colonel. You know that I'm within my rights." I tell him: "You, more than anyone else, know that he's dead." And he says: "That's right, but after all, I'm only a public servant. The only legal way would be with a death certificate." And I tell him: "If the law is on your side, take advantage of it and bring a doctor who can make out the death certificate." And he, with his head lifted but without haughtiness, calmly too, but without the slightest show of weakness or confusion, says: "You're a respectable person and you know that it would be an abuse of authority." When I hear him I see that his brains are not addled so much by liquor as by cowardice.

Now I can see that the mayor shares the anger of the town. It's a feeling fed for ten years, ever since that stormy night when they brought the wounded men to the man's door and shouted to him (because he didn't open the door, he spoke from inside); they shouted to him: "Doctor, take care of these wounded men because there aren't enough doctors to go around," and still without opening (because the door stayed closed with the wounded lying in front of it). "You're the only doctor left. You have to do a charitable act"; and he replied (and he didn't open the door then either), imagined by the crowd to be standing in the middle of the living room, the lamp held high lighting up his hard yellow eyes: "I've forgotten everything I knew about all that. Take them somewhere else," and he kept the door closed (because from that time on the door was never opened again) while the anger grew,

spread out, turned into a collective disease which gave no respite to Macondo for the rest of his life, and in every ear the sentence shouted that night—the one that condemned the doctor to rot behind these walls—continued echoing.

Ten years would still pass without his ever drinking the town water, haunted by the fear that it would be poisoned; feeding himself on the vegetables that he and his Indian mistress planted in the courtyard. Now the town feels that the time has come when they can deny him the pity that he denied the town ten years ago, and Macondo, which knows that he's dead (because everyone must have awakened with a lighter feeling this morning), is getting ready to enjoy that longed-for pleasure which everyone considers to be deserved. Their only desire is to smell the odor of organic decomposition behind the doors that he didn't open that other time.

Now I can begin to believe that nothing can help my promise in the face of the ferocity of a town and that I'm hemmed in, surrounded by the hatred and impatience of a band of resentful people. Even the church has found a way to go against my determination. Father Ángel told me a moment ago: "I won't let them bury in consecrated ground a man who hanged himself after having lived sixty years without God. Our Lord would look upon you with good eyes too if you didn't carry out what won't be a work of charity but the sin of rebellion." I told him: "To bury the dead, as is written, is a work of charity." And Father Ángel said: "Yes. But in this case it's not up to us to do it, it's up to the sanitary authorities."

I came. I called the four Guajiros who were raised in my house. I made my daughter Isabel go with me. In that way the act becomes more family, more human, less personal and defiant than if I dragged the corpse to the cemetery through the streets of the town myself. I think Macondo is capable of doing anything after what I've seen happen in this century. But if they won't respect me, not even because I'm old, a Colonel of the Republic, and,

to top it off, lame in body and sound in conscience, I hope that at least they'll respect my daughter because she's a woman. I'm not doing it for myself. Maybe not for the peace of the dead man either. Just to fulfill a sacred promise. If I brought Isabel along it wasn't out of cowardice but out of charity. She brought the child (and I can see that she did it for the same reason), and here we are now, the three of us, bearing the weight of this harsh emergency.

We got here a moment ago. I thought we'd find the body still hanging from the ceiling, but the men got here first, laid him on the bed, and almost shrouded him with the secret conviction that the affair wouldn't last more than an hour. When I arrive I hope they'll bring the coffin, I see my daughter and the child sitting in the corner and I examine the room, thinking that the doctor may have left something that will explain why he did it. The desk is open, full of a confusion of papers, none written by him. On the desk I see the same bound formulary that he brought to my house twenty-five years ago when he opened that enormous trunk which could have held the clothing of my whole family. But there was nothing else in the trunk except two cheap shirts, a set of false teeth that couldn't have been his for the simple reason that he still had his own, strong and complete, a portrait, and a formulary. I open the drawers and I find printed sheets of paper in all of them; just papers, old, dusty; and underneath, in the last drawer, the same false teeth that he brought twenty-five years ago, dusty, yellow from age and lack of use. On the small table beside the unlighted lamp there are several bundles of unopened newspapers. I examine them. They're written in French, the most recent ones three months old: *July, 1928*. And there are others, also unopened: *January, 1927; November, 1926*. And the oldest ones: *October, 1919*. I think: *It's been nine years, since one year after the sentence had been pronounced, that he hadn't opened the newspapers. Since that time he's given up the last thing that linked him to his land and his people.*

