

X.

My grandfather's come back beside Mama. She's sitting down, completely lost in her thoughts. The dress and the hat are here, on the chair, but my mother's not in them anymore. My grandfather comes closer, sees that her mind's somewhere else, and he moves his cane in front of her eyes, saying: "Wake up, child." My mother blinks, shakes her head. "What were you thinking about?" my grandfather asks. And she, smiling with great effort: "I was thinking about the Pup."

My grandfather sits down beside her again, his chin resting on his cane. He says: "That's a coincidence. I was thinking about him too."

They understand their words. They talk without looking at each other, Mama leaning back in her chair and my grandfather sitting next to her, his chin still resting on his cane. But even like that they understand each other's words, the way Abraham and I can understand each other when we go to see Lucrecia.

I tell Abraham: "Now I'm tecky-tacking." Abraham always walks in front, about three steps ahead of me. Without turning around to look, he says: "Not yet, in a minute." And I say to him: "When I teck somebum hobblows up." Abraham doesn't turn his head but I can hear him laugh softly with a foolish and simple laugh that's like the thread of water that trembles down from the snout of an ox when he's finished drinking. He says: "It must be around five o'clock." He runs a little more and says: "If we go now somebum might hoblow." But I insist: "In any case, there's always tecky-tacking." And he turns to me and starts to run, saying: "All right, then, let's go."

In order to see Lucrecia you have to go through five yards full of trees and bushes. You have to go over the low wall that's green with lizards where the midget with a woman's voice used to sing. Abraham goes running along, shining like a sheet of metal in the

strong light, his heels harried by the dog's barking. Then he stops. At that point we're by the window. We say: "Lucrecia," making our voices low as if Lucrecia was sleeping. But she's awake, sitting on the bed, her shoes off, wearing a loose nightgown, white and starched, that reaches down to her ankles.

When we speak, Lucrecia lifts her eyes and makes them turn around the room, fastening a round, large eye like that of a curlew on us. Then she laughs and begins to move toward the center of the room. Her mouth is open and she shows her small, broken teeth. She has a round head, with the hair cut like a man's. When she gets to the center of the room she stops laughing, squats down, and looks at the door until her hands reach her ankles, and she slowly begins to lift her gown, with a calculated slowness, cruel and challenging at the same time. Abraham and I are still looking in the window while Lucrecia lifts up her gown, her lips sticking out in a panting and anxious frown, her big curlew eyes staring and shining. Then we can see her white stomach, which turns deep blue farther down, when she covers her face with the nightgown and stays that way, stretched out in the center of the bedroom, her legs together and tight with a trembling force that comes up from her ankles. All of a sudden she quickly uncovers her face, points at us with her forefinger, and the shining eye pops out in the midst of terrible shrieks that echo all through the house. Then the door of the room opens and the woman comes in shouting: "Why don't you go screw the patience of your own mothers?"

We haven't been to see Lucrecia for days. Now we go to the river along the road to the plantations. If we get out of this early, Abraham will be waiting for me. But my grandfather doesn't move. He's sitting next to Mama with his chin on his cane. I keep watching him, watching his eyes behind his glasses, and he must feel that I'm looking at him, because all of a sudden he gives a deep sigh, shakes himself, and says to my mother in a low, sad voice: "The Pup would have made them come if he had to whip them."

Then he gets up from his chair and walks over to where the dead man is.

It's the second time that I've been in this room. The first time, ten years ago, things were just the same. It's as if they hadn't been touched since then or as if since that remote dawn when he came here to live with Meme he hadn't worried about his life anymore. The papers were in the same place. The table, the few cheap articles of clothing, everything was in the same place it's in today. As if it were yesterday when the Pup and I came to make peace between this man and the authorities.

By that time the banana company had stopped squeezing us and had left Macondo with the rubbish of the rubbish they'd brought us. And with them went the leaf storm, the last traces of what prosperous Macondo had been like in 1915. A ruined village was left here, with four poor, dark stores; occupied by unemployed and angry people who were tormented by a prosperous past and the bitterness of an overwhelming and static present. There was nothing in the future at that time except a gloomy and threatening election Sunday.

