

Confirmation



GIANNI SEGRÉ

The Confirmation

Gianni Segré

Translated from the French by

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To M.-M.

Chapter 1

“You mustn’t tell your mother you’ve been here. She’ll ask questions.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Next time, don’t come along the path. Walk along the beach till you get opposite the house, then cut across the ground that rims down to the sea and come in quickly through the garden. The door will be open.”

“Yes, all right.”

“If anyone sees you come out of here and asks you what you’ve been doing, say you were passing and just dropped in to look at my flowers and say hello—you’ll think of something to say. What we do here is a secret.”

“Yes, I know.”

From the high oak double-bed, the Stranger and Maria-Modesta could follow the movement of the waves through the low, narrow, uncurtained window that pierced the thick stone wall. A lamp turned the granite sill into a bedside table. Apart from the silent, unremembering old bed, which the Stranger had bought with the little house near the beach, and a heavy bin in which he kept his clothes, the room was unfurnished. The other four rooms were almost empty. In the kitchen, there was a chimney, also in granite, and a long table that the Stranger had made out of wood washed up by the sea, chiselled by water, wind and sand and bleached by the sun. On a shelf of the same wood was a packet of sugar with a spoon stuck in it, and two enamelled mugs. A long bench had been placed against one wall so that you could sit back. From the middle of the eucalyptus wood ceiling hung an electric lamp; a round piece of metal, cut from a tin, served

as a shade. The worm-eaten, but apparently solid beams rained a fine, mouldy-smelling dust on to the tiled floor. Under the window, as in most of the poor houses in Galicia, was a sink set in the wall, and a crude sort of drain: a short pipe carried the water through the wall and along the outside of the house to the sand, where it was absorbed.

“Have you got any more chocolate?” Maria-Modesta asked the Stranger.

“There’s one piece left. Perhaps it’s dropped onto the floor.

Ah, there it is!”

Lying stretched out on her back, she nibbled at the chocolate. She wiped the tips of her fingers on her short, blonde pigtails.

“Finished!” she said, flinging up her arms and letting them drop beside her body.

The marks left by her bathing-costume on her tanned skin robbed her of that wild, healthy look possessed by bodies constantly exposed to the wind and the sun, but they made her look all the more naked.

“Do you remember last year when ypu gave me a doll you’d won in the shooting-gallery? It was* a pretty doll.” “Have you still got it?”

“Somebody broke it.”

“I’ll win you another one.”

“We’ll have to wait for St. Tecla’s day. The fair won’t be coming till the autumn. Will you still be here then?”

“May be.”

“Oh, look

!

A mouse! Did you see it? It’s gone into the other room. You must kill it!”

“Why?”

“Because!”

“It won’t eat you.”

“No, not me, but it’ll eat everything you’ve got in the house. They’re vermin, you know. We always kill them.”

“You’re cruel.”

“Yes, we are cruel, very cruel, terribly cruel and I’m the most cruel of all.”

She burst out laughing and caught the Stranger by the hair. “Are you crazy? Let me go, you’re hurting!”

“I told you I was cruel. You see?”

"Stop it!"

"No, I'll pull it till it gets longer. You ought to have longer hair."

"Come on, let go. Be a good girl."

She let go of his hair, then sat stock still as if she was trying to hear something. Then she said:

"Didn't you hear? Someone knocked."

"Damn! What shall we do?"

"I don't know."

"Don't talk so loud. Shit, they're knocking again!"

"You mustn't say shit," she said.

"Yes, I know. Be quiet!"

"Shall I go and see who it is?"

"If you move. I'll kill you. And don't laugh! " He got up off the bed.

"I'll go and see. Where's my mac?"

"You look funny without your clothes on," she said.

"Shut up!"

"You look so funny!"

"Good evening! I was just passing and I thought I'd drop in and say hello to the Stranger."

"That was very nice of you. Can I offer you a drink?"

"Oh, no thank you. I mustn't stop. Last time your brandy got me a real telling off from the *patrona* when I got home."

"That's life!"

"Oh, I'm only joking—I couldn't have a better wife. I'm two years older than her, but she treats me just like a son."

"You must do as she says, but..., we're going to have a drop all the same."

"Well, just a drop perhaps. But no more! I've got a long way to go before I get home. And I've been on my feet since four this morning."

"Since four?"

"Yes, señor, and I'm seventy-five."

"You don't look it I"

"Well, I am."

"Well, we'll drink a glass of wine to your seventy-five years. I'll go and get the bottle. At this time of the day, it'll be nicer out of doors."

The Stranger went back into the house and on his way to the kitchen he popped in to see Maria-Modesta.

“Are you a good girl?”

“Yes. Who is it?”

“It’s José the gravedigger. I’m giving him a drink. I won’t be long. Don’t move.”

“Oh yes I will I”

The Stranger went out into the garden with a bottle and two glasses.

“Wine’s a good thing,” said the old peasant. “A good disinfectant. Mind you, you mustn’t overdo it, but when you’re working it gives you strength, and ... when you’re not working, that’s no reason to go without. You’re on holiday, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said the Stranger.

“Well, you must make the best of it. If I could have my time over again, I’d have a different kind of life I can tell you.

But you don’t realize till it’s too late. There’s one consolation though. When you’re poor, you haven’t much choice. Your health!”

“And yours!” replied the Stranger, raising his glass.

The day was drawing to its close. The peasant women were making their way home along the path in front of the house, and the old man was proud of being seen in the company of the Stranger. The women were coming back from the fields, in Indian file, carrying broad baskets on their heads. They walked purposefully, confidently, rhythmically, their heads held high over their compact bodies—bodies crushed by generations of labour. They were like empresses in their black clothes, pride dressed in mourning.

“It’s getting late. I must be going,” said the peasant.

The church bell rang out from the village, the sound distorted by the wind. Distorted too was the chanting of Vespers, broadcast over loudspeakers that the parish priest had bought out of his own money, to awaken the faith of his two thousand parishioners, but also, unwittingly, to awaken the anticlericalism of the schoolmaster, who confided to his intimates his thoughts on the men of God and their earthly possessions.

“Good-bye!” said the old man. “And thanks for the wine. May all your wishes be granted!”

The Stranger went back into the house and found Maria-Modesta asleep. One arm was raised behind her head, the other hung from the bed and was almost touching the floor; her body was stretched out across the bed, occupying the whole width of the mattress. Her legs were parted to

form a sort of immodest yet innocent “A” under the sheets that only just covered the low part of her belly. The Stranger raised her arm on to the bed, taking care not to awaken her, and covered her shoulders so that she wouldn’t catch cold. He stood motionless against the window-sill, contemplating the girl’s face; it was the first time he had seen her asleep, and she looked different. Her pigtails, which jumped about over her neck as soon as she moved, now lay still beside her cheeks. Her large luminous blue eyes, which usually took all one’s attention away from the rest of her face, were closed; and he saw, as if for the first time, the gentleness of her features, the smoothness of her skin, the delicacy of her intelligent forehead rather too large for a girl of her age. Her full, swelling lips never entirely closed, showed a little of their inner curve, tender and moist, and the white tips of her front teeth. The contour of her lips was marked by deep pigmentation, inscribed there by the sun, as if redrawn by a brown crayon. Her mouth did not belong to her face; it stood out from it, leaving her cheeks behind, like a child pouting, or offering her lips to be kissed.

Maria-Modesta moved her legs, took a deep breath and opened her eyes.

“Ah, you’re awake?”

“Why, was I asleep?”

“Very much so.”

“Oh? And what were you doing?”

“I

was watching you sleep.”

“Just standing there all the time?”

“No, not all the time. First I went out and talked to that idiot who was knocking at the door, then I came back here and found you asleep.”

“Come back to bed now.”

“You know it’s getting late? It’s past eight.”

“That’s not late. We never eat till ten.”

“All the same, you must be going soon. Your mother will be wondering where you are.”

“Here! ” cried Maria-Modesta, her eyes sparkling with pretended wickedness. “What if I said I’d been here?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Are you frightened? I know you’re frightened! You’re frightened they’d beat you.”

“Yes, all right.”

“They’d beat me too, you know,” she said, becoming serious once more.
“In fact, I’ve already been beaten.”

“Because you said you came here?”

“Of course not!”

“Why, then?”

Maria-Modesta hid her eyes in the palms of her hands, turned round and buried her head between his chest and his left arm. She stayed in this position for a moment, then said: “I was beaten because I did things with Teresa.”

“What things?”

The girl sat up and, looking at the Stranger with an expression of defiance, said:

“We played at doctors.”

“Doctors?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“On the beach by the little harbour, behind the boats.”

“And someone saw you and told your mother?”

“No.”

“Who gave you the beating, then?”

“My mother.”

“Well, then, someone must have told her!”

“Teresa did. She said that I wanted to play doctors with her, but she wanted to just as much as me, but she said it was me, and that wasn’t true.”

“What did Teresa do with you?”

“It all depends. Hardly anything at first.”

“How old is Teresa?”

“Same as me, twelve.”

“Do you go to school together?”

“Yes. But I don’t talk to her any more. She tells lies and can’t keep a secret.”

. “Yes, I see. Anyway, you don’t need Teresa any more.”

“No, I’ve got you. Teresa’s a bitch—and I’m ... your wife.”

The Stranger took Maria-Modesta in his arms and laughed.

“My great big little old wife!”

“Why are you laughing?”

“I’m not laughing.”

“Yes, you are! And I know why—because you’re thinking that I can’t really be your wife because you’ve already got one, a real one.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s because you’re still too young.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-two.”

“That makes ... twenty years more than me. Is that too much ?

“No, it couldn’t be better.”

“In twenty years time I’ll be thirty-two. If I don’t die before then of course.”

“You’ll never die.”

“I’ll never die, and neither will you. And we’ll always love each other!”

“By the way, who taught you to play at doctors?”

“No one.”

“And Teresa?”

“No one taught her either. We taught each other.”

“Just like that, by chance?”

Maria-Modesta started laughing and said:

“Yes, by chance.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I just want to.”

“I don’t really know how to tell you, and anyway I can’t remember it very well.”

“Tell me what you can remember.”

“I’ve told you already, it was down by the little harbour. We ran around the boats, playing hide-and-seek, and then a little boy came along. He wanted to play with us. We didn’t want him to and we found such a good hiding-place that he couldn’t find us. We could see him looking for us, but we kept very still, holding each other tight as if we were afraid.

We weren’t really afraid, but it felt as if we were. After a while, the boy got tired of looking for us and went off. But we stayed where we were and I said to Teresa that we had found a good hiding-place and that no one would be able to see us because there was a big boat in front of us and the wall behind. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes, at the end of the little harbour, where the sea wall was damaged last winter.”

“That’s right. And we were just between the big stones that had fallen. That’s why it was a good hiding-place.”

“Then what?”

“Then Teresa shivered as if she was cold.

“And you?”

“I was shivering too.”

“Then what?”

“We laughed, but we didn’t really want to. The first time Teresa touched me under my skirt, then I touched her.”

“Is that all?”

“She wanted to look at me.”

“Did you show her?”

“Yes.”

“And did she show you, too?”

“Yes.”

“Did you do things to her?”

“Not at first A few days later.”

“And did she do things to you?”

“Yes. But a few days later too.”

“You waited because you didn’t dare?”

“No. It was because we didn’t really know what to do. But later I realized how to do it.”

“You learned it with Teresa?”

“No, by myself.”

“Where?”

“At home.”

“How do you mean, at home?”

“In bed. I tried several times, then it worked.”

“And what about Teresa?”

“Teresa was the same, except that I told her how. Then we did it together.”

“But separately?”

“Yes. But we watched each other. Then, a few days later, we did it to each other.”

“Did you like it better like that?”

"Yes and no."

"How do you mean?"

"She did it too hard."

"And did Teresa like it?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Did you talk while you were doing it?"

"No."

"Did you do it again?"

"We did it twice. Then we had to go home."

"Couldn't you have started earlier?"

"Yes, but we had to find a way of getting away from the other girls."