The men bring the coffin and lower the corpse into it. Then I remember the day twenty-five years ago when he arrived at my house and gave me the letter of recommendation, written in Panama and addressed to me by the Intendant General of the Atlantic Coast at the end of the great war, Colonel Aureliano Buendía. I search through various trifles in the darkness of the bottomless trunk. There's no clue in the other corner, only the same things he brought twenty-five years ago. I remember: *He had two cheap shirts, a set of teeth, a portrait, and that old bound formulary.* I go about gathering up these things before they close the coffin and I put them inside. The portrait is still at the bottom of the trunk, almost in the same place where it had been that time. It's the daguerreotype of a decorated officer. I throw the picture into the box. I throw in the false teeth and finally the formulary. When I finish I signal the men to close the coffin. I think: *Now he's on another trip. The most natural thing for him on his last trip is to take along the things that were with him on the next to the last one. At least that would seem to be the most natural.* And then I seem to see him, for the first time, comfortably dead.

I examine the room and I see that a shoe was forgotten on the bed. I signal my men again with the shoe in my hand and they lift up the lid at the precise moment when the train whistles, disappearing around the last bend in town. *It's two-thirty*, I think. *Two-thirty on September 12, 1928; almost the same hour of that day in 1903 when this man sat down for the first time at our table and asked for some grass to eat.* Adelaida asked him that time: "What kind of grass, doctor?" And he in his parsimonious ruminant voice, still touched by nasality: "Ordinary grass, ma'am. The kind that donkeys eat."

II.

The fact is that Meme isn't in the house and that probably no one could say exactly when she stopped living here. The last time I saw her was eleven years ago. She still had the little *botiquín* on this corner that had been imperceptibly modified by the needs of the neighbors until it had become a variety store. Everything in order, neatly arranged by the scrupulous and hard-working Meme, who spent her day sewing for the neighbors on one of the four Domestics that there were in town in those days or behind the counter attending to customers with that pleasant Indian way which she never lost and which was at the same time both open and reserved; a mixed-up combination of innocence and mistrust.

I hadn't seen Meme since the time she left our house, but actually I can't say exactly when she came here to live with the doctor on the corner or how she could have reached the extreme of degradation of becoming the mistress of a man who had refused her his services, in spite of everything and the fact that they shared my father's house, she as a foster child and he as a permanent guest. I learned from my stepmother that the doctor wasn't a good man, that he'd had a long argument with Papa, trying to convince him that what Meme had wasn't anything serious, not even leaving his room. In any case, even if what the Guajiro girl had was only a passing illness, he should have taken a look at her, if only because of the consideration with which he was treated in our house during the eight years he lived there.

I don't know how things happened. I just know that one morning Meme wasn't in the house anymore and he wasn't either. Then my stepmother had them close up his room and she didn't mention him again until years later when we were working on my wedding dress.

Three or four Sundays after she'd left our house, Meme went

to church, to eight o'clock mass, with a gaudy silk print dress and a ridiculous hat that was topped by a cluster of artificial flowers. She'd always been so simple when I saw her in our house, barefoot most of the time, so that the person who came into church that Sunday looked to me like a different Meme from the one we knew. She heard mass up front, among the ladies, stiff and affected under that pile of things she was wearing, which made her new and complicated, a showy newness made up of cheap things. She was kneeling down up front. And even the devotion with which she followed the Mass was something new in her; even in the way she crossed herself there was something of that flowery and gaudy vulgarity with which she'd entered the church, puzzling people who had known her as a servant in our home and surprising those who'd never seen her.

