IV.

In the kitchen of the house there's an old carved wooden chair without crosspieces and my grandfather puts his shoes to dry next to the stove on its broken seat.

Tobías, Abraham, Gilberto, and I left school at this time yesterday and we went to the plantations with a sling, a big hat to hold the birds, and a new knife. On the way I was remembering the

useless chair placed in the kitchen corner, which at one time was used for visitors and which now is used by the dead man who sits down every night with his hat on to look at the ashes in the cold stove.

Tobías and Gilberto were walking toward the end of the dark nave. Since it had rained during the morning, their shoes slipped on the muddy grass. One of them was whistling, and his hard, firm whistle echoed in the vegetable cavern the way it does when someone starts to sing inside a barrel. Abraham was bringing up the rear with me. He with his sling and the stone, ready to shoot. I with my open knife.

Suddenly the sun broke the roof of tight, hard leaves and a body of light fell winging down onto the grass like a live bird. "Did you see it?" Abraham asked. I looked ahead and saw Gilberto and Tobías at the end of the nave. "It's not a bird," I said. "It's the sun that's just come out strong."

When they got to the bank they began to get undressed and gave strong kicks in that twilight water, which didn't seem to wet their skin. "There hasn't been a single bird all afternoon," Abraham said. "There aren't any birds after it rains," I said. And I believed it myself then. Abraham began to laugh. His laugh is foolish and simple and it makes a sound like that of a thread of water from a spigot. He got undressed. "I'll take the knife into the water and fill the hat with fish," he said.

Abraham was naked in front of me with his hand open, waiting for the knife. I didn't answer right away. I held the knife tight and I felt its clean and tempered steel in my hand. *I'm not going to give him the knife*, I thought. And I told him: "I'm not going to give you the knife. I only got it yesterday and I'm going to keep it all afternoon." Abraham kept his hand out. Then I told him:

"Incomploruto."

Abraham understood me. He's the only one who can understand my words. "All right," he said and walked toward the water

through the hardened, sour air. He said: "Start getting undressed and we'll wait for you on the rock." And he said it as he dove in and reappeared shining like an enormous silver-plated fish, as if the water had turned to liquid as it came in contact with him.

I stayed on the bank, lying on the warm mud. When I opened the knife again I stopped looking at Abraham and lifted my eyes up straight toward the other side, up toward the trees, toward the furious dusk where the sky had the monstrous awfulness of a burning stable.

"Hurry up," Abraham said from the other side. Tobías was whistling on the edge of the rock. Then I thought: *I'm not going swimming today. Tomorrow.*

On the way back Abraham hid behind the hawthorns. I was going to follow him, but he told me: "Don't come back here. I'm doing something." I stayed outside, sitting on the dead leaves in the road, watching a single swallow that was tracing a curve in the sky. I said:

"There's only one swallow this afternoon."

Abraham didn't answer right away. He was silent behind the hawthorns, as if he couldn't hear me, as if he were reading. His silence was deep and concentrated, full of a hidden strength. After a long silence he sighed. Then he said:

"Swallows."

I told him again: "There's only one swallow this afternoon." Abraham was still behind the hawthorns but I couldn't tell anything about him. He was silent and drawn in, but his silence wasn't static. It was a desperate and impetuous immobility. After a moment he said:

"Only one? Ah, yes. You're right, you're right."

I didn't say anything then. Behind the hawthorns, he was the one who began to move. Sitting on the leaves, I could hear the sound of other dead leaves under his feet from where he was. Then he was silent again, as if he'd gone away. Then he breathed deeply and asked:

"What did you say?"

I told him again: "There's only one swallow this afternoon." And while I was saying it I saw the curved wing tracing circles in the sky of incredible blue. "He's flying high," I said.

Abraham replied at once:

"Ah, yes, of course. That must be why then."

He came out from behind the hawthorns, buttoning up his pants. He looked up toward where the swallow was still tracing circles, and, still not looking at me, he said:

"What were you telling me a while back about the swallows?"

That held us up. When we got back the lights in town were on. I ran into the house and on the veranda I came on the fat, blind women with the twins of Saint Jerome who every Tuesday have come to sing for my grandfather since before I was born, according to what my mother says.