"And that took time?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand why Teresa told your mother about it. Why did she tell her you did things together?"

"She didn't actually say. Her mother told my mother that I was taking Teresa down to the little harbour to do things."

"How did Teresa's mother know?"

"It's a bit complicated. Well, Teresa's aunt, who sleeps in the same room...Well, one night, she couldn't get to sleep and she heard Teresa doing things. So she told Teresa's mother, and Teresa told her mother that I had taught her everything and that I always wanted her to go with me to the hiding-place to play at doctors. So Teresa's mother told my mother and that's how I got a hiding."

"And you haven't played at doctors with anyone since?" "No. I was too afraid."

"And didn't you do things any more?"

"Oh, yes."

"When?"

"At night."

"Every night?"

"Yes."

"Even since you've known me?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it enough when we do it during the day?"

"Yes, but I've got into the habit. And, anyway, I'm all alone in the evening. You're here and I'm at home and I can't get to sleep for thinking

about what we've done that day and what we'll do the next. So you see, I can't help it."

"Yes, my love, I understand. But hasn't your mother ever caught you doing it?"

"No, I sleep with my sister, the eldest."

"And your sister has never noticed anything?"

"No. I wait till she's asleep."

"And how do you know when she's really asleep?"

"She snores. The doctor says she should have had an operation on her nose when she was little. I had an operation and that's why I don't snore. Did you have an operation when you were little?"

"It's a good thing to have an operation."

"Why don't you ever say anything when you like what I do to you?"

"When I finish?"

"Yes."

"I don't know."

"Anyway, I know when you've finished."

"Yes."

"How?"

"I just do."

"You know everything, don't you?"

"Yes, I know everything."

"Do all foreigners know everything?"

"No, only I do."

"Only you?"

"Yes. But there are also people one tells things to . . . That doesn't count, but it can be dangerous."

"Yes it can."

"But I know things without having to be told."

"You're a magician, you are!"

"Yes, I'm a magician."

"Mama says she knows everything, but it's not true."

"She knows what people tell her. That's why you must never talk. Never say anything, either to your mother or anyone else."

"What about when I go to confession?"

"It's just the same. If the priest asks if you do anything you shouldn't, say no. Say you don't know what he means. Say you haven't done

anything.”

“But I mustn’t say that! You have to tell the priest everything, or you go to hell.”

“There’s no point in telling everything. God understands everything, much more than you or I put together. All you have to do is this: when you’ve almost finished your confession, you add that you sometimes tell lies. That’s all! The lie you’ve just told is wiped out because you’ve already admitted to telling lies. Do you see?”

“Yes, but I don’t think it works like that.”

“Of course it does. I’m sure of it.”

“Really sure?”

“Positive.”

“So there’s no point in saying anything, just that I tell lies. It won’t take so long then.”

“Oh, no, you’ve got to confess something, like being disobedient, or stealing jam from your mother, or arriving late at Mass. Otherwise the priest will realize that you’re not telling the truth.”

“Then I just say that I tell lies and...”

“Everything will be all right.”

“All right. But I’m not sure it’ll work every time.”

“Yes it will! Just as I said. Anyway, you can always make a full confession every now and then, when you go with your mother to Siveiro for the market on Fridays.”

“And I can tell him everything?”

“Oh, not everything, but you can tell him a bit more.” “But why him and not the other?”

“Because you don’t know the priest at Siveiro and he doesn’t know you. You won’t see him again, especially in the village. But if you told the priest here that you do bad things he’d know about you and whenever he met you in the street he’d say to himself: Oh yes, that’s the little girl who does bad things! And that’s not all! He might ask you who you do them with, and if you ever let on that it was me he’d have me chased from the village. Do you understand now why it’s dangerous?”

“Yes, but that’s why I like it.”

“You won’t like it so much when we’re both in prison.”

“In prison?”

"Of course. If the head of the *Guardia Civil* found out what we do, he'd put us in prison."

"Me too?"

"You too, because you're still much too young for that." "Have you ever done things with other girls?"

"Not as young as you."

"You mustn't! You mustn't with anybody else but me! Not even your wife!"

"No, not even my wife. Anyway, she's not here/'

"But you have done things with her?"

"A long time ago."

"Last year?"

"Yes, before I knew you."

"Do you do the same things to me as you did to her?"

"Not exactly."

"Do you do more with me or with her?"

"It's different."

"What don't you do with me that you do with her?"

"Things."

"Why not with me?"

"Because you're too young."

"When will I be grown up?"

"When you're old enough to do everything."

"Then do everything to me now, straight away, then I'll be grown up and I can become your wife."

"Don't be in such a hurry. Anyway, you've got lots of things to learn yet."

"Don't I know everything?"

"No, you don't know everything."

"What fun we're going to have then!"

"Do you hear the bell? It's ten o'clock. Quick, get dressed !

"And what are you going to do?"

"I'll get dressed too."

"Let's see who gets dressed first. One, two... three! No, I'm not getting up. I want to stay here with you."

"You'll get into trouble with your mother."

"I don't care. I want to stay and talk. Tell me what you'll do tomorrow."

"I'll make you ... a cup of chocolate and a buttered roll."

"You're teasing!"

"Come on, get up now! Please!"

"All right, I'll get up, because I'm nicer than you are. But I don't like it when you tease me."

"I won't tease you again."

"And you'll always love me seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Oh, the floor's cold!"

"Don't walk about barefoot. You'll catch cold."

"I can't find my sandals."

"You're not looking properly. There they are!"

"Where?"

"Over there by the door."

"That's not a door, it's a curtain!"

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean, yes? You've got nothing on!"

"I like walking about with nothing on when you're there, because I know you're looking at me."

"And because you know how beautiful you are."

"Am I beautiful?"

"Didn't you know?"

"No."

"Fibber!"

"Yes, I am a fibber."

She threw herself into the Stranger's arms and he lifted her over his head. The girl touched the beams of the ceiling with both hands and started laughing and shouting because he was nibbling at her belly.

"Stop, you're tickling!"

"You don't always say that."

"It's not the same now. You're doing it on purpose now, just to make me laugh."

When Maria-Modesta was dressed, the Stranger took her by the hand and led her to the door. He opened it a fraction to see if anyone was passing, and said:

"There's no one there. You can go now."

“Shall I see you later in the square?”

“Yes. After dinner I’ll call in at your father’s cafe.”

“I’ll be there. And will you be coming to the village tomorrow morning? I won’t be going to school because the mistress is ill.”

“I’ll be at the harbour at about eleven o’clock to buy some fish.”

“You’ll see me on the little beach, then, with the other girls. If it’s a fine day I’ll go bathing.”

“And I’ll expect you here in the afternoon.”

“Of course.”

“Well, see you tomorrow, then?”

“Yes. I’ll go along the shore now, even though it’s dark. You know, so that no one can see me.”

“Go quickly!”

“Yes. See you tomorrow! It’s a secret. You’re my husband and I’m your wife.”

Chapter 2

On Sunday afternoons Maria-Modesta did not come to see the Stranger: her parents needed her at the *taberna*, which was very crowded all day.

The Stranger would stay in the village until two o'clock, drinking and talking, then go home and stretch out in the garden. Lying on the grass, he would look up at the deep blue sky and the few passing clouds. If the wind dropped, he'd go down to the sea to freshen up. It wasn't far away: he would run the fifty yards down to the beach and jump in. But he never stayed in the water longer than a few minutes, for the sea is very cold on the north-west coast of Spain. He would walk back to the garden to dry off in the sun and stay there till dusk. Then he would go back to the village and accept an invitation to dinner from the doctor or the schoolmaster, or one of the fishermen who were so jealous and proud of the Stranger's friendship.

When the weather was bad, or the sky overcast, instead of lying in the sun he would tend his trees: he would saw off the dead branches of the fig-trees, tie up the vines that might be snapped off by the wind, or water the *vimios*, the supple shrubs that were used for making chairs and baskets: he had only learned of their existence in Spain, knew only their Spanish name, and had never bothered to find out what the translation was. The only plants that he did not have to bother with, because they didn't need watering, had a name that he could never remember. They created shade, which was all the Stranger asked of them. He was very fond of his trees, his shrubs, his succulents and his flowers, but he was not curious to know

more about them or to learn the tricks of the good gardener. He had bought them all the year before, without particularly wanting to, because they were already there in the garden, and he had bought the garden without particularly wanting to because it went with the house. And he would never have bought the house if he had not been pressed into doing so by his friends in the village who wanted to see him again every year.

“You must buy a house,” they had said. “You must become one of us.”

Then, some time later, he was told:

“We’ve got just the thing for you! Only a few minutes away from the village. And it’s even got a well. It’s in the *Barrio de las Delicias*, the District of Delights. The path isn’t very good—it’s narrow and sandy, but you could leave your car a little way off, no one would touch it here.”

“I know, but . .

“It’s a good path for walking, especially when you’re young. It’s a bit tiring in the winter, when it rains, but you’re only there in the summer. You’ll see, it’s the most beautiful spot in the world. There’s nowhere else like it. It’s a paradise.” The Stranger went to see it. It really was a very pretty house. It was among the fields outside the village in a quarter-acre of sandy land, with a few trees near the door; at the back the land ran down to the beach and the sea. The house was low and painted blue, except for the natural-coloured stones around the door and windows.

“You’ll have the sea all to yourself, with five kilometres of empty beach, the dunes...”

He had walked over a few of the five thousand metres of beach, which, in fact, would never belong to him because it was State property. He had inspected his future fig-trees, whose fruit he would probably never taste because the children of the village would pick them green while he was away. His friends refused to give in; they probed his thoughts and hung on his decision.

“Well, do you like it?”

How could he say no? He did like it. All the same, he tried to make them see that a week-end house two thousand kilometres from Paris was not what he was looking for. In fact, he was not looking for anything at all. But how could he convince them?

“It’s a bargain!” they said.

“Then I’ll leave it for you. If I was a businessman I wouldn’t be here to buy a house but rather to sell it.”

“Well then? You can’t sell it till you’ve bought it. In a few years it’ll be worth twice, or three times as much!”

“I’m not a speculator. I don’t know enough about it.”

“But that’s not the only reason you should buy it. You ought to have somewhere of your own, here, in a quiet spot. Despite what they say in the village it’ll be a while before the tourists start getting interested. You’re at the end of the world here. With this house, you’ll come back every year and be one of us.”

For fifty thousand pesetas, he became one of them.

After signing the deeds before the notary of the nearest town, he walked round his property, sprained an ankle on a loose floorboard and realized that he would have to have a new wooden ceiling put in and install a bathroom. But first he would have to see about the roof, for the beams were half rotten.

He was amused, if not helped, by the wildly contradictory advice he was given:

“It’s not worth doing anything to it. The loft has stood for forty years and it’ll stand for a good many more.”

“If I were you, I’d knock the whole thing down and build a new house. No half measures. It’s your house and you’ve got to keep it in good repair.”

“A few new floorboards here and a bit of cement there and it’ll be as good as new. No point in spending money for the sake of it.”

“It’s not a week since you bought it, and four people have already told me that if they’d known they’d have paid double the price.”

“I didn’t say anything myself, but you’ve been had. It’s not worth half what you’ve paid for it. But what’s done is done.”

A little girl with a skirt that was too short and legs that were too long, teeth that looked enormous in her little face, blue, laughing eyes that looked too bright and too deep for her age, and blonde pigtails, still wet from bathing—one of a hundred children who ran up and surrounded him when they saw him arrive on the village square, ran their fingers over his car and watched his every movement, waiting for an unusual gesture that might show whether strangers were indeed different from themselves; a little girl whom he had perhaps seen hundreds of times without remembering, saw him wander over to a cafe, and walked away from the beach where she had been playing with her friends. The Stranger entered the *taberna* and the little girl came and stood next to him at the bar. The

only other person on the premises was the proprietor, an old man who was half-deaf, and whose eyes, as he put it, were beginning to play tricks on him. The Stranger asked the little girl if she was thirsty.

“No,” she answered.