I (I couldn't have been more than thirteen at the time) wondered what had brought on that transformation, why Meme had disappeared from our house and reappeared in church that Sunday dressed more like a Christmas tree than a lady, or with enough there to dress three women completely for Easter Sunday and the Guajiro girl even had enough drippings and beads left over to dress a fourth one. When mass was over the men and women stopped by the door to watch her come out. They stood on the steps in a double row by the main door, and I think that there might even have been something secretly premeditated in that indolent and mockingly solemn way in which they were waiting, not saying a word until Meme came out the door, closed her eyes and opened them again in perfect rhythm to her seven-colored parasol. That was how she went between the double row of men and women, ridiculous in her high-heeled peacock disguise, until one of the men began to close the circle and Meme was in the middle, startled, confused, trying to smile with a smile of distinction that was as gaudy and false on her as her outfit. But when Meme came out, opened her parasol, and began to walk, Papa, who was next to me, pulled me toward the group. So when the men began

closing the circle, my father opened a way out for Meme, who was hurriedly trying to get away. Papa took her by the arm without looking at the people there, and he led her through the center of the square with that haughty and challenging expression he puts on when he does something that other people don't agree with.

Some time passed before I found out that Meme had gone to live with the doctor as his mistress. In those days the shop was open and she still went to Mass like the finest of ladies, not bothered by what was thought or said, as if she'd forgotten what had happened that first Sunday. Still, two months later, she wasn't ever seen in church again.

I remember the doctor when he was staying at our house. I remember his black and twisted mustache and his way of looking at women with his lustful, greedy dog eyes. But I remember that I never got close to him, maybe because I thought of him as the strange animal that stayed seated at the table after everyone had gotten up and ate the same kind of grass that donkeys eat. During Papa's illness three years ago, the doctor didn't leave his corner the same as he hadn't left it one single time after the night he refused to attend to the wounded men, just as six years before that he'd denied the woman who two days later would be his concubine. The small house had been shut up before the town passed sentence on the doctor. But I do know that Meme was still living here for several months or several years after the store was closed. It must have been much later when people found out that she'd disappeared, because that was what the anonymous note tacked on this door said. According to that note, the doctor had murdered his mistress and buried her in the garden because he was afraid the town would use her to poison him. But I'd seen Meme before I was married. It was eleven years ago, when I was coming back from rosary and the Guajiro woman came to the door of her shop and said to me in her jolly and somewhat ironic way: "Chabela, you're getting married and you didn't even tell me."

"Yes," I tell him, "that's how it must have been." Then I tug on the noose, where on one of the ends the living flesh of the newly cut rope can be seen. I retie the knot my men had cut in order to take the body down and I toss one of the ends over the beam until the noose is hanging, held with enough strength to contribute many deaths just like this man's. While he fans himself with his hat, his face altered by shortness of breath and liquor, looking at the noose, calculating its strength, he says: "A noose as thin as that couldn't possibly have held his body." And I tell him: "That same rope held up his hammock for many years." And he pulls a chair over, hands me his hat, and hangs from the noose by his hands, his face flushed by the effort. Then he stands on the chair again, looking at the end of the hanging rope. He says: "Impossible. That noose doesn't reach down to my neck." And then I can see that he's being illogical deliberately, looking for ways to hold off the burial.

I look at him straight in the face, scrutinizing him. I tell him: "Didn't you ever notice that he was at least a head taller than you?" And he turns to look at the coffin. He says: "All the same, I'm not sure he did it with this noose."

I'm sure it was done that way. And he knows it too, but he has a scheme for wasting time because he's afraid of compromising himself. His cowardice can be seen in the way he moves around in no direction. A double and contradictory cowardice: to hold off the ceremony and to set it up. Then, when he gets to the coffin, he turns on his heels, looks at me, and says: "I'd have to see him hanging to be convinced."

I would have done it. I would have told my men to open the coffin and put the hanged man back up again the way he was until a moment ago. But it would be too much for my daughter. It would be too much for the child, and she shouldn't have brought him. Even though it upsets me to treat a dead man that way, offending defenseless flesh, disturbing a man who's at rest for the first time; even though the act of moving a corpse who's

lying peacefully and deservedly in his coffin is against my principles, I'd hang him up again just to see how far this man will go. But it's impossible. And I tell him so: "You can rest assured that I won't tell them to do that. If you want to, hang him up yourself, and you can be responsible for what happens. Remember that we don't know how long he's been dead."

He hasn't moved. He's still beside the coffin, looking at me, then looking at Isabel and then at the child, and then at the coffin again. Suddenly his expression becomes somber and menacing. He says: "You must know what can happen because of this." And I can see what he means by his threat. I tell him: "Of course I do. I'm a responsible person." And he, his arms folded now, sweating, walking toward me with studied and comical movements that pretend to be threatening, says: "May I ask you how you found out that this man had hanged himself last night?"