Six months before an anonymous note had been found nailed to the door of this house one morning. No one was interested in it and it stayed nailed here for a long time until the final drizzle washed away its dark letters and the paper disappeared, hauled off by the last winds of February. But toward the end of 1918, when the closeness of the elections made the government think about the necessity of keeping the tension of its voters awake and irritated, someone spoke to the new authorities concerning this solitary doctor, about whose existence there would have to be some valid evidence after such a long time. They had to be told that during the first years the Indian woman who lived with him ran a shop that shared in the same prosperity that favored even the most insignificant enterprises in Macondo during those times. One day (no one remembers the date, not even the year) the door

of the shop didn't open. It was imagined that Meme and the doctor were still living here, shut up, living on the vegetables they grew themselves in the yard. But in the note that appeared on this corner it said that the physician had murdered his concubine and buried her in the garden, afraid that the town would use her to poison him. The inexplicable thing is that it was said during a time when no one could have had any reason to plot the doctor's death. I think that the authorities had forgotten about his existence until that year when the government reinforced the police and the reserves with men they could trust. Then they dug up the forgotten legend of the anonymous note and the authorities violated these doors, searched the house, dug up the yard, and probed in the privy trying to locate Meme's body. But they couldn't find a trace of her.

On that occasion they would have dragged the doctor out, beaten him, and he most surely would have been one more sacrifice on the public square in the name of official order. But the Pup stepped in; he came to my house and invited me to visit the doctor, certain that I'd be able to get a satisfactory explanation from him.

When we went in the back way we found the ruins of a man abandoned in the hammock. Nothing in this world can be more fearsome than the ruins of a man. And those of this citizen of nowhere who sat up in the hammock when he saw us come in were even worse, and he himself seemed to be covered by the coat of dust that covered everything in the room. His head was steely and his hard yellow eyes still had the powerful inner strength that I had seen in them in my house. I had the impression that if we'd scratched him with our nails his body would have fallen apart, turning into a pile of human sawdust. He'd cut his mustache but he hadn't shaved it off. He'd used shears on his beard so that his chin didn't seem to be sown with hard and vigorous sprouts but with soft, white fuzz. Seeing him in the hammock I thought: *He doesn't look like a man now. Now he looks like a corpse whose eyes still haven't died.*

When he spoke his voice was the same parsimonious ruminant voice that he'd brought to our house. He said that he had nothing to say. He said, as if he thought that we didn't know about it, that the police had violated his doors and had dug in his yard without his consent. But that wasn't a protest. It was only a complaining and melancholy confidence.

As for Meme, he gave us an explanation that might have seemed puerile, but which was said by him with the same accent with which he would have told the truth. He said that Meme had left, that was all. When she closed the shop she began to get restless in the house. She didn't speak to anyone, she had no communication at all with the outside world. He said that one day he saw her packing her bag and he didn't say anything to her. He said that he still didn't say anything when he saw her in her street clothes, high heels, with the suitcase in her hand, standing in the doorway but not speaking, only as if she were showing herself like that so that he would know that she was leaving. "Then," he said, "I got up and gave her the money that was left in the drawer."

I asked him: "How long ago was that, doctor?"

And he said: "You can judge by my hair. She was the one who cut it."

The Pup didn't say much on that visit. From the time he'd entered the room he seemed impressed by the sight of the only man he hadn't met after being in Macondo fifteen years. That time I noticed (and more than ever, maybe because the doctor had cut his mustache) the extraordinary resemblance between those two men. They weren't exact, but they looked like brothers. One was several years older, thinner and more emaciated. But there was the community of features between them that exists between two brothers, even if one looks like the father and the other like the mother. Then I recalled that last night on the veranda. I said:

"This is the Pup, doctor. You promised me you'd visit him once."

He smiled. He looked at the priest and said: "That's right, colonel. I don't know why I didn't." And he continued looking at him, examining him, until the Pup spoke.

"It's never too late for a good beginning," he said. "I'd like to be your friend."