“Do you want some peanuts?”

“No, I don’t want anything.”

The Stranger sipped his glass of port and looked out at the sea through a small dusty window just above a wine cask. He picked up his glass, went over to the door and sat on the bottom step. The girl followed him and sat beside him: she said nothing. The Stranger took no notice: he was used to having a silent, inquisitive bodyguard following him wherever he went.

In the beginning, it had been much worse, but most of the children no longer felt the same curiosity for him as when they were seeing a foreigner for the first time in their lives. Now, only a few followed him out of habit, hoping to get from him a biscuit or a glass of lemonade.

At last, the girl broke the silence: “Are you glad you bought the little blue house?”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you still sleep in your little tent?” “Because I can’t live in the house yet—I’ve got workers there.”

“It’ll be nice when they’ve finished!”

“Yes, it’ll be nice.”

“And why do you always put your tent up by the cemetery?”

“Because it’s quiet there.”

“Aren’t you frightened?”

“No.”

“You could put it in your garden.”

“It’s not worth it I’ll be leaving soon.”

“When?”

“As soon as the work’s finished.”

“Will you be back next year?”

“Of course.”

“Where will you go when you leave here?”

“I’m going home, to Paris.”

“Where’s that?”

“In France-”

Is it nice there?”

“Yes.”

“Is it big?”

“Yes.”

“Is it far?”

“Yes, very far.”

“I’d like to go far away.”

“When you’re grown up, you’ll be able to go there.”

Two grown-up little girls came bustling in to fetch their friend.

“Aren’t you coming to play?” they demanded.

The girl didn’t answer, but waved her hand as if chasing flies away.

“Come on, we’re waiting for you!”

The Stranger had not deigned to look at the two exasperating children and remained facing his young companion.

“Will you take me to France one day?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“When?”

“Whenever you like.”

The Stranger would have liked to say that he would take her when she was older, if her mother allowed it, and that it wasn’t possible at the moment. But he said nothing of the kind because the two friends were obviously just waiting for an opportunity to laugh at the little girl who had the privilege of talking to him.

“You promise?”

“I promise. One day, I’ll take you with me a long way away.”

The work in the house was finally completed, two months after the date specified, and the Stranger announced to everyone that he would be leaving the next day.

When it was time to set off, he couldn’t start the car. It had been raining all night. He knew nothing about cars and had to get help from the village to get it going. The men dropped the nets they were mending on the jetty and ran up to see what they could do. By that time the car was surrounded by a crowd of boys. A young deaf-mute poured out a stream of inarticulate cries; a half-witted youth with a thin moustache dribbled on to his shirt and dapped his hands for joy. The women stood in their doorways, watching the spectacle with expressionless faces, as if such an event was a daily occurrence, unwilling to show their curiosity and amusement.

When the car finally deigned to move, all the inhabitants of the village stood along the road to wave him on his way. Several even broke ranks to run alongside the car, and almost put their heads through the window to shout “*feliz viaje!*” and “*hasta la vista!*”

Everyone in the village liked him because he had come back every *summer* from the day he arrived there, quite by chance, a few years before; and because he came from a long way off, because he was a foreigner, a stranger, and because they had never seen any others before.

“We’ll expect you back!”

“You’re at home with us!”

“See you next year!”

As he came to the edge of the village there were still a few people to wave him on, then he was out on the highway—if a dusty track scattered with stones, with deep ruts made by carts whose solid wooden wheels had not changed from the time of the Romans, could be called a highway.

There was one turning, then another, then a stretch of straight road. Below were the dunes, the beach, his house. Just before a third turning, a little girl emerged on the left of the road, walking back from the fields. She stopped and waited as the car passed slowly by, raising a yellow cloud of dust. The girl had legs that were too long and a skirt that was too short, blonde pigtails and plastic sandals. She made no gesture; her attitude had all the assurance of someone who was about to get into a car that had come to collect her. In her hands was a bunch of wild flowers and some blades of grass that she had picked in the fields.

The car stopped beside her. The little girl and the Stranger looked at each other for a moment without smiling. The girl was breathing heavily, her mouth open, as if she had been running. The hand holding the flowers made a sudden upwards movement and fell back.

“Tell me your name again,” said the Stranger. “I’ll send you a postcard from Paris.”

There was no reply.

The car moved off again slowly. The Stranger looked at the little girl in his driving mirror: she was standing in the same place, but with her back turned. The hand that had held the bunch of flowers hung loosely beside her, and the flowers lay on the ground.

“Would you pass me my sunglasses?” said the Stranger to his wife, who was sitting beside him.

“It’s the little girl you gave that doll to—the doll you won at the fair,” said his wife, handing him the sunglasses. “I think she’s called Maria-Modesta.”

Chapter 3

He hated cars and driving, and he had never driven for so long and at such a speed. A year had gone by and he had looked forward so much to this journey back that he now felt as if it had all happened before. All those days, those years, which he had long ago, too long ago, resigned himself to wasting, he now had to recover in kilometres; and he now had to risk his life at every bend to recapture his dream. He still had several hundred kilometres to cover. He stopped during the night at San Sebastian, but only for three hours. He didn't even get out of the car, but just dozed off for a while on the seat, half-lying, half-sitting, and it wasn't yet day when he set off again.

He arrived at Santiago de Compostela at three in the afternoon. He stayed just long enough to have a meal and a shave, and was off again for the last few kilometres. The day before he had begun to think that he had become the victim of his own imagination, but now, worn out, he gave his thoughts free rein:

"Maria-Modesta—what has become of her? Is she still in the village? If she hasn't left, perhaps she's grown become someone quite different. Audi what if someone tells; me she's dead? What will I do if she's dead? I'll go away; I'll never go back to the village. What am I saying? Of course she's not dead! What's the matter with me? I'm talking like a ten-year-old in love with his cousin. She may have gone away with her family, and no one will know exactly where they're living, I'll look for her everywhere, all over Spain, village by village, house by house. I'll find her, I'll take her in my arms, I'll tell her I love her. But will she want me? She might have a

boy friend already. I'll be too old for her. She's bound to like the little gold ring and the blue leather boots with all the buttons that go almost up to the knees. I must see her to give them to her. The other kids in the village will want something too, but I haven't brought them anything. To hell with them! The trouble is that if I don't give them anything, they'll think it odd that I've brought only one present, just for Maria-Modesta. I'll organize a lottery and make sure that she wins it. A lottery...no, perhaps not a lottery, a sort of game like heads or tails, or drawing straws, and I'll rig it for her. No, that won't work: I've never been able to toss a coin even.

"What a lousy road! I could have been there already if it weren't so appalling. Hardly surprising the people at Viseiro say that I've bought a house 'at the end of the world'—and they're only ten kilometres from the village. They might well laugh! But they know nothing. One day I'd like to drive over to Viseiro with Maria-Modesta sitting beside me—take her into the cafés and restaurants, like a young lady, and buy her clothes in the best shops. I'd dress her from head to foot: shoes, socks, underwear, skirts, bodices...I'd like to spoil her, take her to a good paediatrician, give her tonics, even if she doesn't need them, and take her to the dentist twice a year.

"I mustn't go so fast—I mustn't go and kill myself. I must see her. She's probably on the harbour beach, playing with the other kids, throwing sand at each other. I can just see her: all blonde and tanned, with her pigtails and short skirt. There are the dunes! Another kilometre and I'll be there! Who was that who waved at me? Oh, the baker ... the postman—I mean the one who does both, because he has an oven and a bicycle!"

The Stranger drove into the village, slowly, so as not to knock down the people—or the hens—walking in the middle of the road.

"Why must those stupid chickens always decide to cross at the last minute?"

Nothing had changed from the year before, except the new house on the outskirts of the village—they'd finished it at last

"Yellow and mauve. How could they? What a mess!"

As he arrived in the village square, the church clock struck five, which meant that it was four o'clock by the sun and five o'clock for the State. At the fountain, a group of women dressed in black, in mourning as always, were awaiting their turn; only a few of them were talking; two were obviously pregnant; others had children clinging to their skirts. Some

small boys were playing on the square with a deflated ball. The ball ended up in the bucket of an old woman, who, cursing, threw it into the sea. There was not one little girl to be seen.

The Stranger got out of the car. He had stopped outside the house of José, the schoolmaster, who had turned part of the house into a cafe; the fishermen called it "*la taberna de Don José*" and drank a *manzanilla* there first thing in the morning or a *mezclado* after the night catch. Don José was on his doorstep.

"Ah, so you're back! Good to see you again! And your wife?"

"She couldn't get away from her work—she'll be coming later."

"Maruja!" Don José yelled to his wife. "Come and see who's arrived!"

A few old men got up from the benches of the *taberna* to shake the Stranger's hand. "Welcome back! We're very happy to have you with us again I Quick, get a glass for the señor!"

The doctor ran into the *taberna* and asked:

"Where is he, then?"

He elbowed his way through the group that surrounded the Stranger, threw his arms round his neck and with a sort of affectionate shyness said:

"They came round to tell me you'd arrived and here I am to welcome you back. What will you drink?"

In a few minutes the cafe had become so crowded, it was hard to move. Several glasses had already been smashed on the floor, and were soon followed by a bottle, almost full. Children came in and out, others jostled around at the door and peered inside, while others again took turns to sit in the Stranger's car, which he had left unlocked.

"I think I'll get a breath of air," said the Stranger, who wanted to see if he could find Maria-Modesta. "Then I must unload my car before it gets dark."

"Don't you worry about that," someone said. "You stay here—we'll see to it. The key's with Evariste the builder, isn't it? We'll go and find him and half a dozen women to take all your things to the house."

"No, no," protested the Stranger. "You mustn't! It's a whole kilometre away from here. I can get almost right up to the house in the car. Two or three journeys of a few hundred metres and the job will be done. I'll manage by myself." "Certainly not! Don't you bother about a thing."

The Stranger gave in. "Oh well, if it gives them pleasure ..." he thought as he watched his luggage disappear, borne on the heads of the women.

“It’s stifling in here,” said the doctor. “Let’s move on. Let’s go to Francisco’s.”

The doctor, the schoolmaster and the Stranger crossed the square to the cafe opposite.

“Well, here we are again! Just the three of us, like last year!” said the doctor, sitting down and putting his arm round the Stranger’s shoulders and the other round the schoolmaster’s. “The three of us could do great things together! ”

The Stranger grinned in agreement, without bothering to find out what the doctor meant; he knew that he often talked just to hear the sound of his own voice or to impress the simpler-minded. But the schoolmaster ignored the doctor’s remark. He had never quite forgiven him the time when, six years before, he had called on the doctor when his wife was about to give birth. “These things take time,” said the doctor, who was in bed with a hangover. “I’ll come another day.” And the schoolmaster had suddenly to learn the midwife’s trade and help his fourth daughter into the world himself.

“Tell you what,” said the doctor to his two friends. “Today, we’U just have a drink, but tomorrow, damn it, you’ll come and dine at my place!”

The schoolmaster was not listening, and the Stranger could think of nothing but Maria-Modesta.

“Do you hear?” yelled the doctor. “A patient of mine has brought me a young boar he just killed. We’ll feast on it tomorrow!”

With an atrocious accent he started reciting;

“La cigale ayant chanté tout l’été, se trouva fort dépourvue quand la bise fut venue...”

And he burst out laughing. Then turning to the Stranger, he said:

“I dare say you recognize the quotation.”

“Oh, shut up!” said the schoolmaster. “Can’t you see we’re not interested!”

“I speak French,” replied the doctor with great seriousness. “You’re not interested because you don’t understand, but my friend here understands.”

The schoolmaster gave him an icy stare:

“Get on with your drink. At least when you’re drinking you’ve got your mouth full and can’t talk rubbish.”

“I was not talking rubbish. I was quoting from the classics.” And turning to the Stranger he asked:

“And how’s your wife?”

“Leave him in peace!” the schoolmaster answered for the Stranger. “He’s already said that she may come later.”

The Stranger had not said “*may* come”, but he appreciated the schoolmaster’s diplomacy and did not correct him.