I wait for him to get in front of me. I remain motionless, looking at him until my face is hit by his hot, harsh breath, until he stops, his arms still folded, moving his hat behind one armpit. Then I say to him: "When you ask me that in an official capacity, I'll be very pleased to give you an answer." He stands facing me in the same position. When I speak to him he doesn't show the least bit of surprise or upset. He says: "Naturally, colonel, I'm asking you officially."

I'll give him all the rope he wants. I'm sure that no matter how much he tries to twist it, he'll have to give in to an ironclad position, but one that's patient and calm. I tell him: "These men cut the body down because I couldn't let it stay hanging there until you decided to come. I told you to come two hours ago and you took all this time to walk two blocks."

He still doesn't move. I face him, resting on my cane, leaning forward a little. I say: "In the second place, he was my friend." Before I can finish speaking he smiles ironically, but without changing position, throwing his thick and sour breath into my face. He says: "It's the easiest thing in the world, isn't it?" And

suddenly he stops smiling. He says: "So you knew this man was going to hang himself."

Tranquil, patient, convinced that he's only going on like that to complicate things, I say to him: "I repeat. The first thing I did when I found out he'd hanged himself was to go to your place and that was two hours ago." And as if I'd asked him a question and not stated something, he says: "I was having lunch." And I say to him: "I know. I even think you took time out for a siesta."

Then he doesn't know what to say. He moves back. He looks at Isabel sitting beside the child. He looks at the men and finally at me. But his expression is changed now. He seems to be looking for something to occupy his thought for a moment. He turns his back on me, goes to where the policeman is, and tells him something. The policeman nods and leaves the room.

Then he comes back and takes my arm. He says: "I'd like to talk to you in the other room, colonel." Now his voice has changed completely. It's tense and disturbed now. And while I walk into the next room, feeling the uncertain pressure of his hand on my arm, I'm taken with the idea that I know what he's going to tell me.

This room, unlike the other one, is big and cool. The light from the courtyard flows into it. In here I can see his disturbed eyes, the smile that doesn't match the expression of his eyes. I can hear his voice saying: "Colonel, maybe we can settle this another way." And without giving him time to finish, I ask him: "How much?" And then he becomes a different man.

Meme had brought out a plate with jelly and two salt rolls, the kind that she'd learned to make from my mother. The clock had struck nine. Meme was sitting opposite me in the back of the store and was eating listlessly, as if the jelly and rolls were only something to hold together the visit. I understood that and let her lose herself in her labyrinths, sink into the past with that nostalgic and sad enthusiasm that in the light of the oil lamp burning on the

counter made her look more withered and old than the day she'd come into church wearing the hat and high heels. It was obvious that Meme felt like recalling things that night. And while she was doing it, one had the impression that over the past years she'd held herself back in some unique and timeless static age and that as she recalled things that night she was putting her personal time into motion again and beginning to go through her long-postponed aging process.

Meme was stiff and somber, talking about the picturesque and feudal splendor of our family during the last years of the previous century, before the great war. Meme recalled my mother. She recalled her that night when I was coming back from church and she told me in her somewhat mocking and ironic way: "Chabela, you're getting married and you didn't even tell me." Those were precisely the days when I'd wanted my mother and was trying to bring her back more strongly in my memory. "She was the living picture of you," she said. And I really believed it. I was sitting across from the Indian woman, who spoke with an accent mixed with precision and vagueness, as if there was a lot of incredible legend in what she was recalling but also as if she was recalling it in good faith and even with the conviction that the passage of time had changed legend into reality that was remote but hard to forget. She spoke to me about the journey my parents had made during the war, about the rough pilgrimage that would end with their settling in Macondo. My parents were fleeing the hazards of war and looking for a prosperous and tranquil bend in the road to settle down in, and they heard about the golden calf and came looking for it in what was then a town in formation, founded by several refugee families whose members were as careful about the preservation of their traditions and religious practices as the fattening of their hogs. Macondo was my parents' promised land, peace, and the Parchment. Here they found the appropriate spot to rebuild the house that a few years later would be a country mansion with three stables and two guest rooms. Meme