All night I was thinking that today we'd get out of school again and go to the river, but not with Gilberto and Tobías. I want to go alone with Abraham, to see the shine of his stomach when he dives and comes up again like a metal fish. All night long I've wanted to go back with him, alone in the darkness of the green tunnel, to brush his thigh as we walk along. Whenever I do that I feel as if someone is biting me with soft nibbles and my skin creeps.

If this man who's come to talk to my grandfather in the other room comes back in a little while maybe we can be home before four o'clock. Then I'll go to the river with Abraham.

He stayed on to live at our house. He occupied one of the rooms off the veranda, the one that opens onto the street, because I thought it would be convenient, for I knew that a man of his type wouldn't be comfortable in the small hotel in town. He put a sign on the door (it was still there until a few years ago when they whitewashed the house, written in pencil in his own hand),

and on the following week we had to bring in new chairs to take care of the demands of his numerous patients.

After he gave me the letter from Colonel Aureliano Buendía, our conversation in the office went on so long that Adelaida had no doubts but that it was a matter of some high military official on an important mission, and she set the table as if for a holiday. We spoke about Colonel Buendía, his premature daughter, and his wild firstborn son. The conversation had not gone on too long when I gathered that the man knew the Intendant General quite well and that he had enough regard for him to warrant his confidence. When Meme came to tell us that dinner was served, I thought that my wife had improvised some things in order to take care of the newcomer. But a far cry from improvisation was that splendid table served on the new cloth, on the chinaware destined exclusively for family dinners on Christmas and New Year's Day.

Adelaida was solemnly sitting up straight at one end of the table in a velvet dress closed up to the neck, the one that she wore before our marriage to attend to family business in the city. Adelaida had more refined customs than we did, a certain social experience which, since our marriage, had begun to influence the ways of my house. She had put on the family medallion, the one that she displayed at moments of exceptional importance, and all of her, just like the table, the furniture, the air that was breathed in the dining room, brought on a severe feeling of composure and cleanliness. When we reached the parlor, the man, who was always so careless in his dress and manners, must have felt ashamed and out of place, for he checked the button on his shirt as if he were wearing a tie, and a slight nervousness could be noticed in his unworried and strong walk. I can remember nothing with such precision as that instant in which we went into the dining room and I myself felt dressed too domestically for a table like the one Adelaida had prepared.

There was beef and game on the plates. Everything the same, however, as at our regular meals at that time, except for the presentation on the new china, between the newly polished candlesticks, which was spectacular and different from the norm. In spite of the fact that my wife knew that we would be having only one visitor, she had set eight places, and the bottle of wine in the center was an exaggerated manifestation of the diligence with which she had prepared the homage for the man whom, from the first moment, she had confused with a distinguished military functionary. Never before had I seen in my house an environment more loaded with unreality.

Adelaida's clothing would have been ridiculous had it not been for her hands (they were beautiful, really, and overly white), which balanced, along with her regal distinction, the falsity and arrangement of her appearance. It was when he checked the button on his shirt and hesitated that I got ahead of myself and said: "My second wife, *doctor*." A cloud darkened Adelaida's face and turned it strange and gloomy. She didn't budge from where she was, her hand held out, smiling, but no longer with the air of ceremonious stiffness that she had had when we came into the dining room.

The newcomer clicked his heels like a military man, touched his forehead with the tips of his extended fingers, and then walked over to where she was.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. But he didn't pronounce any name.

Only when I saw him clumsily shake Adelaida's hand did I become aware that his manners were vulgar and common.

He sat at the other end of the table, between the new crystal ware, between the candlesticks. His disarrayed presence stood out like a soup stain on the tablecloth.

Adelaida poured the wine. Her emotion from the beginning had been changed into a passive nervousness that seemed to say: *It's all right, everything will be done the way it was laid out, but you owe me an explanation.*

And it was after she served the wine and sat down at the other end of the table, while Meme got ready to serve the plates, that he leaned back in his chair, rested his hands on the tablecloth, and said with a smile:

"Look, miss, just start boiling a little grass and bring that to me as if it were soup."

Meme didn't move. She tried to laugh, but she couldn't get it out; instead she turned toward Adelaida. Then she, smiling too, but visibly upset, asked him: "What kind of grass, doctor?" And he, in his parsimonious ruminant voice:

"Ordinary grass, ma'am. The kind that donkeys eat."