“Maybe she’ll come, maybe she won’t, that’s how it goes in life and love! ” sang the doctor.

“There don’t seem to be as many people about as last year,” the Stranger remarked.

“You see? He keeps his eyes open, our friend here!” said the doctor. “In fact, most of the fishermen aren’t back yet. There are still over a hundred to come. They’re still out at sea, cod-fishing off Newfoundland. They’ll be back in a couple of months, God willing.”

“And if the sea allows it,” added the schoolmaster, who had no faith in Divine intervention in the behaviour of the sea. “Three years ago, my brother fell overboard and was never seen again.”

And lowering his voice, he added:

“He believed in God, poor bastard!”

“There are fewer children about too,” said the Stranger, trying to steer the conversation back to where he wanted it.

“That’s not true,” said the doctor. “We’ve had twelve births and not a single child death since last year.”

“Twelve births! That’s not many,” said the Stranger, not knowing whether it was or not. “Were there more boys or girls?”

“Same as usual: about half and half.”

“Just now, out on the square, I saw nothing but boys,” said the Stranger. And, forcing a laugh, he added: “Anyone would think you’d drowned all the girls.”

Neither of them laughed, but the doctor said:

“They’re with the priest at the moment: for the past three months they’ve been going to catechism class every evening. Some of them are preparing for their First Communion and the others, the older ones, for Confirmation. They’ll be out soon. I’m waiting for my girls now.”

“How old are they?”

“Eleven and eight.”

“You’ve got two boys, too, haven’t you?”

“That’s right: one is three and the other seven. The youngest isn’t very well at all, he doesn’t eat, he doesn’t sleep,

I don’t know what’s the matter with him. Heaven knows I spare myself no trouble for him.”

“That’s true!” said the schoolmaster. “He’d do anything for his children. They mean as much to him as his car.”

The doctor did not appreciate the joke, but admitted all the same that his car did mean a lot to him, adding:

“I’ve had it for four years and it’s as good as new. I treat it as I would treat a patient”

“That’s why it’s ready for the scrap-heap! ” said the schoolmaster.

The doctor put his arm round the Stranger’s shoulders and said:

“Don’t take any notice. He’s only teasing.”

“Is he?” exclaimed the Stranger, in mock surprise.

From the cafe door they could see all the girls of the village between six and thirteen pass by in twos and threes; they were coming down the street leading from the church to the harbour square, the real centre of the village. The Stranger did not take his eyes off the procession, looking for Maria-Modesta. For a moment his view was blocked: Francisco’s daughter came into the taberna, followed by the doctor’s two daughters. When he could see through the door again, the girls were still streaming past—little brunettes, little blondes, ugly ones and pretty ones, well dressed ones and badly dressed ones. They were jostling one another and laughing and shouting; when they passed a man they said, “*Buenas tardes, señora!*”, and when they passed a woman, “*Buenas tardes señor!*”; they snatched at each other’s veils and tried to trip each other up. There were two red-heads walking arm in arm, twins: they were cross-eyed and wore steel-rimmed glasses. The doctor’s youngest daughter saw them go by and said to her father:

“They’re a turn, those two: when they read the catechism instead of keeping their eyes on the book they look at the holy water stoop.”

The doctor pretended he hadn’t heard, but his daughter pulled him by the arm and said:

“Did you hear, papa?”

“I heard!” answered the father, giving her a smack that sent her flying between the schoolmaster’s knees.

“You treat your car better,” he said to the doctor.

“My car isn’t as stupid!”

“But you didn’t make your car, did you?”

The doctor could find no better answer to such an insult than to double up in forced laughter and order drinks all round.

Gradually, the line thinned out till no more little girls went by. Maria-Modesta had not been among them, or if she had the Stranger had not seen her.

“I’ll have to be getting along soon,” he said. ‘Td better go and see what has happened to my luggage.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said the doctor. “They’ll have seen to it all right”

“I’m sure they will, but the door won’t be locked.”

“So what? You’ve nothing to fear here.”

“I know, but...”

A little girl limped into the *taberna*: she had broken the strap of one of her sandals. She looked at nobody and stood in front of the television set, watching the weather forecast. She stood stock still, beside another girl, as if fascinated by the various lines and marks indicating winds and zones of high and low pressure. Then came the commercials and the news. She still did not move, but stood there, with her back to everyone. It was Maria-Modesta.

Chapter 4

He spent the first night of his holidays in a track-suit; he hadn't made his bed yet: first he wanted to air the sheets and blankets, which had acquired a musty smell through being locked away all winter—next day, he would lay them out in the sun. So he had simply taken away the newspaper that covered the mattress and slept on that. He fell asleep, rocked by ever less precise thoughts as to what he might have done with Maria-Modesta and by the light, rapid scuttlings of a few mice in the loft.

In the morning, he woke up around half past six. Without getting up, he looked out through the window at the rain falling over the grey sea. The other half of the gulf was shrouded in mist. He noticed that saltpetre stains had appeared on the walls during his absence and that the floor was littered with dead flies. They convinced him of the need of a thorough cleaning.

He leapt from the bed, opened the window and jumped out over the ledge. He undressed on the sandy ground, put his clothes into a pile and placed a large stone on them to stop them blowing about. At the water's edge he stopped to look at the landscape. A fine rain was still falling. He started to run along the shore as far as the dunes; then he walked slowly back and when he drew level with the house he stopped, stepped back a few paces and dived into the sea. It was freezing. He only stayed in long enough to swim a few vigorous strokes, then came out shouting for joy. He picked up his clothes, flung them into the room, hoisted himself back through the window and dropped inside. Taking a towel out of one of his

cases, he dried himself, put on the track-suit in which he had slept and a pair of gum-boots, and set off for the village.

From his house to the harbour square was a good quarter of an hour's walk, nearly half of it across a path where one's feet sank into the sand.

The *taberna* that belonged to Maria-Modesta's parents had only just opened when the Stranger arrived in the village. The rough wooden benches were still upside-down on the tables, and Maria-Modesta's elder sister, the one who was twenty and had a fiance and adenoids, was beginning to sweep the previous night's dirty sand off the concrete floor.

"Good morning," said the Stranger coldly, for he found her unbearably stupid.

"Good morning," she answered.

"A cup of coffee, please."

"Yes," she said, carrying on with her sweeping. Leaning on the bar, the Stranger watched her, curious to see how long she would keep him waiting for his coffee. She disappeared into the kitchen and re-emerged at once with a bucket of clean sand, which she sprinkled over the floor. She then took down the benches from the tables, dusted both tables and benches, and finally, after taking the duster back into the kitchen, went behind the bar to get his coffee.

"Will I have much longer to wait?" asked the Stranger, who was well aware of the difficulty of getting the first cup of coffee of the day.

"The machine's got to warm up. A few minutes..."

"A few minutes ... how many?"

"About a quarter of an hour."

"I'll come back."

He went out on to the square to look around. The tide was very low and the boats which had not been anchored near enough to the beach were lying on their sides. Stagnant douds lay over a gentle sea, and there was hardly any wind; the lighthouse was still alight; some cats were poking around in the rubbish at the end of the jetty, two hens were looking for water-fleas under the wet sand. The parish priest, who had just said Mass, saw the Stranger and stopped to greet him. "You're early this year!"

"Yes, a bit early."

"It's not bathing weather yet."

"No, the water's still very cold."

“Not enough sun. That’s the main thing!”

“We’ll just have to wait. I’m not in a hurry.

“You *think* aright and you speak aright,” said the priest sententiously. Then, laughing, he added: “let us await the sun in front of a bowl of hot coffee. What do you say?”

The priest stepped aside to let the Stranger go in first, but the Stranger stepped back, and after a few civilities followed the priest to the bar.

“There’s your coffee!” said the young woman. “It’s been ready quite a *time*. You wouldn’t wait. It’s probably cold now.

“Then get me another,” said the Stranger.

“It’s not worth it. I’ll warm this up for you.”

“Oh, no you won’t. It won’t be worth drinking.”

“Try it first,” suggested the priest. “If it’s not warm enough tot you, you can have *mine*. I’ll drink yours. It’ll be no sacrifice, I assure you. I have a good system for warming up cold coffee—I add a *glass* of brandy!”

“Thank you, but it really doesn’t matter,” said the Stranger to the priest. He turned to the girl: “No, just add some very hot milk.”

“We haven’t had a drop of milk for two days. We expected it to come last night, bat the bus never got here.”

“That’s how it is half the time,” explained the priest “Last week, a wheel came off and it ended up in a ditch. Hardly surprising with the condition the road’s in! And yon should see it in winter! The rain washes away the soil and there’s nothing bat holes and rubble. In January, the doctor was taking a woman to Siveiro to have her child. WdL three kilometres from here, the road had been swept away and he couldn’t go on. Fortunately, everything turned out all right, bat you should have seen the inside of the car! All the seats had to be repaired. When they got back the doctor was in a worse state than the poor woman. Still, let’s not dwell on such gloomy matters. When the weather changes, I’ll take you fishing. I’ve got a new engine in my boat.”

“The old one was all right, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, bat the one I’ve got now is fantastic! It’s really powerful and runs on only a third of the fuel that the old one used. It’s a diesel engine. My brother brought it back from France for me—and managed to get it through without paying.”

Hearing footsteps on the wooden stairs that linked the *taberna* with the living quartos on the first floor, the Stranger hoped that he would see

Maria-Modesta, who would have to come down to go to school. He lacked the courage to turn round and, without moving, looked straight ahead in the advertisement mirror over the percolator. In the mirror appeared Maria-Modesta, whose eyes met those of the Stranger. She disappeared at the bend in the stairs, reappeared, jumped the last few steps and entered the room, hands clasped together.

Her pigtails were undone and her eyes stiff looked sleepy. She walked slowly across the room towards the Stranger and the priest, who had both turned round. Without moving and without raising his elbows from the bar, the Stranger said: "Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

The girl nodded respectfully and said:

"Good morning."

The greeting was for the Stranger: the respectful nod of the head for the priest, who put out his hand to place it paternally on the girl's hair. The girl drew back and the priest's hand remained suspended for a moment in mid-air, then fell to his soutane. Maria-Modesta's reaction gave the Stranger the wild hope that if he had done the same, she would not have rejected him.

"Come and get washed! Come on, quick!" yelled her mother from the kitchen.

Maria-Modesta leant her chest on the rail and, with both feet together, slid sideways along the bar, crab-fashion. When she got to the end, she jumped backwards, then forwards, then backwards again, with her feet still together; then she curtsied, jumped round, lost her balance and fell gracefully. She got up and disappeared into the kitchen.

Bringing a wicker-chair up to a white enamel basin, she sat down and plunged her feet into the warm water.

"Don't forget your knees!" said her mother as she went out

Through the open door, Maria-Modesta saw out of the corner of her eye that the Stranger could see her, but that the priest, who was still talking to the Stranger, had his back to her.

Over her legs she rubbed a piece of soap that was so big that she had to hold it with both hands to stop it slipping. So as not to wet her skirt she had lifted it up and tucked a corner of it under the elastic of her knickers. When she had finished washing her legs she rinsed then and then dried them. Then she got up from the chair, emptied the basin, filled it with clean water from a large saucepan and put it in the sink. She disappeared

for a moment into a corner of the room, then emerged completely naked. She advanced towards the door. The Stranger stared, fascinated, until Maria-Modesta suddenly shut the door. The priest asked for a glass of brandy to help him digest the coffee, which he criticized for containing rather too much chicory.

Maria-Modesta's mother came down the stairs carrying a pile of sheets and coughing—she suffered from asthma. She was no longer young, but her face retained traces of a former beauty. She had smooth hair held behind by a piece of string, blue eyes beneath strong, precisely marked brow ridges, prominent cheek-bones and a full mouth, teeth ever ready to show themselves in a smile, a strong neck ever ready for her husband's prudish kiss or her children's tears when they came for a moment's rest or consolation. Tall, with large breasts, hips and calves, she was motherly in every aspect, always. Around her left arm she wore a copper band—against rheumatism. She went into the kitchen. Her daughter, still quite naked, was beginning to dry herself with a small towel.