recalled the details without repentance, and spoke about the most extravagant things with an irrepressible desire to live them again or with the pain that came from the fact that she would never live them again. There was no suffering or privation on the journey, she said. Even the horses slept under mosquito netting, not because my father was a spendthrift or a madman, but because my mother had a strange sense of charity, of humanitarian feelings, and thought that the eyes of God would be just as pleased with the act of protecting an animal from the mosquitoes as protecting a man. Their wild and burdensome cargo was everywhere; the trunks full of clothing of people who had died before they'd been on earth, ancestors who couldn't have been found twenty fathoms under the earth; boxes full of kitchen utensils that hadn't been used for a long time and had belonged to my parents' most distant relatives (my father and mother were first cousins), and even a trunk filled with the images of saints, which they used to reconstruct their family altar everywhere they stopped. It was a strange carnival procession with horses and hens and the four Guajiro Indians (Meme's companions) who had grown up in the house and followed my parents all through the region like trained circus animals.

Meme recalled things with sadness. One had the impression that she considered the passage of time a personal loss, as if she noticed in that heart of hers, lacerated by memories, that if time hadn't passed she'd still be on that pilgrimage, which must have been a punishment for my parents, but which was a kind of lark for the children, with strange sights like that of horses under mosquito netting.

Then everything began to go backward, she said. Their arrival in the newborn village of Macondo during the last days of the century was that of a devastated family, still bound to a recent splendid past, disorganized by the war. The Indian woman recalled my mother's arrival in town, sidesaddle on a mule, pregnant, her face green and malarial and her feet disabled by swelling.

Perhaps the seeds of resentment were maturing in my father's soul but he came ready to sink roots against wind and tide while he waited for my mother to bear the child that had been growing in her womb during the crossing and was progressively bringing death to her as the time of birth drew near.

The light of the lamp outlined her profile. Meme, with her stiff Indian expression, her hair straight and thick like a horse's mane or tail, looked like a sitting idol, green and spectral in the small hot room behind the store, speaking the way an idol would have if it had set out to recall its ancient earthly existence. I'd never been close to her, but that night, after that sudden and spontaneous show of intimacy, I felt that I was tied to her by bonds tighter than those of blood.

Suddenly, during one of Meme's pauses, I heard coughing in the next room, in this very bedroom where I am now with the child and my father. It was a short, dry cough, followed by a clearing of the throat, and then I heard the unmistakable sound that a man makes when he rolls over in bed. Meme stopped talking at once, and a gloomy, silent cloud darkened her face. I'd forgotten about him. During the time I was there (it was around ten o'clock) I had felt as if the Guajiro woman and I were alone in the house. Then the tension of the atmosphere changed. I felt fatigue in the arm with which I'd been holding the plate with the jelly and rolls, without tasting any. I leaned over and said: "He's awake." She, expressionless now, cold and completely indifferent, said: "He'll be awake until dawn." And suddenly I understood the disillusionment that could be seen in Meme when she recalled the past of our house. Our lives had changed, the times were good and Macondo was a bustling town where there was even enough money to squander on Saturday nights, but Meme was living tied to a past that had been better. While they were shearing the golden calf outside, inside, in the back of the store, her life was sterile, anonymous, all day behind the counter and spending the night with a man who didn't sleep until dawn, who spent his time walk-

ing about the house, pacing, looking at her greedily with those lustful dog eyes that I've never been able to forget. It saddened me to think of Meme with that man who refused his services one night and went on being a hardened animal, without bitterness or compassion, all day long in ceaseless roaming through the house, enough to drive the most balanced person out of his mind.

Recovering the tone of my voice, knowing that he was in his room, awake, maybe opening his lustful dog eyes every time our words were heard in the rear of the store, I tried to give a different turn to the conversation.

"How's business been for you?" I asked.

Meme smiled. Her laugh was sad and taciturn, seeming detached from any feeling of the moment, like something she kept in the cupboard and took out only when she had to, using it with no feeling of ownership, as if the infrequency of her smiles had made her forget the normal way to use them. "There it is," she said, moving her head in an ambiguous way, and she was silent, abstract again. Then I understood that it was time for me to leave. I handed Meme the plate without giving any explanation as to why it was untouched, and I watched her get up and put it on the counter. She looked at me from there and repeated: "You're the living picture of her." I must have been sitting against the light before, clouded by it as it came in the opposite direction and Meme couldn't see my face while she'd been talking. Then when she got up to put the plate on the counter she saw me frontward, from behind the lamp, and that was why she said: "You're the living picture of her." And she came back to sit down.