At once I realized that facing the stranger, the Pup had lost his usual strength. He spoke timidly, without the inflexible assurance with which his voice thundered from the pulpit reading the atmospheric predictions of the Bristol Almanac in a transcendental and threatening tone.

That was the first time they'd seen each other. And it was also the last. Still, the doctor's life was prolonged until this morning because the Pup had intervened again in his favor on the night they begged him to take care of the wounded and he wouldn't even open the door, and they shouted that terrible sentence down on him, the fulfillment of which I've now undertaken to prevent.

We were getting ready to leave the house when I remembered something that I'd wanted to ask him for years. I told the Pup I was going to stay awhile with the doctor while he interceded with the authorities. When we were alone I asked him:

"Tell me something, doctor. What was the child?"

He didn't change his expression. "What child, colonel?" he asked. And I said: "Yours. Meme was pregnant when you left my house." And he, tranquil, imperturbable:

"You're right, colonel. I'd even forgotten about that."

My father was silent. Then he said: "The Pup would have made them come if he had to whip them." My father's eyes show a restrained nervousness. And while this waiting goes on, it's been a half hour already (because it must be around three o'clock), I'm worried about the child's perplexity, his absorbed expression, which doesn't seem to be asking anything, his abstract and cold indifference, which makes him just like his father. My son's going to dissolve in the boiling air of this Wednesday just as it happened

to Martín nine years ago, when he waved from the train window and disappeared forever. All my sacrifices for this son will be in vain if he keeps on looking like his father. It won't be of any use for me to beg God to make him a man of flesh and blood, one who has volume, weight, and color like other men. Everything will be in vain as long as he has the seeds of his father in his blood.

Five years ago the child didn't have anything of Martín's. Now he's getting to have it all, ever since Genoveva García came back to Macondo with her six children, with two sets of twins among them. Genoveva was fat and old. Blue veins had come out around her eyes, giving a certain look of dirtiness to her face, which had been clean and firm before. She showed a noisy and disordered happiness in the midst of her flock of small white shoes and organdy frills. I knew that Genoveva had run away with the head of a company of puppeteers and I felt some kind of repugnance at seeing those children of hers, who seemed to have automatic movements, as if run by some single central mechanism; small and upsettingly alike, all six with identical shoes and identical frills on their clothing. Genoveva's disorganized happiness seemed painful and sad to me, as did her presence, loaded with urban accessories, in a ruined town that was annihilated by dust. There was something bitter, something inconsolably ridiculous, in her way of moving, of seeming fortunate and of feeling sorry for our way of life, which was so different, she said, from the one she had known in the company of the puppeteers.

Looking at her I remembered other times. I said to her: "You've gotten very fat." And then she became sad. She said: "It must be that memories make a person fat." And she stood there looking closely at the child. She said: "And what happened to the wizard with four buttons?" And I answered her right out, because I knew that she knew: "He went away." And Genoveva said: "And didn't he leave you anything but that?" And I told her no, he'd only left me the child. Genoveva laughed with a loose and vulgar laugh. "He must have been pretty sloppy to make only one child in

five years," she said, and she went on, still moving about and cackling in the midst of her confused flock: "And I was mad about him. I swear I would have taken him away from you if it hadn't been that we'd met him at a child's wake. I was very superstitious in those days."

It was before she said good-bye that Genoveva stood looking at the child and said: "He's really just like him. All he needs is the four-button jacket." And from that moment on the child began to look just like his father to me, as if Genoveva had brought on the curse of his identity. On certain occasions I would catch him with his elbows on the table, his head leaning over his left shoulder, and his foggy look turned nowhere. He was just like Martín when he leaned against the carnation pots on the railing and said: "Even if it hadn't been for you, I'd like to spend the rest of my life in Macondo." Sometimes I get the impression that he's going to say it; how could he say it now that he's sitting next to me, silent, touching his nose that's stuffed up with the heat? "Does it hurt you?" I asked him. And he says no, that he was thinking that he couldn't keep glasses on. "You don't have to worry about that," I tell him, and I undo his tie. I say: "When we get home you can rest and have a bath." And then I look toward where my father has just said: "Cataure," calling the oldest of the Guajiros. He's a heavysset and short Indian, who was smoking on the bed, and when he hears his name he lifts his head and looks for my father's face with his small somber eyes. But when my father is about to speak again the steps of the mayor are heard in the back room as he staggers into the bedroom.