“Haven't you finished yet? Hurry up!”

“I'm ready.”

“Hurry up! You should be dressed by now.”

The mother poured out a bowl of milk, put a heaped teaspoon of sugar into it and said:

“Take some bread.”

Maria-Modesta moved a stool and got up on to it. She opened the door of a small wall-cupboard and said to her mother:

“You've put it too far in. I can't reach it.”

The mother caught her daughter by the waist and lifted her down.

“I'll get it. You do your hair.”

She took the roll of bread, cut it in two and gave a piece to her daughter. The little girl put it under her arm, picked up the bowl with both hands and, without taking her eyes off the milk, walked slowly and hesitantly out of the kitchen and sat at one of the tables.

“You'll be late for school,” said the priest.

Maria-Modesta shrugged her shoulders.

“You're not very well behaved,” he observed primly.

She continued eating, her spoon dripping with milk, ignoring him completely.

“Ah! For you there is milk, then!” the Stranger exclaimed.

“It’s not fresh,” said Maria-Modesta’s sister. “It’s condensed milk.”

“Well?”

“We can’t give that to customers. It’s sweetened, and not everyone likes that.”

“Hurry up! ” said her mother, standing in front of her little girl.

Maria-Modesta tried to hurry and spilt a few drops of milk on her skirt.

“You can’t even eat properly! ” said her mother, giving her a smack.

And turning to the Stranger, she added:

“I bet in France no one would want a girl like this, eh ? ” This time the Stranger turned his back on the girl so as not to embarrass her and pretended he hadn’t heard. The mother turned to the priest:

“And what’s she like at catechism, Father? Is she learning it or not?”

“She could do better ... But I’ve already told her, if she’s not ready I won’t present her for Confirmation.”

He peered at the little girl over his glasses:

“What would His Lordship the Bishop say if he found that you didn’t know the catechism?”

“He wouldn’t find out,” answered the girl, who got another smack from her mother.

“You heard what Father said? If you don’t learn your catechism, no Confirmation. No bride’s dress, as you call it! ” “And all the other little boys and girls,” continued the priest, “will come back from Santiago de Compostela as soldiers of Christ and you’ll have to stay here waiting for them, and they’ll point their fingers at you and call you a little heathen.”

“A heathen? What’s a heathen?”

“A heathen is a person who does not believe in God, who does not belong to our Holy Mother the Church,” explained the priest.

“And I won’t belong to Mother Church?”

“Come on, hurry up! ” said her mother. “Have you finished your milk?”

Maria-Modesta got up and her mother bent down to kiss her on the forehead.

“And when you come out of school, come straight home! ”

“Good-bye! ” Maria-Modesta called as she ran out.

She left the cafe with three textbooks and a few exercise-books under her arm. As she hopped along, she improvised a few steps of the *pasacalie*,

and, to the rhythm of that ancient Galidan dance, sang: “Mother Church,
Mother Church, I’m a heathen, I’m a heathen, I’m a heathen ...”

Chapter 5

“I must find a way of approaching her, of talking to her.

“She must come here.

“We must be alone, in this isolated house by the shore. Just the two of us between these thick walls. The wind and the sea will drown my words.

“She will listen to what I say and, gradually, she will discover how rare, how precious, how forbidden our situation is.

“It will be the first time in her life that anyone has spoken to her as I shall speak to her.

“She will blush, go pale, and tremble.

“But I shall touch her only with words.

“I will ask her, for example, what she would think if I knelt down in front of her. Without waiting for an answer, I’ll ask her what she would think if I slipped my hands under her skirt and kissed her belly.

“But the whole time I’m talking I won’t move, so as not to frighten her and to leave her the chance of refusing.

“Will she refuse?

“No, she will discover her own desires.

“I will handle her with words, shock her more and more, but I still won’t touch her.

“I’ll remind her that we’re alone and tell her how many things we could do.

“I’ll reassure her—no one can see us, no one will know.

“And I’ll ask her: Do you want to?

“She won’t answer, but her silence will mean that I can take her by the hand, lead her gently to a corner of the room. She’ll follow me and this time I will kneel down in front of her and say: Stay like that, don’t move.

“I won’t take off any of her clothes. I shall hardly move them.

“When she begins to like it I shall put back her cotton knickers, stand up and say, very persuasively: Now, take your clothes off. We’re going to lie on the bed. We’ll be more comfortable there.

“I’ll help her to undress, talking the whole time. You’ll like it... You must like it.. . You’ll like it so much that you’ll come back every day ...

“I’ll cover her with clean sheets, I’ll dose the shutters to keep out the afternoon sun and our first night will begin.”

The Stranger had been imagining the scene ever since he had got back to the village. It had been in the evening. Maria-Modesta had not seen him. But the next day she recognized him: he was the foreign gentleman who the year before had given her a doll he had won at the fair.

This year he had come alone, without his wife, which, in the eyes of the villagers, was suspicious enough in itself. When asked if she’d be coming soon, he answered that she’d be coming later on, that her summer holidays hadn’t started yet, that he had come early in order to get the house ready. “You must get bored all by yourself,” people said. He replied that he never had time to get bored with all the work that had to be done. He explained how difficult it was painting damp walls, rewiring the house, furnishing a room for his wife’s parents, who might also come and spend their holidays in this beautiful village ...

To convince them, he even bought some old furniture: another bed, a table and some chairs. And he rewired the house and whitewashed all the rooms. In the evenings he shaved, went down to the beach for a bathe, put on clean clothes and set off for the village, straight to the cafe owned by Maria-Modesta’s parents.

A few unsuccessful attempts to talk to the child made him fear that his intentions had been discovered: the father, who was usually so solicitous towards his customers, seemed to want to avoid him. One night, the Stranger thought of allaying all suspicion by increasing the fellow’s turnover: instead of drinking wine at two pesetas, he drank whisky at thirty. About halfway through the evening, already feeling the effects of a good half-bottle of Scotch and under the fond eyes of Maria-Modesta’s parents,

he went over and sat in a corner of the room. After a few obviously bored minutes, he called over to the little girl:

“Maria-Modesta, come here a minute!”

When the girl did not move, her mother pushed her out from behind the bar:

“Go on, girl, see what the gentleman wants.” Maria-Modesta got up off the case of mineral water bottles that served as a stool and went over, with an evident lack of enthusiasm, towards the Stranger, while her mother looked on with a benevolent smile reserved only for the very best customers.

“Sit down here next to me,” he said.

“What do you want?” she said, still standing.

“Sit down and I’ll tell you.”

But he didn’t know what to say. None of what he had meant to say could be said with so many people about.

“Well, what do you want?”

“Nothing.”

The girl got up from the table, but he caught her by the arm.

“Wait! I know... get me another whisky.”

The first Sunday went by. Then the second.

Maria-Modesta did not go to school on Sunday, of course: she spent part of the afternoon playing on the beach with the other children. The Stranger followed her everywhere, on the harbour square and in the back streets behind the church. To justify his presence, he took photographs, especially of Maria-Modesta herself, but so as not to make his preference too obvious he wasted dozens of shots on subjects that were not of the slightest interest to him: the grocer’s son, the shoemaker’s wife and her baby grandson, an old man smoking his pipe, a fishing-net drying in the sun. For one such shot, he took ten of Maria-Modesta. The other children soon noticed and started teasing her and chanting, “Maria-Modesta’s got a fiancé, a fiancé, and I know who he is!”

He stopped taking photographs.

One evening, on his way into the village, the daughter of a neighbouring farmer asked him:

“Why do they say that you’re always running around after the children?”

He didn’t know what to reply and said:

“That’s funny. I never run.”

The incident served as a warning. ‘It’s not as easy as I thought,” he reflected. “And much more dangerous. I shall have to attract her without chasing her.”

But how?

He realized that all the children made much more fuss of him when he arrived in the village in his car. Among them, very often, was Maria-Modesta.

“Will you take us for a drive, señor?” they would cry.

One afternoon, he took a cargo of boys and girls as far as the dolmen. The road was in a very bad state and the children shrieked with joy at every bump.

One boy sang, purposely out of tune, an old *gallegada* all about a girl called Carmela who wore low-cut shoes and yellow stockings; everyone was laughing, except Maria-Modesta, who sat next to the Stranger. When he changed gear, he touched her left knee and stroked her thigh. The girl did not move, or look at him. She gave no sign that she liked what he did, but she did not draw her leg away.

That evening, in Maria-Modesta’s *taberna*, the Stranger sat down at a table and began a letter to his wife. The little girl came up and asked him:

“Who are you writing to?”

“Someone.”

“Can I read it?”

“Yes. Here.”

“I don’t understand it. What does it mean?”

“That I’m writing in French and that you can’t understand.”

“Can you write in Spanish?”

“Yes.”

‘I don’t believe you.”

“Oh yes I can.” .

“Then write me a *canto para meñinos*,” she said in Galician dialect

‘I can’t write children’s stories, but. .. wait a minute, I’ll write one for you, just for you.”

“Go on, then.”

He picked up the bottle of whisky that stood on the table, took a good swig straight out of the bottle, then on a fresh sheet of paper began to write. The girl read as he went along:

“This story that you are about to read is a secret for you alone. A big secret that no one else must ever know about. And this secret is made up of several other secrets.”

He took another mouthful of whisky to give him courage, put down the bottle again and said out loud, so as not to attract attention by their silence:

“Do you understand so far?”

“Yes,” said Maria-Modesta.

He picked up his pen, and wrote:

“You must never say a single word about it, either while I am writing, or later.”

He looked the girl straight in the eyes. She nodded.

“I’m going to tell you something that I cannot say out loud. I came back this year for a single reason—to see you. And do you know why? To talk to you. And do you know what I want to tell you? I want to say that I love you. And do you think that is all? No. I have hundreds of other things to tell you too. Do you know what things? Just things! ... But where, when will I tell you them? At my house, tomorrow. When you come out of school, you must come and see me. You know, the blue house, the last house of all, near the beach. I’ll expect you. Will you come?”

He put down his pen and turned to Maria-Modesta, who was sitting beside him.

“Yes, she said.

Standing behind the little girl was her elder sister, the stupid one who made bad coffee. At what point had she come up? Had she read it all from the beginning, or only the end? Had she understood?

The following afternoon Maria-Modesta did not come as she had promised and for two days the Stranger dared not go out. He kept looking out of the windows, thinking that sooner or later the police would come to arrest him. He remembered that the chief of the *Guardia Civil* in the village had told him the year before that the two most heavily punished crimes in Spain were pyromania, which could get the death penalty, and crimes against public morality.

From one of the windows of the house, he saw in the distance a car go by on the main road—it was not the doctor’s car and not, therefore, from the village. Moreover, it was green: perhaps it was an army car, or a police car from the town. He thought that they were coming to arrest him and

was overcome with fear. A terrible, overwhelming fear. He kept indoors until the evening of the second day, then he went into the village. He wanted to give himself up.

“I’ll tell them everything. I’ll get it off my chest,” he said to himself.

But on the way there he thought about it a great deal “Before giving myself up,” he decided, “it would be better to find out how much the others know and what they’re thinking.”

He went to the café usually frequented by the police chief; he wanted to meet him, buy him a drink and talk to him, and try to find out what he really knew.

“I’m ready to face any charge—I’ll deny everything. I shall pretend to be outraged and say that it’s all a product of the imagination of illiterate peasants, and that someone must have a grudge against me. And that it’s crazy to suspect me of anything, I, a citizen with an irreproachable past, a magistrate of repute in my own country—*sí, señor!*—a man of letters, an academician ...”

The police chief was sitting by himself in the cafe. The Stranger entered, whistling an Asturian song, the *Folio de San Vicente de la Barquera*. The policeman invited him to his table and the Stranger said that he had several records of Spanish folk-songs. The policeman asked him if he had a good ear for music and, without waiting for a reply, added: “Personally, I’ve no ear at all. But I’ve got excellent eyesight. It’s my job ... I can even see in the dark, like cats, I can even see when I’m not there.”