Then she began to recall the days when my mother had arrived in Macondo. She'd gone directly from the mule to a rocking chair and stayed seated for three months, not moving, taking her food listlessly. Sometimes they would bring her lunch and she'd sit halfway through the afternoon with the plate in her hand, rigid, not rocking, her feet resting on a chair, feeling death growing inside of them until someone would come and take the plate from

her hands. When the day came, the labor pains drew her out of her abandonment and she stood up by herself, although they had to help her walk the twenty steps between the porch and the bedroom, martyrized by the occupation of a death that had taken her over during nine months of silent suffering. Her crossing from the rocker to the bed had all the pain, bitterness, and penalties that had been absent during the journey taken a few months before, but she arrived where she knew she had to arrive before she fulfilled the last act of her life.

My father seemed desperate over my mother's death, Meme said. But according to what he himself said afterward when he was alone in the house, "No one trusts the morality of a home where the man doesn't have a legitimate wife by his side." And since he'd read somewhere that when a loved one dies we should set out a bed of jasmine to remember her every night, he planted a vine against the courtyard wall, and a year later, in a second marriage, he was wedded to Adelaida, my stepmother.

Sometimes I thought that Meme was going to cry while she was speaking. But she remained firm, satisfied at expiating the loss of having been happy once and having stopped being so by her own free will. Then she smiled. Then she relaxed in her chair and became completely human. It was as if she'd drawn up mental accounts of her grief when she leaned forward and saw that she still had a favorable balance in good memories left, and then she smiled with her old wide and teasing friendliness. She said that the other thing had started five years later, when she came into the dining room where my father was having lunch and told him: "Colonel, colonel, there's a stranger to see you in your office."

III.

Behind the church, on the other side of the street, there was once a lot with no trees. That was toward the end of the last century,

when we came to Macondo and they hadn't started to build the church yet. It was a dry, bald plot of land where the children played after school. Later on, when construction on the church began, they set up four beams to one side of the lot and it could be seen that the encircled space was just right for building a hut. Which they did. Inside they kept the materials for the construction of the church.

When the work on the church came to an end, someone finished putting adobe on the walls of the small hut and opened a door in the rear wall, which faced the small, bare, stony plot where there was not even a trace of an aloe bush. A year later the small hut was finished, big enough for two people. Inside there was a smell of quicklime. That was the only pleasant odor that had been smelled for a long time inside that enclosure and the only agreeable one that would be smelled ever after. When they had whitewashed the walls, the same hand that had completed the construction ran a bar across the inside door and put a padlock on the street door.

The hut had no owner. No one worried about making his rights effective over either the lot or the construction materials. When the first parish priest arrived he put up with one of the well-to-do families in Macondo. Then he was transferred to a different parish. But during those days (and possibly before the first priest had left) a woman with a child at her breast had occupied the hut, and no one knew when she had come, nor from where, nor how she had managed to open the door. There was an earthen crock in a corner, black and green with moss, and a jar hanging from a nail. But there wasn't any more whitewash left on the walls. In the yard a crust of earth hardened by the rain had formed over the stones. The woman built a network of branches to protect herself from the sun. And since she had no means to put a roof of palm leaves, tile, or zinc on it, she planted a grapevine beside the branches and hung a clump of *sábila* and a loaf of bread by the street door to protect herself against evil thoughts.

When the coming of the new priest was announced in 1903, the woman was still living in the hut with her child. Half of the population went out to the highway to wait for the priest to arrive. The rural band was playing sentimental pieces until a boy came running, panting to the point of bursting, saying that the priest's mule was at the last bend in the road. Then the musicians changed their position and began to play a march. The person assigned to give the welcoming speech climbed up on an improvised platform and waited for the priest to appear so that he could begin his greeting. But a moment later the martial tune was suspended, the orator got down off the table, and the astonished multitude watched a stranger pass by, riding a mule whose haunches carried the largest trunk ever seen in Macondo. The man went by on his way into town without looking at anyone. Even if the priest had been dressed in civilian clothes for the trip, it would never have occurred to anyone that the bronzed traveler in military leggings was a priest dressed in civilian clothes.