V.

There's a moment when siesta time runs dry. Even the secret, hidden, minute activity of the insects ceases at that precise instant; the course of nature comes to a halt; creation stumbles on the brink of chaos and women get up, drooling, with the flower of the embroidered pillowcase on their cheeks, suffocated by temperature and rancor; and they think: *It's still Wednesday in Macondo*. And then they go back to huddling in the corner, splicing sleep to reality, and they come to an agreement, weaving the whispering as if it were an immense flat surface of thread stitched in common by all the women in town.

If inside time had the same rhythm as that outside, we would be in the bright sunlight now, in the middle of the street with the coffin. It would be later outside: it would be nighttime. It would be a heavy September night with a moon and women sitting in their courtyards chatting under the green light, and in the street, us, the renegades, in the full sunlight of this thirsty September. No one will interfere with the ceremony. I expected the mayor to be inflexible in his determination to oppose it and that we could have gone home; the child to school and my father to

his clogs, the washbasin under his head dripping with cool water, and on the left-hand side his pitcher with iced lemonade. But now it's different. My father has once more been sufficiently persuasive to impose his point of view on what I thought at first was the mayor's irrevocable determination. Outside the town is bustling, given over to the work of a long, uniform, and pitiless whispering; and the clean street, without a shadow on the clean dust, virgin since the last wind swept away the tracks of the last ox. And it's a town with no one, with closed houses, where nothing is heard in the rooms except the dull bubbling of words pronounced by evil hearts. And in the room, the sitting child, stiff, looking at his shoes; slowly his eyes go to the lamp, then to the newspapers, again to his shoes, and now quickly to the hanged man, his bitten tongue, his glassy dog eyes that have no lust now; a dog with no appetite, dead. The child looks at him, thinks about the hanged man lying underneath the boards; he has a sad expression and then everything changes: a stool comes out by the door of the barbershop and inside the small altar with the mirror, the powder, and the scented water. The hand becomes freckled and large, it's no longer the hand of my son, it's been changed into a large, deft hand that coldly, with calculated parsimony, begins to strop the razor while the ear hears the metallic buzzing of the tempered blade and the head thinks: *Today they'll be coming earlier because it's Wednesday in Macondo.* And then they come, sit on the chairs in the shade and the coolness of the threshold, grim, squinting, their legs crossed, their hands folded over their knees, biting on the tips of their cigars; looking, talking about the same thing, watching the closed window across from them, the silent house with Señora Rebeca inside. She forgot something too: she forgot to disconnect the fan and she's going through the rooms with screened windows, nervous, stirred up, going through the knickknacks of her sterile and tormented widowhood in order to be convinced by her sense of touch that she won't have died before the hour of burial comes. She's opening

and closing the doors of her rooms, waiting for the patriarchal clock to rise up out of its siesta and reward her senses by striking three. All this, while the child's expression ends and he goes back to being hard and stiff, not even delaying half the time a woman needs to give the last stitch on the machine and raise her head full of curlers. Before the child goes back to being upright and pensive, the woman has rolled the machine to the corner of the veranda, and the men have bitten their cigars twice while they watch a complete passage of the razor across the cowhide; and Águeda, the cripple, makes a last effort to awaken her dead knees; and Señora Rebeca turns the lock again and thinks: *Wednesday in Macondo. A good day to bury the devil.* But then the child moves again and there's a new change in time. When something moves you can tell that time has passed. Not till then. Until something moves time is eternal, the sweat, the shirt drooling on the skin, and the unbribable and icy dead man, behind his bitten tongue. That's why time doesn't pass for the hanged man: because even if the child's hand moves, he doesn't know it. And while the dead man doesn't know it (because the child is still moving his hand), Águeda must have gone through another bead on her rosary; Señora Rebeca, lounging in her folding chair, is perplexed, watching the clock remain fixed on the edge of the imminent minute, and Águeda has had time (even though the second hasn't passed on Señora Rebeca's clock) to go through another bead on her rosary and think: *I'd do that if I could get to Father Ángel.* Then the child's hand descends and the razor makes a motion on the strop and one of the men sitting in the coolness of the threshold says: "It must be around three-thirty, right?" Then the hand stops. A dead clock on the brink of the next minute once more, the razor halted once more in the limits of its own steel; and Águeda still waiting for a new movement of the hand to stretch her legs and burst into the sacristy with her arms open, her knees moving again, saying: "Father, Father." And Father Ángel, prostrate in the child's immobility, running his tongue over his lips