XI.

This noon has been terrible for our house. Even though the news of his death was no surprise to me, because I was expecting it for a long time, I couldn't imagine that it would bring on such an

upset in my house. Someone had to go to this burial with me and I thought that one would be my wife, especially since my illness three years ago and that afternoon when she found the cane with the silver handle and the wind-up dancer when she was looking through the drawers of my desk. I think that we'd forgotten about the toy by then. But that afternoon we made the mechanism work and the ballerina danced as on other occasions, animated by the music that had been festive before and which then, after the long silence in the drawer, sounded quiet and nostalgic. Adelaida watched it dance and remembered. Then she turned to me, her look moistened by simple sadness:

"Who does it remind you of?" she asked.

And I knew who Adelaida was thinking about, while the toy saddened the room with its worn-out little tune.

"I wonder what's become of him?" my wife asked, remembering, shaken perhaps by the breath of those days when he'd appeared at the door of the room at six in the afternoon and hung the lamp in the doorway.

"He's on the corner," I said. "One of these days he'll die and we'll have to bury him."

Adelaida remained silent, absorbed in the dance of the toy, and I felt infected by her nostalgia. I said to her: "I've always wanted to know who you thought he was the day he came. You set that table because he reminded you of someone."

And Adelaida said with a gray smile:

"You'd laugh at me if I told you who he reminded me of when he stood there in the corner with the ballerina in his hand." And she pointed to the empty space where she'd seen him twenty-two years before, with full boots and a costume that looked like a military uniform.

I thought on that afternoon they'd been reconciled in memory, so today I told my wife to get dressed in black to go with me. But the toy is back in the drawer. The music has lost its effect. Adelaida is wearing herself out now. She's sad, devastated, and

she spends hours on end praying in her room. "Only you would have thought of a burial like that," she told me. "After all the misfortunes that befell us, all we needed was that cursed leap year. And then the deluge." I tried to persuade her that my word of honor was involved in this undertaking.

"We can't deny that I owe my life to him," I said.

And she said:

"He's the one who owes his to us. All he did when he saved your life was to repay a debt for eight years of bed, board, and clean clothes."

Then she brought a chair over to the railing. And she must be there still, her eyes foggy with grief and superstition. Her attitude seemed so decided that I tried to calm her down. "All right. In that case I'll go with Isabel," I said. And she didn't answer. She sat there, inviolable, until we got ready to leave and I told her, thinking to please her: "Until we get back, go to the altar and pray for us." Then she turned her head toward the door, saying: "I'm not even going to pray. My prayers will still be useless just as long as that woman comes every Tuesday to ask for a branch of lemon balm." And in her voice there was an obscure and overturned rebellion:

"I'll stay collapsed here until Judgment Day. If the termites haven't eaten up the chair by then."

My father stops, his neck stretched out, listening to the familiar footsteps that are advancing through the back room. Then he forgets what he was going to tell Cataure and tries to turn around, leaning on his cane, but his useless leg fails him in the turn and he's about to fall down, as happened three years ago when he fell into the lemonade bowl, with the noise of the bowl as it rolled along the floor and the clogs and the rocker and the shout of the child, who was the only one who saw him fall.

He's limped ever since then, since then he's dragged the foot that hardened after that week of bitter suffering, from which we

thought he'd never recover. Now, seeing him like that, getting his balance back with the help of the mayor, I think that that useless leg holds the secret of the compromise that he's going to fulfill against the will of the town.