And, in fact, he wasn't, because at that very same moment, along the shortcut on the other side of town, people saw a strange priest coming along, fearfully thin, with a dry and stretched-out face, astride a mule, his cassock lifted up to his knees, and protected from the sun by a faded and run-down umbrella. In the neighborhood of the church the priest asked where the parish house was, and he must have asked someone who didn't have the least idea of anything, because the answer he got was: "It's the hut behind the church, father." The woman had gone out, but the child was playing inside behind the half-open door. The priest dismounted, rolled a swollen suitcase over to the hut. It was unlocked, just barely held together by a leather strap that was different from the hide of the suitcase itself, and after he examined the hut, he brought up the mule and tied it in the yard in the shade of the grape leaves. Then he opened up the suitcase, took out a hammock that must have been the same age and had seen the same use as the umbrella, hung it diagonally across the

hut, from beam to beam, took off his boots, and tried to sleep, unconcerned about the child, who was looking at him with great frightened eyes.

When the woman returned she must have felt disconcerted by the strange presence of the priest, whose face was so inexpressive that it was in no way different from the skull of a cow. The woman must have tiptoed across the room. She must have dragged her folding cot to the door, made a bundle of her clothes and the child's rags, and left the hut without even bothering about the crock and the jar, because an hour later, when the delegation went back through town in the opposite direction preceded by the band, which was playing its martial air in the midst of a crowd of boys who had skipped school, they found the priest alone in the hut, stretched out in his hammock in a carefree way, his cassock unbuttoned and his shoes off. Someone must have brought the news to the main road, but it occurred to no one to ask what the priest was doing in that hut. They must have thought that he was related to the woman in some way, just as she must have abandoned the hut because she thought that the priest had orders to occupy it, or that it was church property, or simply out of fear that they would ask her why she had lived for more than two years in a hut that didn't belong to her without paying any rent or without anyone's permission. Nor did it occur to the delegation to ask for any explanation, neither then nor any time after, because the priest wouldn't accept any speeches. He laid the presents on the floor and limited himself to greeting the men and women coldly and quickly, because according to what he said, he hadn't shut his eyes all night.

The delegation dissolved in the face of that cold reception by the strangest priest they'd ever seen. They noticed how his face looked like the skull of a cow, with closely cropped gray hair, and he didn't have any lips, but a horizontal opening that seemed not to have been in the place of his mouth since birth but made later on by a quick and unique knife. But that very afternoon they

realized that he looked like someone. And before dawn everyone knew who it was. They remembered having seen him with a sling and a stone, naked, but wearing shoes and a hat, during the time when Macondo was a humble refugee village. The veterans remembered his activities in the civil war of '85. They remembered that he had been a colonel at the age of seventeen and that he was intrepid, hardheaded, and against the government. But nothing had been heard of him again in Macondo until that day when he returned home to take over the parish. Very few remembered his given name. On the other hand, most of the veterans remembered the one his mother had put on him (because he was willful and rebellious) and that it was the same one that his comrades in arms would call him by later on. They all called him the pup. And that was what he was always called in Macondo until the hour of his death:

"Pup, Puppy."

So it was that this man came to our house on the same day and almost at the same hour that the pup reached Macondo. The former along the main road, unexpected and with no one having the slightest notion of his name or profession; the priest by the shortcut, while the whole town was waiting for him on the main road.

I returned home after the reception. We had just sat down to the table—a little later than usual—when Meme came over to tell me: "Colonel, colonel, colonel, there's a stranger to see you in your office." I said: "Tell him to come in." And Meme said: "He's in the office and says that he has to see you at once." Adelaida stopped feeding soup to Isabel (she couldn't have been more than five at the time) and went to take care of the newcomer. A moment later she came back, visibly worried:

"He's pacing back and forth in the office," she said.