and the viscous taste of the meatball nightmare, seeing Águeda, would then say: "This is undoubtedly a miracle," and then, rolling about again in the sweaty, drooly drowsiness: "In any case, Águeda, this is no time for saying a mass for the souls in Purgatory." But the new movement is frustrated, my father comes into the room and the two times are reconciled; the two halves become adjusted, consolidate, and Señora Rebeca's clock realizes that it's been caught between the child's parsimony and the widow's impatience, and then it yawns, confused, dives into the prodigious quiet of the moment and comes out afterward dripping with liquid time, with exact and rectified time, and it leans forward and says with ceremonious dignity: "It's exactly two forty-seven." And my father, who, without knowing it, has broken the paralysis of the instant, says: "You're lost in the clouds, daughter." And I say: "Do you think something might happen?" And he, sweating, smiling: "At least I'm sure that the rice will be burned and the milk spilled in lots of houses."

The coffin's closed now, but I can remember the dead man's face. I've got it so clearly that if I look at the wall I can see his open eyes, his tight gray cheeks that are like damp earth, his bitten tongue to one side of his mouth. This gives me a burning, restless feeling. Maybe if my pants weren't so tight on one side of my leg.

My grandfather's sat down beside my mother. When he came back from the next room he brought over the chair and now he's here, sitting next to her, not saying anything, his chin on his cane and his lame leg stretched out in front of him. My grandfather's waiting. My mother, like him, is waiting too. The men have stopped smoking on the bed and they're quiet, all in a row, not looking at the coffin. They're waiting too.

If they blindfolded me, if they took me by the hand and walked me around town twenty times and brought me back to this room I'd recognize it by the smell. I'll never forget how this

room smells of trash, piled-up trunks, all the same, even though I've only seen one trunk, where Abraham and I could hide and there'd still be room left over for Tobías. I know rooms by their smell.

Last year Ada sat me on her lap. I had my eyes closed and I saw her through my lashes. I saw her dark, as if she wasn't a woman but just a face that was looking at me and rocking and bleating like a sheep. I was really going to sleep when I got the smell.

There's no smell at home that I can't recognize. When they leave me alone on the veranda I close my eyes, stick out my arms, and walk. I think: *When I get the smell of camphorated rum I'll be by my grandfather's room.* I keep on walking with my eyes closed and my arms stretched out. I think *Now I've gone past my mother's room, because it smells like new playing cards. Then it will smell of pitch and mothballs.* I keep on walking and I get the smell of new playing cards at the exact moment I hear my mother's voice singing in her room. Then I get the smell of pitch and mothballs. I think: *Now I'll keep on smelling mothballs. Then I'll turn to the left of the smell and I'll get the other smell of underwear and closed windows. I'll stop there.* Then, when I take three steps, I get the new smell and I stop, with my eyes closed and my arms outstretched, and I hear Ada's voice shouting: "Child, what are you walking with your eyes closed for?"

That night, when I began to fall asleep, I caught a smell that doesn't exist in any of the rooms in the house. It was a strong and warm smell, as if someone had been shaking a jasmine bush. I opened my eyes, sniffing the thick and heavy air. I said. "Do you smell it?" Ada was looking at me but when I spoke to her she closed her eyes and looked in the other direction. I asked her again: "Do you smell it? It's as if there were some jasmines somewhere." Then she said:

"It's the smell of the jasmines that used to be growing on the wall here nine years ago."

I sat on her lap. "But there aren't any jasmines now," I said. And she said: "Not now. But nine years ago, when you were born, there was a jasmine bush against the courtyard wall. It would be hot at night and it would smell the same as now." I leaned on her shoulder. I looked at her mouth while she spoke. "But that was before I was born," I said. And she said: "During that time there was a great winter storm and they had to clean out the garden."