Maybe his gratitude goes back to that time. From the time he fell on the veranda, saying that he felt as if he'd been pushed off a tower, and the last two doctors left in Macondo advised him to prepare for a good death. I remember him on the fifth day in bed, shrunken between the sheets; I remember his emaciated body, like the body of the Pup, who'd been carried to the cemetery the year before by all the inhabitants of Macondo in a compressed and moving procession of flowers. Inside the coffin his majesty had the same depth of irremediable and disconsolate abandonment that I saw in the face of my father during those days when the bedroom filled up with his voice and he spoke about that strange soldier who appeared one night in the camp of Colonel Aureliano Buendía during the war of '85, his hat and boots decorated with the skin, teeth, and claws of a tiger, and they asked him: "Who are you?" And the strange soldier didn't answer; and they asked him: "Where do you come from?" And he still didn't answer; and they asked him: "What side are you fighting on?" And they still didn't get any answer from the strange soldier, until an orderly picked up a torch and held it close to his face, examined it for an instant, and exclaimed, scandalized: "Jesus! It's the Duke of Marlborough!"

In the midst of that terrible hallucination, the doctors gave orders to bathe him. It was done. But on the next day you could only see a small change in his stomach. Then the doctors left the house and said that the only thing advisable was to prepare him for a good death.

The bedroom was sunken in a silent atmosphere in which you could hear only the slow and measured flapping of the wings of death, that mysterious flapping that has the smell of a man in the bedrooms of the dying. After Father Ángel administered the last

rites, many hours passed before anyone moved, looking at the angular profile of the hopeless man. Then the clock struck and my stepmother got ready to give him his spoonful of medicine. That was when we heard the spaced and affirmative footsteps on the veranda. My stepmother held the spoon in the air, stopped murmuring her prayer, and turned to the door, paralyzed by a sudden blush. "I'd recognize those steps even in purgatory," she managed to say at the precise moment that we looked toward the door and saw the doctor. He was on the threshold, looking at us.

I say to my daughter: "The Pup would have made them come even if he had to whip them," and I go over to where the coffin is, thinking: *Since the time the doctor left our house I've been convinced that our acts were ordained by a higher will against which we couldn't have rebelled, even if we tried with all our strength, or even if we assumed the sterile attitude of Adelaida, who shut herself up to pray.*

And while I cover the distance that separates me from the coffin, looking at my men, impassive, sitting on the bed, I feel that I've breathed in the first breath of air that boils up over the dead man, all that bitter matter of fate that destroyed Macondo. I don't think the mayor will delay with the authorization for the burial. I know that outside, on the streets tormented by the heat, people are waiting. I know that there are women in the windows, anxious for a spectacle, and that they stay there, looking out, forgetting that the milk is boiling on the stove and that the rice is dry. But I think that even this last show of rebellion is beyond the possibilities of this crushed and flayed group of men. Their capacity for fight has been broken ever since that Sunday election day when they moved, drew up their plans, and were defeated, and afterward they still were convinced that they were the ones who determined their own acts. But all of that seemed to have

been disposed, ordained, channeling the deeds that would lead us step by step to this fateful Wednesday.

Ten years ago, when ruin came down upon us, the collective strength of those who looked for recovery might have been enough for reconstruction. All that was needed was, to go out into the fields laid waste by the banana company, clean out the weeds, and start again from scratch. But they'd trained the leaf storm to be impatient, not to believe in either past or future. They'd trained it to believe in the moment and to sate the voracity of its appetite in it. We only needed a short time to realize that the leaf storm had left and that without it reconstruction was impossible. The leaf storm had brought everything and it had taken everything away. After it all that was left was a Sunday in the rubble of a town and the ever-present electoral schemer on Macondo's last night, setting up four demijohns of liquor in the public square at the disposal of the police and the reserves.

If the Pup managed to hold them back that night in spite of the fact that their rebellion was still alive, today he would have been capable of going from house to house armed like a dogcatcher obliging them to bury this man. The Pup held them under an ironclad discipline. Even after the priest died four years ago—one year before my illness—that discipline could be seen in the impassioned way in which they all cut the flowers and shrubs in their gardens and took them to his grave in a final tribute to the Pup.