I saw her walk behind the candlesticks. Then she began to feed Isabel her soup again. "You should have had him come in," I

said, still eating. And she said: "That's what I was going to do. But he was pacing back and forth in the office when I got there and said good afternoon, but he didn't answer me because he was looking at the leather dancing girl on the shelf. And when I was about to say good afternoon again, he wound up the dancing girl, put her on the desk, and watched her dance. I don't know whether it was the music that prevented him from hearing when I said good afternoon again, but I stood there opposite the desk, where he was leaning over watching the dancing girl, who was still wound up a little." Adelaida was feeding Isabel her soup. I said to her: "He must be very interested in the toy." And she, still feeding Isabel her soup: "He was pacing back and forth in the office, but then, when he saw the dancing girl, he took her down as if he knew beforehand what it was for, as if he knew how it worked. He was winding it up when I said good afternoon to him for the first time, before the music began to play. Then he put it on the desk and stood there watching it, but without smiling, as if he weren't interested in the dance but in the mechanism."

They never announced anyone to me. Visitors came almost every day: travelers we knew, who left their animals in the stable and came in with complete confidence, with the familiarity of one who always expects to find an empty place at our table. I told Adelaida: "He must have a message or something." And she said: "In any case, he's acting very strangely. He's watching the dancing girl until it runs down and in the meantime I'm standing across the desk without knowing what to say to him, because I knew that he wouldn't answer me as long as the music was playing. Then, when the dancing girl gave the little leap she always gives when she runs down, he was still standing there looking at her with curiosity, leaning over the desk but not sitting down. Then he looked at me and I realized that he knew I was in the office but that he hadn't worried about me because he wanted to know how long the dancing girl would keep on dancing. I didn't say good afternoon to him again, but I smiled when he looked at me be-

cause I saw that he had huge eyes, with yellow pupils, and they look at a person's whole body all at the same time. When I smiled at him he remained serious, but he nodded his head very formally and said: 'The colonel. It's the colonel I have to see.' He has a deep voice, as if he could speak with his mouth closed. As if he were a ventriloquist."

She was feeding Isabel her soup, and she said: "At first he was pacing back and forth in the office." Then I understood that the stranger had made an uncommon impression on her and that she had a special interest in my taking care of him. Nevertheless, I kept on eating lunch while she fed Isabel her soup and spoke. She said: "Then, when he said he wanted to see the colonel, what I told him was 'Please come into the dining room,' and he straightened up where he was, with the dancing girl in his hand. Then he raised his head and became as rigid and firm as a soldier, I think, because he's wearing high boots and a suit of ordinary cloth, with the shirt buttoned up to his neck. I didn't know what to say when he didn't answer anything and was quiet, with the toy in his hand, as if he were waiting for me to leave the office in order to wind it up again. That was when he suddenly reminded me of someone, when I realized that he was a military man."

And I told her: "So you think it's something serious." I looked at her over the candlesticks. She wasn't looking at me. She was feeding Isabel her soup. She said:

"When I got there he was pacing back and forth in the office and so I couldn't see his face. But then when he stood in the back he had his head held so high and his eyes were so fixed that I think he's a military man, and I said to him: 'You want to see the colonel in private, is that it?' And he nodded. Then I came to tell you that he looks like someone, or rather, that he's the same person that he looks like, although I can't explain how he got here."

I kept on eating, but I was looking at her over the candlesticks. She stopped feeding Isabel her soup. She said:

"I'm sure it's not a message. I'm sure it's not that he looks like someone but that he's the same person he looks like. I'm sure, rather, that he's a military man. He's got a black pointed mustache and a face like copper. He's wearing high boots and I'm sure that it's not that he looks like someone but that he's the same person he looks like."

She was speaking in a level tone, monotonous and persistent. It was hot and maybe for that reason I began to feel irritated. I said to her: "So, who does he look like?" And she said: "When he was pacing back and forth in the office I couldn't see his face, but later on." And I, irritated with the monotony and persistence of her words: "All right, all right, I'll go to see him when I finish my lunch." And she, feeding Isabel her soup again: "At first I couldn't see his face because he was pacing back and forth in the office. But then when I said to him: 'Please come in,' he stood there silent beside the wall with the dancing girl in his hand. That was when I remembered who he looks like and I came to tell you. He has huge, indiscreet eyes, and when I turned to leave I felt that he was looking right at my legs."

She suddenly fell silent. In the dining room the metallic tinkle of the spoon kept vibrating. I finished my lunch and folded the napkin under my plate.

At that moment from the office I heard the festive music of the windup toy.