The smell was still there, warm, almost touchable, leading the other smells of the night. I told Ada: "I *want* you to tell me that." And she remained silent for an instant, then looked toward the whitewashed wall with moonlight on it and said:

"When you're older you'll learn that the jasmine is a flower that *comes out.*"

I didn't understand, but I felt a strange shudder, as if someone had touched me. I said: "All right," and she said: "The same thing happens with jasmines as with people who come out and wander through the night after they're dead."

I stayed there leaning on her shoulder, not saying anything. I was thinking about other things, about the chair in the kitchen where my grandfather puts his shoes on the seat to dry when it rains. I knew from then on that there's a dead man in the kitchen and every night he sits down, without taking off his hat, looking at the ashes in the cold stove. After a moment I said: "That must be like the dead man who sits in the kitchen." Ada looked at me, opened her eyes, and asked: "What dead man?" And I said to her: "The one who sits every night in the chair where my grandfather puts his shoes to dry." And she said: "There's no dead man there. The chair's next to the stove because it's no good for anything else anymore except to dry shoes on."

That was last year. Now it's different, now I've seen a corpse and all I have to do is close my eyes to keep on seeing him inside, in the darkness of my eyes. I was going to tell my mother, but

she's begun to talk to my grandfather: "Do you think something might happen?" she asks. And my grandfather lifts his chin from his cane and shakes his head. "At least I'm sure that the rice will be burned and the milk spilled in lots of houses."

VI.

At first he used to sleep till seven o'clock. He would appear in the kitchen with his collarless shirt buttoned up to the neck, his wrinkled and dirty sleeves rolled up to the elbows, his filthy pants at chest level with the belt fastened outside, well below the loops. You had the feeling that his pants were about to fall down, slide off, because there was no body to hold them up. He hadn't grown thinner, but you didn't see the military and haughty look he had the first year on his face anymore; he had the dreamy and fatigued expression of a man who doesn't know what his life will be from one minute to the next and hasn't got the least interest in finding out. He would drink his black coffee a little after seven and then go back to his room, passing out his inexpressive "Good morning" along the way.

He'd been living in our house for four years and in Macondo he was looked upon as a serious professional man in spite of the fact that his brusque manner and disordered ways built up an atmosphere about him that was more like fear than respect.

He was the only doctor in town until the banana company arrived and work started on the railroad. Then empty seats began to appear in the small room. The people who visited him during the first four years of his stay in Macondo began to drift away when the company organized a clinic for its workers. He must have seen the new directions that the leaf storm was leading to, but he didn't say anything. He still opened up the street door, sitting in his leather chair all day long until several days passed without the return of a single patient. Then he threw the bolt

on the door, bought a hammock, and shut himself up in the room.

During that time Meme got into the habit of bringing him breakfast, which consisted of bananas and oranges. He would eat the fruit and throw the peels into the corner, where the Indian woman would pick them up on Saturdays, when she cleaned the bedroom. But from the way he acted, anyone would have suspected that it made little difference to him whether or not she would stop cleaning some Saturday and the room would become a dungheap.

He did absolutely nothing now. He spent his time in the hammock, rocking. Through the half-open door he could be seen in the darkness and his thin and inexpressive face, his tangled hair, the sickly vitality of his hard yellow eyes gave him the unmistakable look of a man who has begun to feel defeated by circumstances.

During the first years of his stay in our house, Adelaida appeared to be indifferent or appeared to go along with me or really did agree with my decision that he should stay in the house. But when he closed his office and left his room only at mealtime, sitting at the table with the same silent and painful apathy as always, my wife broke the dikes of her tolerance. She told me: "It's heresy to keep supporting him. It's as if we were feeding the devil." And I, always inclined in his behalf out of a complex feeling of pity, amazement, and sorrow (because even though I may try to change the shape of it now, there was a great deal of sorrow in that feeling), insisted: "We have to take care of him. He's a man who doesn't have anybody in the world and he needs understanding."

Shortly afterward the railroad began to operate. Macondo was a prosperous town, full of new faces, with a movie theater and several amusement places. At that time there was work for everyone, except for him. He kept shut up, aloof, until that morning when, all of a sudden, he made an appearance in the dining room at breakfast time and spoke spontaneously, even with enthusiasm,

about the magnificent prospects for the town. That morning I heard the words for the first time. He said: "All of this will pass when we get used to the *leaf storm.*"

Months later he was frequently seen going out into the street before dusk. He would sit by the barbershop until the last hours of daylight, taking part in the conversation of the groups that gathered by the door, beside the portable dressing table, beside the high stool that the barber brought out into the street so that his customers could enjoy the coolness of dusk.