This man was the only one who didn't go to the burial. The only one, precisely, who owed his life to that unbreakable and contradictory subordination of the town to the priest. Because the night they set out the four demijohns of liquor on the square and Macondo became a town overrun by armed barbarians, a town in terror which buried its dead in a common grave, someone must have remembered that there was a doctor on this corner. That was when they laid the stretchers by the door and shouted

to him (because he didn't open up, he spoke from inside); they shouted to him: "Doctor, take care of these wounded people because there aren't enough doctors to go around," and he replied: "Take them somewhere else, I don't know about any of that." And they said to him: "You're the only doctor left. You have to do a charitable act." And he answered (and still hadn't opened the door), imagined by the crowd to be in the middle of the room, the lamp held high, his hard yellow eyes lighted up: "I've forgotten everything I knew about all that. Take them somewhere else," and he stayed there (because the door was never opened) with the door closed, while men and women of Macondo were dying in front of it. The crowd was capable of anything that night. They were getting ready to set fire to the house and reduce its only occupant to ashes. But then the Pup appeared. They say that it was as if he'd been there invisible, standing guard to stop the destruction of the house and the man. "No one will touch this door," they say the Pup said. And they say that was all he said, his arms open as if on a cross, his inexpressive and cold cow-skull face illuminated by the glow of rural fury. And then the impulse was reined in, it changed direction, but it still had sufficient force for them to shout the sentence that would assure the coming of this Wednesday for all the ages.

Walking toward the bed to tell my men to open the door, I think: *He'll be coming any minute now.* And I think that if he doesn't get here in five minutes we'll take the coffin out without any authorization and put the dead man in the street so he'll have to bury him right in front of the house. "Cataure," I say, calling the oldest of my men, and he barely has time to lift his head when I hear the mayor's footsteps coming through the next room.

I know that he's coming straight toward me and I try to turn quickly on my heels, leaning on my cane, but my bad leg fails me and I go forward, sure that I'm going to fall and hit my face against the coffin, when I stumble across his arm and clutch it firmly, and I hear his voice of peaceful stupidity saying: "Don't

worry, colonel, I can assure you that nothing will happen." And I think that's how it is, but I know he's saying it to give himself courage. "I don't think anything will happen," I tell him, thinking just the opposite, and he says something about the ceiba trees in the cemetery and hands me the authorization for the burial. Without reading it I fold it, put it in my vest pocket, and tell him: "In any case, whatever happens, it had to happen. It's as if it had been announced in the almanac."

The mayor goes over to the Indians. He tells them to nail up the coffin and open the door. And I see them moving about, looking for the hammer and nails which will remove the sight of that man forever, that unsheltered gentleman from nowhere whom I saw for the last time three years ago beside my convalescent's bed, his head and face cracked by premature decrepitude. He had just rescued me from death then. The same force that had brought him there, that had given him the news of my illness, seemed to be the one which held him up beside my bed saying:

"You just have to exercise that leg a little. You may have to use a cane from now on."

I would ask him two days later what I owed him and he would answer: "You don't owe me anything, colonel. But if you want to do me a favor, throw a little earth on me when morning finds me stiff. That's all I need for the buzzards not to eat me."

In the promise he made me give, in the way he proposed it, in the rhythm of his footsteps on the tile in the room, it was evident that this man had begun to die a long time back, even though three years would pass before that postponed and defective death would be completely realized. That day was today. And I even think that he probably didn't need the noose. A slight breeze would have been enough to extinguish the last glow of life that remained in his hard yellow eyes. I'd sensed all that ever since the night I spoke to him in his little room, before he came here to live with Meme. So when he made me promise what I'm about to do now, I didn't feel upset. I told him simply:

"It's an unnecessary request, doctor. You know me and you must know that I would have buried you over the heads of everybody even if I didn't owe my life to you."

And he, smiling, his hard yellow eyes peaceful for the first time:

"That's all very true, colonel. But don't forget that a dead man wouldn't have been able to bury me."

Now no one will be able to correct this shame. The mayor has handed my father the burial order and my father has said: "In any case, whatever happens, it had to happen. It's as if it had been announced in the almanac." And he said it with the same indolence with which he turned himself over to the fate of Macondo, faithful to the trunks where the clothing of all those who died before I was born is kept. Since then everything has gone downhill. Even my stepmother's energy, her ironclad and dominant character have been changed into bitter doubt. She seems more and more distant and silent, and her disillusionment is such that this afternoon she sat down beside the railing and said: "I'll stay collapsed here until Judgment Day."