The next morning, the Stranger woke up with a hangover. “Either they know everything, or they know nothing,” he told himself yet again. They may be waiting for me round the next corner. I must find out for sure. If they know, I’ve nothing more to lose; if they don’t, I’ve everything to gain.”

As soon as he saw Maria-Modesta, by the fountain in the square, he went up to her, took her by the arm and, in front of the other children, said aloud:

“I must have a word with you.”

But he was prudent enough to take her well out of earshot; “I waited for you for two days,” he said quietly. “You promised to come and you didn’t. Please come, I must talk to you. We must see each other—it’s not just for me, but for you too.”

“I couldn’t come,” she replied. “I may be able to come tomorrow. But I must be careful, because our teacher told all the girls in the class not to go to anyone’s house without letting her know first”

The Stranger went quite pale. He held his arms out to Maria-Modesta as if to push her away and said in a choking voice:

“No, don’t come! Don’t come!”

Chapter 6

“I like your pink sheets,” said Maria-Modesta to the Stranger. “With the shutters almost closed you can hardly see your skin. If I was brown all over, even here, you wouldn’t be able to see me at all.”

“I’d hear you though. What a chatter-box you are!”

“Yes, I know. If I was brown all over, you’d only hear my voice and you’d think I was a ghost. Like this I’m just a semighost.”

“Yes, a little triangular ghost.”

“Why triangular?”

“Because of this little triangle that hasn’t caught the sun.” “Hey, don’t touch me! I want to go and pee.”

“Go on then.”

“No. If I get up it will be to go to the village with you, arm-in-arm, like the grown-ups do when they come out of church on Sunday. Then people will invite us to their houses, and we’ll have photos taken, and there’ll be singing, and we’ll go to Madrid.”

“Why Madrid?”

“On our honeymoon. And then we’ll buy rugs.” “Rugs?”

“Yes, to put on each side of the bed.”

“Do you wish there were some rugs here?”

“Yes. Blue with flowers and sort of mussels.”

“Mussels?”

“My uncle brought one back from Turkey and it had designs like mussels on it.”

“When I go into Siveiro, I’ll see if I can find one.”

“Will you take me with you?”

“I’d like to, but what would we tell your parents?” “They’d never know. They’d think I was on the beach or in the fields.”

“Don’t you think that’s rather risky?”

“You’re always afraid you’ll be found out. You can see they don’t know anything at all.”

“But it would only take some little thing for them to catch us.”

She jumped off the bed.

“Where are you going?”

“To pee!”

When she came back, the Stranger said:

“Feel better?”

“Oh, yes!” she said, sighing. Then, more seriously, she added: “But I don’t like you to talk about things like that” “You started it!”

“That’s because I couldn’t wait any longer.”

“My little angel, my little angel...”

She snuggled up to him, her fists hidden under his arm-pits. She wriggled about a bit, then fell asleep.

“Every time you come here, you go to sleep,” he said when she woke up.

“No, I don’t.”

“Oh, yes, you do!”

“That’s because I’m tired.”

“Do you feel better now?”

“Yes.”

“You’re hurting me with your knee,” he said. “Stretch your leg out.”

“No, I want to keep it there. I like it tickling my knee. It gives me ideas. It makes me feel all funny inside, like when I look at you or when I think about things. Do you feel like that when you look at me?”

“Yes, I like it”

She threw back the sheets and blankets and said:

“Look at me.”

“I am looking at you.”

“Can you see me properly?”

“Yes. But not as much as I’d like.”

The girl turned her head towards the Stranger and, smiling, slowly unbent her knees, keeping her thighs together. Then she suddenly opened

them and said:

“There! Look!”

They remained in silence for a while. Then she sat up, resting on her elbows, as if to look at him.

“I can feel your eyes,” she said. “I’ve a feeling you’re looking at the little thing.”

Her feet were placed against each other, like two hands, palm against palm, as if in prayer, as she watched his hand descending her body.

“Slowly . . she said.

She was still lying on her elbows.

“You’re killing me.”

“I like it when you say that.”

“You’re killing me . .

All the time they talked, they looked each other in the eyes.

“You never tell me when you really ‘die’.”

“When it’s over?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Just say that you’re ‘dying’.”

“Quicker now.”

She bent backwards and said:

“I’ll tell you, but don’t talk now.”

A very long silence was followed by a long period of immobility. The little girl’s heart was still pounding when she hid her head between his head and chest. She stayed in this position for a little while, took another deep breath, yawned and said:

‘I’m hungry.’

“I’ve nothing to give you and even if I had I wouldn’t give it to you.”

“Why?”

“Because you didn’t say anything.”

“What should I have said?”

“You know very well. What you promised to say.”

She pretended to be embarrassed and hid her eyes with her arm.

“You wanted me to say that I was ‘dying’.”

“Yes.”

She flung her little arms round the Stranger, hugged him as tightly as she could, kissed him all over the face and whispered in his ear:

“I didn’t dare to.”

“You know, it’s not really that I didn’t dare to say that I was ‘dying’.
It’s that there was something else I wanted to say and that’s what I didn’t
dare to say.”

“And what was it? Tell me, please tell me.”

“Yes, perhaps I will, perhaps I will... but don’t stop now, don’t stop ...
I’ll tell you ... yes... there, there ... there! I’ve come...”

Chapter 7

“The liver of an alcoholic is more interesting than that of a non-drinker,” said the doctor, pulling the cork out of the sixth bottle of Rioja.

“Yours must be like a sponge,” said the schoolmaster.

“All the better! I’ve always intended leaving it to some poor sponge-diver, on condition that he sells it to a pretty woman for her private use. What do you say, Gertrude?” “Where did he get that name?” asked the schoolmaster.

“I don’t know,” replied the priest. “Every now and then he takes it into his head to call me Gertrude ... I wouldn’t mind, but he’s done it twice in public.”

“And you didn’t know where to hide, eh, Gertrude?” insisted the doctor.

“No, I mustn’t drink any more,” said the hunchback, the rich man of the village, putting his hand over his glass.

“Come on, just to finish it off ! ” said the doctor, tapping him on his hump.

“No, really! Anyway, it’s late and I must be getting along.”

“So must I,” said the priest. “It’s not that I don’t enjoy your company, but it’s Sunday tomorrow and no day of rest for me.”

Three of them were left: the doctor, the schoolmaster and the Stranger.

“He’s always so amiable, your priest,” said the Stranger. “Like a commercial traveller,” said the schoolmaster. “That’s what he’s paid for.”

“Now, now!” said the doctor. “We mustn’t speak ill of absent friends.”

“Don’t worry,” said the schoolmaster. “Those people are never absent. They get into everything, they’re everywhere you turn. They’re harder to throw off than fleas.”

“Now, now! ” repeated the doctor.

“They can go anywhere they like, like hotel thieves: they’ve got a pass-key given them by their boss in person, by the God whose ministers they claim to be.”

“Come now, you can’t say they do any harm!” said the doctor.

“No, they even give blessings,” said the schoolmaster. “But instead of coming to bless my house at Easter, I’d rather they helped me to give the walls a coat of paint.”

“A blessing never does any harm and is never unwelcome,” said the doctor. “Don’t you agree?” he added, turning to the Stranger. “We must let God into our houses! ”

“Yes,” replied the Stranger, “and then show Him all kinds of dreadful things.”

There was a knock at the door. The doctor got up, went over to a low table on which there was a box of cigars, stuck one in his mouth and came back to offer them to his guests.

He made a ceremonious gesture, the box fell from his hands, the cigars scattered over the carpet and rolled under the furniture. He did not swear once and even got down on all fours to pick them up.

The knocking continued.

“Go and see who’s at the door,” said the schoolmaster. “We’ll deal with your cigars.”

“I can see two in the corner, but I can’t reach them,” said the doctor, his head buried under the sofa.

The schoolmaster held the doctor by the hips, pulled him out and helped him to his feet.

Red-faced, he staggered out to the door.

“Look at the state he’s in!” said the schoolmaster to the Stranger. “He’s like that half the time! I’ve known him since he was a medical student—he was always drunk, even then.”

“How did he ever become a doctor, then?”

“His father was well off and his uncle was an archbishop.” “Very reassuring!”

“Hardly! But at least he’s honest! When he knows what’s the matter with you, he treats you very well. When he doesn’t he sends you to a specialist.”

The doctor came back, flopped on to the sofa and announced:

“Perhaps I’ll get some rest when I’m dead! Ramona’s girl has hurt her foot. I must go and see what it’s all about. ’ “Ramona? Which one?” asked the schoolmaster.

“The cafe one.”

“Cafe-Ramona ? They don’t seem to have any luck in that family!”

“That’s true,” said the doctor. “She suffers from rheumatism, her husband’s got the beginnings of an ulcer, the eldest girl is to marry some good-for-nothing because she’s a bit pregnant ...”

“Pregnant?”

“Yes, just so. But I know nothing about it. Professional secrecy!”

“And now it’s the little girl.”

“Maria-Modesta?” asked the Stranger, horrified.

“Yes,” replied the doctor, “do you know her?”

The Stranger felt himself go pale, blush, then start shaking. In fact, he was not shaking, nor had he gone pale or blushed, but he was so concerned for Maria-Modesta, and even more concerned not to betray his emotions, that he forced himself to cough in order to justify any blushes he may have displayed. He wiped his nose in order to hide his face, stabbed out his cigar and lit another. Finally, calm returned and he felt a kind of emptiness inside him. He said, with a touch of arrogance:

“I’m not surprised! She’s always chasing around like a mad thing.”

The doctor left the room and returned a few moments later with his case.

“Don’t go. I won’t be long.”

He was back within half an hour. He took off his jacket and dropped heavily into an armchair:

“Is there anything left to drink?”

The Stranger poured out a glass of brandy for him and asked:

“Well? What’s the matter with her?”

“Her foot’s swollen. She may have broken a bone. She’ll have to have an X-ray.”

“How did it happen?” asked the schoolmaster.

“Just playing . . . running about... You know, lads...” “Playing at this time? In the middle of the night?” said the Stranger, who had spent the whole afternoon with Maria-Modesta in his house.

“No, it happened a few hours ago,” said the doctor. “Apparently, she stayed out till quite late, and when she realized the time, she was afraid of being scolded and ran home. She hit her foot on a rock.”

“A rock?”

“She says she was playing in the fields and that she came home along the beach. There was a stone, she didn’t see it and bumped into it”

“And she’s broken her foot?”

“I don’t know. She may have. We’ll see tomorrow.”

“Will you be taking her into Siveiro for the X-ray?” asked the schoolmaster.

“Well, yes. Who else?”

“You wouldn’t have room for me by any chance? I could take the opportunity of doing a bit of shopping,” said the schoolmaster.

“Sorry, old fellow. We’re full up! There are already four of us. Myself, the girl, my wife, who has been complaining for the past three weeks because she wants me to take her to buy some linen, and my maid who has to go to the dentist to have a tooth out.”

“If you like, I can take you all in my car, since it’s bigger than yours,” said the Stranger.

And he added:

“I’ve nothing to do all day and I’d enjoy spending the morning in town.”

“You’re very kind, but I must take my own car: the tyres are almost flat and I must fill up the petrol tank.”

The Stranger could not sleep. “It’s all my fault,” he repeated to himself. “I told her not to go home by the path, past the houses, but to go along the beach, so that no one would see her leaving my house. It’s all my fault !”

He put out his hand to switch off the light and thought: “If they keep her at the hospital for several days, I must think up some reason for going to see her. I must see her. I must find some scheme. I must...”

When he awoke, the sun was not yet up. Through the open window he saw the sky, which was already light and blue, and the last stars. He remembered the strange dream that he had had during the night and lay still for a long while trying to remember the details.