The company doctors were not satisfied with depriving him of his means of life and in 1907, when there was no longer a single patient in Macondo who remembered him and when he himself had ceased expecting any, one of the banana company doctors suggested to the mayor's office that they require all professionals in town to register their degrees. He must not have felt that he was the one they had in mind when the edict appeared one Monday on the four corners of the square. It was I who spoke to him about the convenience of complying with the requirement. But he, tranquil, indifferent, limited himself to replying: "Not me, colonel. I'm not going to get involved in any of that again." I've never been able to find out whether his papers were really in order or not. I couldn't find out if he was French, as we supposed, or if he had any remembrance of a family, which he must have had but about which he never said a word. A few weeks later, when the mayor and his secretary appeared at my house to demand of him the presentation and registration of his license, he absolutely refused to leave his room. That day—after five years of living in the same house—I suddenly realized that we didn't even know his name.

One probably didn't have to be seventeen years old (as I was then) in order to observe—from the time I saw Meme all decked out in church and afterward, when I spoke to her in the shop—that the small room in our house off the street was closed up.

Later on I found out that my stepmother had padlocked it, was opposed to anyone's touching the things that were left inside: the bed that the doctor had used until he bought the hammock; the small table with medicines from which he had removed only the money accumulated during his better years (which must have been quite a bit, because he never had any expenses in the house and it was enough for Meme to open the shop with); and, in addition, in the midst of a pile of trash and old newspapers written in his language, the washstand and some useless personal items. It seemed as if all those things had been contaminated by something my stepmother considered evil, completely diabolical.

I must have noticed that the room was closed in October or November (three years after Meme and he had left the house), because early in the following year I began to dream about Martín staying in that room. I wanted to live in it after my marriage; I prowled about it; in conversation with my stepmother I even suggested that it was already time to open the padlock and lift the unbreakable quarantine imposed on one of the most intimate and friendly parts of the house. But before the time we began sewing my wedding dress, no one spoke to me directly about the doctor and even less about the small room that was still like something of his, a fragment of his personality which could not be detached from our house while anyone who might have remembered him still lived in it.

I was going to be married before the year was up. I don't know if it was the circumstances under which my life had developed during childhood and adolescence that gave me an imprecise notion of happenings and things at that time, but what was certain was that during those months when the preparations for my wedding were going forward, I still didn't know the secret of many things. A year before I married him, I would recall Martín through a vague atmosphere of unreality. Perhaps that was why I wanted him close by, in the small room, so that I could convince myself that it was a question of a concrete man and not a fiancé I had

met in a dream. But I didn't feel I had the strength to speak to my stepmother about my project. The natural thing would have been to say: "I'm going to take off the padlock. I'm going to put the table next to the window and the bed against the inside wall. I'm going to put a pot of carnations on the shelf and an aloe branch over the lintel." But my cowardice, my absolute lack of decision, was joined by the foggy image of my betrothed. I remembered him as a vague, ungraspable figure whose only concrete elements seemed to be his shiny mustache, his head tilting slightly to the left, and the ever-present four-button jacket.

He had come to our house toward the end of July. He spent the day with us and chatted with my father in the office, going over some mysterious business that I was never able to find out about. In the afternoon Martín and I would go to the plantations with my stepmother. But when I looked at him on the way back in the mellow light of sunset, when he was closer to me, walking alongside my shoulder, then he became even more abstract and unreal. I knew that I would never be capable of imagining him as human or of finding in him the solidity that was indispensable if his memory was to give me courage, strengthen me at the moment of saying: "I'm going to fix the room up for Martín."

Even the idea that I was going to marry him seemed odd to me a year before the wedding. I had met him in February, during the wake for the Paloquemado child. Several of us girls were singing and clapping, trying to use up every drop of the only fun allowed us. There was a movie theater in Macondo, there was a public phonograph, and other places for amusement existed, but my father and stepmother were opposed to girls my age making use of them. "They're amusements from out of the leaf storm," they said.