My father hadn't ever imposed his will on anything again. Only today did he get up to fulfill that shameful promise. He's here, sure that everything will happen with no serious consequences, watching the Guajiros starting to move to open the door and nail up the coffin. I see them coming closer, I stand up, I take the child by the hand and pull the chair toward the window so as not to be seen by the town when they open the door.

The child is puzzled. When I get up he looks me in the face with an indescribable expression, a little upset. But now he's perplexed, beside me, watching the Indians, who are sweating because of the effort to open the bolts. And with a penetrating and sustained lament of rusty metal, the doors open wide. Then I see the street again, the glowing and burning white dust that covers the houses and has given the town the lamentable look of a run-down piece of furniture. It's as if God had declared Macondo

unnecessary and had thrown it into the corner where towns that have stopped being of any service to creation are kept.

The child, who at the first moment must have been dazzled by the sudden light (his hand trembled in mine when the door was opened), raises his head suddenly, concentrated, intent, and he asks me: "Did you hear it?" Only then do I realize that in some neighboring courtyard a curlew is telling the time. "Yes," I say. "It must be three o'clock already," and almost at that precise moment the first hammer blow sounds on the nail.

Trying not to listen to the lacerating sound that makes my skin crawl, trying to prevent the child from noticing my confusion, I turn my face to the window and in the next block I see the melancholy and dusty almond trees with our house in the background. Shaken by the invisible breath of destruction, it too is on the eve of a silent and final collapse. All of Macondo has been like that ever since it was squeezed by the banana company. Ivy invades the houses, weeds grow in the alleys, walls crumble, and in the middle of the day a person finds a lizard in her room. Everything has seem destroyed since we stopped cultivating the rosemary and the nard; since the time an invisible hand cracked the Christmas dishes in the cupboard and put moths to fatten on the clothes that nobody wore anymore. When a door becomes loose there isn't a solicitous hand ready to repair it. My father doesn't have the energy to move the way he did before the collapse that left him limping forever. Señora Rebeca, behind her eternal fan, doesn't bother about anything that might repel the hunger of malevolence that's provoked in her by her sterile and tormented widowhood. Águeda is crippled, overwhelmed by a patient religious illness; and Father Ángel doesn't seem to have any other satisfaction except savoring the persevering indigestion of meatballs every day during his siesta. The only thing that seems unchanged is the song of the twins of Saint Jerome and that mysterious beggar woman who doesn't seem to grow old and who for twenty years has come to the house every Tuesday for a branch

of lemon balm. Only the whistle of a yellow, dusty train that doesn't take anyone away breaks the silence four times a day. And at night the toom-toom of the electric plant that the banana company left behind when it left Macondo.

I can see the house through the window and I am aware that my stepmother is there, motionless in her chair, thinking perhaps that before we get back that final wind which will wipe out this town will have passed. Everyone will have gone then except us, because we're tied to this soil by a roomful of trunks where the household goods and clothing of grandparents, my grandparents, are kept, and the canopies that my parents' horses used when they came to Macondo, fleeing from the war. We've been sown into this soil by the memory of the remote dead whose bones can no longer be found twenty fathoms under the earth. The trunks have been in the room ever since the last days of the war; and they'll be there this afternoon when we come back from the burial, if that final wind hasn't passed, the one that will sweep away Macondo, its bedrooms full of lizards and its silent people devastated by memories.

Suddenly my grandfather gets up, leans on his cane, and stretches out his bird head where his glasses seem to be fastened on as if they were part of his face. I think it would be hard for me to wear glasses. With the smallest movement they'd slip off my ears. And thinking about that I tap my nose. Mama looks at me and asks: "Does it hurt you?" And I tell her no, that I was just thinking that I wouldn't be able to wear glasses. And she smiles, breathes deeply, and tells me: "You must be soaked." And she's right; my clothes are burning on my skin, the thick, green corduroy, fastened all the way up, is sticking to my body with sweat and gives me an itchy feeling. "Yes," I say. And my mother leans over me, loosens my tie and fans my collar, saying: "When we get home you can rest and have a bath." "Cataure," I hear.