He was in a church that had no roof. He could see the sky, which was a deep blue, but although it was broad daylight there were stars. The sky was so close he could touch it or cut it into pieces. The church was built of light-coloured stone and stood completely isolated in a field that stretched to infinity. No path led to this church; it seemed to be almost hidden from view in the middle of ripe corn, which was growing to an extraordinary height. He was lying on the altar, as on a bed, with a woman whose face he could no longer remember perhaps he had not seen her face during the whole dream. But he knew that she was young, beautiful and naked. They had been there for a long time and might be there forever. From time to time, the woman got down from the altar and walked slowly over to the baptismal font, which bore the words, engraved on marble: "Suffer the little children to come unto me". As soon as the woman touched the water to wash herself, a blind old man began to play on the organ the first triplets of the *Dies Irae* for dead spermatozoa. The woman came back to the altar, their bodies entwined once more, the blind old man disappeared and was replaced at the organ by Maria-Modesta. But an older Maria-Modesta. She still had her blonde pigtailed, her short skirt and her child's eyes. But she had breasts and was wearing a white, long-sleeved blouse, secured at the wrists with buttons of the same blue as the sky, and with a star in the middle. As she sat at the organ, her back was turned to the nave and the altar, but she could see what was happening by looking into a mirror placed at an angle over the keyboard.

She was playing Psalm 84, with one hand: her other hand was hidden in her blouse, over her breasts. She was singing the *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua* and the hand that she had held under her clothes began to move slightly when she looked in the mirror. She was a virgin and would always remain one; that was why she had chosen to sing: "My heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. Yea, the sparrow hath found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O Lord of hosts, my King, and my God ..." Every time she reached the verse, "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness", the mirror misted over, then cleared, but no longer reflected the interior of the church: it had mysteriously changed its angle and Maria-Modesta could see herself in it. When she had finished playing the psalm, she took her hand out of her

blouse and slowly unbuttoned it She opened it, hdd the two sides apart and looked at her breasts in the mirror.

Chapter 8

When the Stranger arrived at the village, he realized by the crowd surrounding the doctor's car that it was later than he had thought. He was sorry that he had not got there earlier: now he would have no time to find an excuse to go and see Maria-Modesca before she left for the hospital at Siveiro.

The car was standing in front of the taberna owned by the girl's parents and the children were playing with the handles, the headlamps, the windscreen-wipers, kicking the tyres and dusting the number plate. The grown-ups stood around, scolding them.

"Don't touch the car!"

To no avail.

A little boy with glasses pulled a face at an old man and banged his fist on the bonnet.

"Your parents may have money, but you could do with a good hiding!" said the old man.

The boy stuck out his tongue.

The Stranger mingled with the crowd of curious bystanders, waiting for the young invalid to appear. Beside him a wizened old fisherman began to mutter:

"It only seems like yesterday that Ramona went off to the town to have Maria-Modesta. The next night, the father treated us all to a round of drinks that knocked us out for three days. It was winter, I remember, January or February, and I've never drunk as much since. Except, of course, when my daughter Honorina got married. It was winter then, too,

and in the cafe where we were celebrating, the floor was so littered with crab and lobster shells that we didn't know where to put our feet. Yes, it seems just like yesterday, yet it's ten years ago, or more. Yes, it must be more, because I remember that that year my son Augusto, who's now..."

The doctor appeared at the door of the *taberna*. Behind him was Maria-Modesta's father, carrying his daughter in his arms. The girl's right foot was bare and swollen; on the left foot was a brown leather shoe. She wore no socks and her skirt was longer than usual, of green velvet and very flared. Over it she wore a fawn pullover. Her hair had been combed, and flowed freely over her shoulders. On her wrist was a gold bracelet, which the Stranger had never seen her wearing. The doctor came out to the car, brushing the children aside and scolding those who had taken the liberty of polishing it with pieces of paper they had found lying about on the ground.

"Good God, you'll scratch it!" he yelled. The children stepped back, not out of fear, but out of respect, as when the saint goes by on procession day. Today the saint was Maria-Modesta, because she had an injured foot, because she was going to the town, because she would be travelling beside the doctor, who was driving her there himself, and because such events do not occur every day.

She did not seem to be in pain; there was even a gleam of pride in her eyes. The doctor opened the right-hand door and helped Maria-Modesta's father to put his daughter on to the front seat. This manoeuvre was complicated by the smallness of the car and by the care that had to be taken not to knock the injured foot against anything—as a result, everyone got a good view of the child's white cotton knickers.

The Stranger looked away from the muscular thighs that had belonged to him the day before, and watched the girl's face in the hope that their eyes might meet. But he was disappointed.

The car started, moved once round the square and passed in front of the house from which the girl had come. Her parents stood in the doorway, tears in their eyes and pride in their bearing. The car disappeared at the first bend.

The crowd dispersed. Some of the women went home and others continued on their way to get water at the fountain. One group of men stayed in the square talking, another wandered over to the nearest *taberna* for a drink. The children began to play: one of them pretended he had a

broken leg and two others became stretcher-bearers. A little girl who wanted to take part declared that she was a nurse; she was rejected out of hand. A boy of about fifteen, a simpleton, yelled: "I'm the doctor, I'm the doctor!"

No one took any notice of him, but suddenly a little boy who was sitting beside him burst into tears: the idiot had tried to give him an injection with a nail he had picked off the ground. Three others were hopping round the fountain crying: "It hurts! It hurts!" Some mothers who had their sons within arm's reach slapped them.

"You mustn't do that, you silly boy. It's unlucky!"

One boy fell to the ground.

"There! What did I tell you!"

The Stranger went into the only shop in the village. Several women greeted him warmly and told the shopkeeper to serve him first. He thanked them, but refused, saying that he was in no hurry. As he waited his turn, he looked around at the goods displayed on the shelves or hanging from the ceiling: buckets, balls of string, ham, dried cod, potatoes, buttons. He examined the buttons that had been sewn on to each box to indicate its contents. Some had a small white button, others a small black button. He thought of the buttons on the sleeves of Maria-Modesta's blouse, the one she wore in the dream, with the long sleeves buttoned at the wrists. And of the black buttons on the patent leather shoes that he would have liked to have bought her. The shop also sold a powder for killing cockroaches and another for killing mice. There were small rolls of fly paper, loaves of bread, bottles of wine, cans of oil holding one, two, five and ten litres, packets of margarine, nuts, nails, plaster, hammers, saws, vinegar, light bulbs, and onions and garlic hanging from the ceiling among brooms, spades and sausages ...

When his turn came to be served, he bought a piece of cheese and borrowed a knife from the shopkeeper. He went out and sat on the carcase of a boat that lay abandoned on the sand, in full sunlight.

When he had finished his cheese, he went back to the shop to return the knife. Then he went and drank a glass of wine in the *taberna* belonging to old Juan.

Two policemen invited him to join them at their table.

"Are you going on duty or just coming off?" the Stranger asked them.

"Coming off."

"You must be tired."

"Oh, we're used to it."

"The rifles and everything else you carry must make quite a weight!"

"I've been lugging this thing around with me for eleven years now and never fired a single shot! But if we didn't have these, you'd soon see! In Spain, the law is this!" he exclaimed, striking the butt of his rifle.

"That and the Church," said the other policeman.

"Yes, even more than us."

The schoolmaster came into the *taberna*, nodded to the policemen and said to the Stranger:

"I was looking for you. There's a foreign woman in my cafe. We don't understand what she wants. Will you come and see?"

"What nationality is she?"

"I don't know. She's dressed for the North Pole and she's wearing a hat."

"But what does she speak?"

"She speaks so that we don't understand."

"Is she alone?"

"Yes. She came by car."

"Good looking?"

"Who?"

"The girl."

"Oh, yes. A blonde."

"How old is she?"

"You can't tell with these foreign girls. If she was from round here, she'd be about eighteen, but being a foreigner she might be ten years older."

"Oh, don't exaggerate!"

"All right. But come and see what she wants."

"Let me finish my wine first."

"Of course. In fact, I'll have a glass myself while I'm here." "What on earth is she doing here?" asked one of the policemen.

"Perhaps she's got lost."

"Or maybe she's looking for petrol."

"In that case, she's come to the right place!"

"Every few words she says 'hotel'," said the schoolmaster. "Well, there you are!" said the Stranger. "She's looking for somewhere to stay."

"If that's what she wants, she's going to have an unpleasant surprise," said the schoolmaster.

"We could put her up at the station," said one of the policemen.

Everybody laughed heartily at this.

"Or you could make a great sacrifice and put her up at your house," said the schoolmaster to the Stranger.

"Out of the question."

"You're not afraid of women, are you?"

"It's not that. I don't want any trouble."

"Trouble? What trouble? Are you afraid of what might be said in the village? We'll say nothing. You can pretend she's a relation of yours. All foreigners are related in some way or other."

The Stranger paid for everyone's drinks and left the *taberna*, followed by the schoolmaster and the two policemen.

Out on the square, the children were gathered round the car, trying to guess where it had come from.

Sitting at a table, a young woman was looking at a road map of the region, under the open stares of the old men huddled around the bar. She was wearing grey woollen slacks, leather boots, a thick fawn-coloured sweater and a brown suede jacket. Her hair was fair, curly and cut very short. She wore no make-up. A handbag of the same suede as the jacket was lying on the marble table-top, beside a white knitted woollen beret with a pompom.

"There you are, that's her," said the schoolmaster.

"I thought it might be!"

"Go and see what she wants."

The Stranger went up to the unknown woman and asked:

"Do you speak French?"

"I am French."

"Can I help you?"

"I don't know. I'm looking for a hotel."

"Here, in the village?"

"Yes."

"There isn't one."

"Aren't there people who let rooms?"

"I don't think so. It's not the custom in these parts."

"Pity! I liked it here. But...excuse my curiosity, where are you staying?"

“At home.”

“You’ve got a house here?”

“Yes.”

“Are you Spanish?”

“No.”

“French?”

“No.”

“Are you on holiday?”

“Almost. And you?”

“Yes, I’m ‘almost’ on holiday too. I’m looking for somewhere quiet where I can spend a few months.”

“And you’ve made up your mind to stay here?”

“No, not necessarily, but I’d like to stay in a village like this.”

“To rest?”

“No, to work.”

“Work?”

“I’m a student. I’m doing a philosophy thesis.”

“But why Spain and why Galicia in particular?”

“I chose to go abroad for the change, Spain because it’s fairly cheap and Galicia because it’s the least Spanish part of Spain. I don’t like the ‘typical’ or the ‘folksy’.”

“How did you end up here?”

“Quite by chance. I just left the highway about ten kilometres from here.”

“In the region they say that this village is at the end of the world.”

“That’s exactly what I’m looking for. My cases are full of books, not clothes. But I need a table, a chair and a bed.” “Would you like a drink?”

“Td like a glass of malaga.”

“Two mala gas,” said the Stranger to the schoolmaster’s daughter, who served at both the bar and the tables.

The old men standing at the bar exchanged smiles and one of them whispered:

“There you are! These foreigners don’t lose much time, do they?”

“Are there any other foreigners in this village?”

“I’m the only one.”

“Is it the first time you’ve been here?”

“No, I’ve been coming here for some years now.”

“But when you came here for the first time, where did you stay?”

“I camped. I set up my tent beside the cemetery.”

The Stranger felt vaguely ashamed of the implications of the word “camped” and hastened to add:

“Only a very small tent, just to sleep in—no air conditioning, portable chairs or television set.”

“Do you think it would be possible to find somewhere to stay in any of the villages round here?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it very much.”

“Could we ask someone here? Perhaps they could tell me. What about him, for example...” she said, indicating the schoolmaster, who was seated at the cash-register, behind the bar.

“José!” said the Stranger. “Would you say this charming young woman had any chance of getting accommodation round here?”

The schoolmaster drew himself up to his full height, flattered at being included in the conversation and replied: “It is possible ... but I think it will prove very difficult. This isn’t a tourist area. You know yourself that there’s nothing laid on for holidaymakers. If I could I certainly would ... but it’s quite impossible. But why don’t you put her up yourself?”

“I’m not a hotel.”