Noontime was hot in February. My stepmother and I were sitting on the veranda, backstitching some white cloth while my father took his siesta. We sewed until he went by, dragging along in his clogs, to soak his head in the washbasin. But February was

cool and deep at night and in the whole town one could hear the voices of women singing at wakes for children.

The night we went to the Paloquemado child's wake Meme Orozco's voice was probably louder than ever. She was thin, graceless, and stiff, like a broom, but she knew how to make her voice carry better than anyone. And in the first pause Genoveva García said: "There's a stranger sitting outside." I think that all of us stopped singing except Remedios Orozco. "Just think, he's wearing a jacket," Genoveva García said. "He's been talking all night and the others are listening to him without saying a peep. He's wearing a four-button jacket and when he crosses his legs you can see his socks and garters and his shoes have laces." Meme Orozco was still singing when we clapped our hands and said: "Let's marry him."

Afterward, when I thought about it at home, I couldn't find any correspondence between those words and reality. I remembered them as if they had been spoken by a group of imaginary women clapping hands and singing in a house where an unreal child had died. Other women were smoking next to us. They were serious, vigilant, stretching out their long buzzard necks toward us. In the back, against the coolness of the doorstep, another woman, bundled up to her head in a wide black cloth, was waiting for the coffee to boil. Suddenly a male voice joined ours. At first it was disconcerted and directionless, but then it was vibrant and metallic, as if the man were singing in church. Veva García nudged me in the ribs. Then I raised my eyes and saw him for the first time. He was young and neat, with a hard collar and a jacket with all four buttons closed. And he was looking at me.

I heard about his return in December and I thought that no place would be more appropriate for him than the small locked room. But I hadn't thought of it yet. I said to myself: "Martín, Martín, Martín." And the name, examined, savored, broken down into its essential parts, lost all of its meaning for me.

When we came out of the wake he put an empty cup in front of me. He said: "I read your fortune in the coffee." I was going to the door with the other girls and I heard his voice, deep, convincing, gentle: "Count seven stars and you'll dream about me." When we passed by the door we saw the Paloquemado child in his small coffin, his face powdered, a rose in his mouth, and his eyes held open with toothpicks. February was sending us warm gusts of death, and the breath of the jasmines and the violets toasted by the heat floated in the room. But in that silence of a dead person, the other voice was constant and different: "Remember. Only seven stars."

He came to our house in July. He liked to lean back against the flowerpots along the railing. He said: "Remember, I never looked into your eyes. That's the secret of a man who's begun to sense the fear of falling in love." And it was true, I couldn't remember his eyes. In July I probably couldn't have said what color the eyes of the man I was going to marry in December were. Still, six months earlier, February was only a deep silence at noontime, a pair of congorocho worms, male and female, coiled on the bathroom floor, the Tuesday beggar woman asking for a branch of lemon balm, and he, leaning back, smiling, his jacket buttoned all the way up, saying: "I'm going to make you think about me every minute of the day. I put a picture of you behind the door and I stuck two pins in your eyes." And Genoveva García, dying with laughter: "That's the kind of nonsense men pick up from the Guajiro Indians."

Toward the end of March he would be going through the house. He would spend long hours in the office with my father, convincing him of the importance of something I could never decipher. Eleven years have passed now since my marriage; nine since the time I watched him say good-bye from the window of the train, making me promise I would take good care of the child until he came back for us. Those nine years would pass with no

one's hearing a word from him, and my father, who had helped him get ready for that endless trip, never said another word about his return. But not even during the two years that our marriage lasted was he more concrete and touchable than he was at the wake for the Paloquemado child or on that Sunday in March when I saw him for the second time as Veva García and I were coming home from church. He was standing in the doorway of the hotel, alone, his hands in the side pockets of his four-button jacket. He said: "Now you're going to think about me for the rest of your life because the pins have fallen out of the picture." He said it in such a soft and tense voice that it sounded like the truth. But even that truth was strange and different. Genoveva insisted: "That's silly Guajiro stuff." Three months later she ran away with the head of a company of puppeteers, but she still seemed scrupulous and serious on that Sunday. Martín said: "It's nice to know that someone will remember me in Macondo." And Genoveva García, looking at him with a face that showed exasperation, said:

"*Airyfay!* That four-button coat's going to get with