At that point, through the rear door, the man with the revolver

comes in again. When he gets in the doorway he takes off his hat and walks carefully, as if he was afraid of waking up the corpse. But he did it to surprise my grandfather, who falls forward, pushed by the man, staggers, and manages to grab the arm of the same man who'd tried to knock him down. The others have stopped smoking and are still sitting on the bed in a row like four crows on a sawhorse. When the man with the revolver comes in the crows lean over and talk secretly and one of them gets up, goes over to the table, and picks up the box of nails and the hammer.

My grandfather is talking to the man beside the coffin. The man says: "Don't worry, colonel. I can assure you that nothing will happen." And my grandfather says: "I don't think anything will happen." And the man says: "They can bury him on the outside, against the left wall of the cemetery where the ceiba trees are the tallest." Then he gives my grandfather a piece of paper, saying: "You'll see that everything will turn out fine." My grandfather leans on his cane with one hand, takes the paper with the other, and puts it into his vest pocket, where he keeps his small, square gold watch with a chain. Then he says: "In any case, whatever happens, it had to happen. It's as if it had been announced in the almanac."

The man says: "There are some people in the windows, but that's just curiosity. The women always look at anything." But I don't think my grandfather heard him, because he's looking through the window at the street. The man moves then, goes over to the bed, and, fanning himself with his hat, he tells the men: "You can nail it up now. In the meantime, open the door so we can get a breath of air."

The men start to move. One of them leans over the box with the hammer and nails and the others go to the door. My mother gets up. She's sweaty and pale. She pulls her chair, takes me by the hand, and tugs me aside so that the men can get by to open the door.

At first they try to turn the bolt, which seems to be soldered to the rusty catches, but they can't move it. It's as if someone were pushing with all his strength from the street side. But when one of the men leans against the door and pounds it, the room is filled with the noise of wood, rusty hinges, locks soldered by time, layer upon layer, and the door opens, enormous, as if a man could go through on another's shoulders; and there's a long creaking of wood and iron that's been awakened. And before we have time to find out what's happened, the light bursts into the room, backward, powerful and perfect, because they've taken away the support that held it for two hundred years with the strength of two hundred oxen, and it falls backward into the room, dragging in the shadow of things in its turbulent fall. The men become brutally visible, like a flash of lightning at noon, and they stumble, and it looks as if they had to hold themselves up so that the light wouldn't knock them down.

When the door opens a curlew begins to sing somewhere in town. Now I can see the street. I can see the bright and burning dust. I can see several men sitting on the opposite sidewalk, their arms folded, looking toward the room. I hear the curlew again and I say to Mama: "Did you hear it?" And she says yes, it must be three o'clock. But Ada told me that curlews sing when they get the smell of a dead man. I'm about to tell my mother just at the moment when I hear the sharp sound of the hammer on the head of the first nail. The hammer pounds, pounds, and fills everything up; it rests a second and pounds again, wounding the wood six times in a row, waking up the long, sad sound of the sleeping boards while my mother, her face turned the other way, looks through the window into the street.

When the hammering is over the song of several curlews can be heard. My grandfather signals his men. They lean over, tip the coffin, while the one who stayed in the corner with his hat says to my grandfather: "Don't worry, colonel." And then my grandfather turns toward the corner, agitated, his neck swollen

and purple like that of a fighting cock. But he doesn't say anything. It's the man who speaks again from the corner. He says: "I don't even think there's anyone left in town who remembers this."

At that instant I really feel the quiver in my stomach. Now I do feel like going out back, I think; but I see that it's too late now. The men make a last effort; they straighten up, their heels dug into the floor, and the coffin is floating in the light as if they were carrying off a dead ship to be buried.

I think: *Now they'll get the smell. Now all the curlews will start to sing.*

(1955)