“But you’ve got the room. She wouldn’t be any trouble to you. You’re not going to let her leave us, are you?”

The old men standing at the bar smiled their encouragement

“If I was forty years younger!” said one.

“Fifty!” corrected another.

The schoolmaster added:

“Forty or fifty, there’d be no problem if I were in your shoes! It’s true! A little effort, go on!”

Laughter erupted round the room and a glass fell to the floor. The young Frenchwoman asked:

“What did they say?”

“They said that I should put you up.”

“And what did you say to that?”

“Nothing.”

Just at that moment, the doctor ran into the *taberna*, bumped into one of the tables and made a dash for the lavatory at the far end of the café. He

shut the door behind him, then re-emerged a few moments later, walked slowly across the room and announced to the whole company:

“That’s better! I’ve been wanting to piss all the way back from Siveiro!”

“Doctor!” said the schoolmaster, who had drunk more than one sherry, would you say that belief in God is a sort of venereal disease?”

“Shut up!”

One of the old men, unable to stop laughing, was seized by a fit of coughing and had to go outside the door to spit. The Stranger asked the doctor:

“How was the journey?”

“All right. But there’s bad news! At Siveiro, they’ve increased the price of wine by half a peseta a glass.”

“Is that why you were in such a hurry to get back?”

“Of course not! I had nothing else to do. My wife got her sheeting and it will be made up for her by tomorrow.” “You’ll be going back, then?”

“Yes, I’ll have to go and see what’s happened about the little girl’s foot”

“Ah, yes, of course,” said the Stranger, pretending to have forgotten.

“How is she?”

“She’s all right. But we won’t know what the damage is until we see the X-ray tomorrow. If you come along with me, we’ll have our aperitifs together and be back here for lunch.”

“An excellent ideal”

“Be outside my house tomorrow morning at ten.”

“All right”

The doctor finished his drink, moved towards the door, then stopped in his tracks, came back to the table where the Stranger was sitting and asked:

“Have you got a new wife?”

“I don’t know her.”

“What?”

“It’s true!”

“Do you speak Spanish, señorita?” asked the doctor. “No,” she replied in Spanish.

“There, you see! Of course you speak Spanish!”

“No.”

“Yes!”

“No.”

There the dialogue between the French girl and the doctor ended.

“Why, you rascal! ” said the doctor to the Stranger, with a meaningful leer.

The old men drinking at the bar kept quiet so as to hear what was being said.

“What’s she doing here then if she doesn’t speak Spanish?”

“Perhaps she wants to learn it,” suggested the Stranger. “Who’s she living with?”

“Nobody.”

“But she’s not going to sleep in the street, is she?”

“You know as well as I that there’s nowhere to stay here.”

“Hasn’t the schoolmaster got a room to let? Since the grandmother died...”

He didn’t finish his sentence, but, addressing the schoolmaster directly, asked:

“Did you hear?”

“Yes.”

“Well, are you going to let the room?”

“I can’t”

“Why not?”

“It’s full of potatoes.”

“Have you got a lot?”

“Three cartloads.”

“And what about you? You’ve no potatoes,” said the doctor to the Stranger. “Why don’t you put her up?”

“You’ve no potatoes either,” said the Stranger.

“No, but I’ve got my wife.”

An old man joined in the conversation:

“I’ve got no wife nor potatoes.”

Everybody started laughing, including the old man, just to make it quite dear that his offer was not a serious one.

The young woman asked the Stranger:

“What are they talking about?”

“Potatoes.”

“What?”

He explained.

“The problem is to find a house with a spare room that isn’t full of potatoes. It’s the custom round here to turn empty rooms into bams.”

“I see,” she said, looking worriedly at her watch.

The doctor returned to the attack:

“You and the priest are the only ones who could take her in,” he said to the Stranger.

“The difference is,” said the schoolmaster, “that the priest would like to but can’t, and our friend here could, but doesn’t want to.”

“That’s true. Why won’t you take her in?”

“I prefer to be alone, but I could offer, I suppose,” said the Stranger, exhausted by this conversation and this problem that did not concern him.

The *taberna* was emptying and the doctor was the last to leave. He went over to the Stranger’s table and said:

“By the way, you haven’t introduced me to your friend. Are you jealous?”

“I told you, I don’t know her. So how can I introduce you?”

The doctor stared at the young woman, with the heavy look of a drunkard; his words vacillated between excessive respect, arrogance and lachrymose compliments. Any attempt to smile resulted in a bloated grimace.

“What does he want?” asked the young woman apprehensively.

“He wants to be introduced.”

“My name’s Helene,” she said, smiling aggressively at the doctor.

The doctor shook hands with her. He looked seraphically happy. He mumbled a few gallantries, tried to recite *La Cigale et la Fourmi*, then, banging his fist down on the table, he addressed the Stranger:

“You’re coming with me to Siveiro tomorrow. You understand? And everything you’ve drunk this evening is on me. God bless you. Amen.”

“Is he mad or drunk?” asked Helene.

“Drunk—he always is twelve horns out of every twenty-four. He’s the local doctor.”

“Doctor!”

The young woman looked apprehensively at her watch again, and the Stranger unexpectedly answered her unspoken question.

“Don’t worry about accommodation. You can stay with me.”

“I’ll go first.”

“It’s magnificent! Just like a convent.”

"Yes, the rooms are very small."

"Aren't there any doors?"

"No, as you see. The curtains are enough."

"You wouldn't be a voyeur by any chance?"

"I've never thought about it. But who knows, I might be."

"Now I understand why you asked me here!"

"You don't understand a thing."

"You said that as though there was something to understand."

"Whatever you do, don't try and understand!"

"So you are hiding something!"

"Who isn't? You yourself wanted a door to your room."

"I don't think we're talking about the same thing."

"I'm sure we're not. Sometimes, what we hide from one person we reveal to another."

"I don't understand you. What do you do here?"

"Live."

"Is that all?"

"It's enough."

"Yes, you're right."

"Well, this is the kitchen and that's the bathroom—rather primitive, I'm afraid, and there's your room."

"Why, it's beautiful!"

"Through there are some other rooms you can use if you like and at the end there's my room."

"What will they say in the village, seeing you with me like this?"

"I don't know."

"Aren't you afraid of what they say?"

"Very much."

"Well?"

"Not of what they say about us."

"I'd like to wash my hands and face ..."

"The sea's a hundred metres away."

"Haven't you any fresh water?"

"There's the well. But don't ask me every time you want water. Just go and get it."

"You are strange ... You can be so nice at times, then suddenly disagreeable."

“I’m sorry. I’m a bit on edge. Overwrought. On the one hand, I’m irritated and put out by your being here. On the other hand, I’m delighted. But since you are here, I’d like you to stay a long time. I can’t tell you why, but I have a vague idea. If it is that, then I daren’t tell you. Don’t ask any questions. Do as you like and ignore me. Now I’ll show you how to work the well.”

They went out into the garden.

“Now, the bucket is attached to this rope. You must never let the bucket or the rope touch the ground or you’ll pollute the water in the well.”

“You are particular.”

“Because I know the value of water. I’ll draw the first bucketful, then you must manage on your own.”

“No, let me try.”

The young woman took the rope and let it run through her hands; the bucket struck the surface of the water, tipped over and filled. She pulled it up without too much effort, lifted it out of the well and emptied it into another bucket.

“How’s that?”

“Very good.”

“It’s amusing and it’ll be good exercise for me.”

“Don’t overdo it. There isn’t that much water.”

“How much does this well provide a day?”

“Forty bucketfuls—that’s about five hundred litres.”

“But that’s a lot!”

“Not enough. I need five thousand litres.”

“Whatever for?”

“To water the garden.”

So if you had that much you’d draw five thousand litres a day?”

“I’d buy a small electric pump.”

Well, I’m going to have a wash,” said the young woman, picking up the bucket.

“Here, I’ll carry it for you.”

“No, I want to carry it by myself.”

“Mind! We’ll spill it if we’re not careful.”

The young woman let go of the handle and put her hand on his. They remained like that for a moment. The Stranger leant back against the well;

the young woman stood beside him, doing the same, her hand still clasped over his.

She looked into the distance, at the sea, the boats and the sun that was about to disappear over the horizon. She rested her head on his shoulder and said, in a different tone of voice:

“I feel a bit tired. I don’t feel like going back to the village for dinner. If there’s anything left to eat, we could stay here. What do you think?”

The Stranger put down the bucket, turned to the young woman, took her face between his hands and hardly touching her lips, kissed her gently.

“Well?” she asked again.

“Yes, all right, I don’t mind staying here. Let’s go into the house. It’s beginning to get cool.”

He took her hand and led her to the door. He stepped back to allow her to go in first, then locked up for the night.

Chapter 9

The next morning, when the Stranger arrived as arranged in front of the doctor's house, he found him in the street, busying himself with his car.

"Broken down?"

"Are you crazy? The way I look after it?"

"What are you doing, then?"

"Just cleaning it up a bit. Now, let's get moving."

Talking of this and that, they reached Siveiro in what seemed like no time at all. They crossed the small town by the main street, which divided it right up the middle, and stopped at a square surrounded by fourteen crosses. Between the first and the fourteenth, which were set very far apart, was a modern two-storey building—this was the hospital.

"They don't exactly liven things up, do they, all these crosses in front of a hospital," said the Stranger. "Do people get treated or die in there? And what are those pictures hanging up there?"

"They used to be the Stations of the Cross," replied the doctor. "Before the Civil War there was a church where the hospital now stands. The Republicans sacked it, tinned it into a brothel, but left the crosses. It amused them to take the *Via Crucis*, dead drunk, stopping at each station to sing obscene litanies. When the war was over, the religious authorities sold the brothel to the state ... the church that had become a brothel, that is..."

"I see."

"And the government built this hospital."

They got out of the car, which the doctor had parked in front of the sixth station, which showed St. Veronica wiping the face of Jesus, and made sure that both doors were locked.

“Let’s go and have a drink,” suggested the doctor. “There’s a *taberna* round here where they sell *ribeiro*—the real thing.”

The Stranger followed without enthusiasm. He did not care for this sharp-tasting wine, which seemed little better to him than the most ordinary of *vins ordinaires*. However, he pretended to a certain interest: he did not wish to reveal any suspicious haste in getting to the hospital.

The proprietor of the *taberna* gave them an enthusiastic welcome. The doctor introduced him to the Stranger, which led to still further bowings and scrapings, performed while still holding on to the Stranger’s hand and accompanied by a stream of words, the upshot of which was that the Stranger should make himself at home. At last, the proprietor disappeared through a door at the back of the cafe.

After a few minutes, the Stranger asked:

“Where’s he gone? We haven’t all day to waste.”

“Don’t worry. He’ll be back. And, anyway, we’ve got plenty of time.”

“I dare say we have, but I don’t want to spend the whole morning here! I’d rather look around a bit.”

“You can do that while I’m in the hospital. There’s no need for you to come. Hospitals are not very pleasant places. In fact, they stink. They don’t smell of the sea like our little village—they smell of the backsides of nuns.”

The proprietor came back.

“Well, what can I offer you gentlemen?”

“Give us some *ribeiro*. Your own, the good stuff !”

“There’s nothing but good wine here,” protested the proprietor. “My wine is famous through the region!” When the Stranger saw a whole bottle standing on the bar, he asked:

“Who’s this for?”

“For us! Who do you think? Are you afraid of it?”

“I’m not afraid, but you’ll have to drink it yourself. I’ll have one glass and no more!”

“Come now! You’re not going to play a trick like that on me in front of everybody. What will they think of me bringing a fellow like you here?”

“I haven’t even had my coffee yet and I’m forced to get down half a litre of wine!”

“All right, then. You don’t have to! I’ll drink your share— and with the greatest of pleasure, I assure you! ’

“You’ll be in a fine state by the time you get to the hospital.”

“Well? Isn’t one allowed to drink any more?”

“Yes, but one’s allowed to be sober at eleven o’clock in the morning, too.”

The doctor did not answer. He poured out a second glass, a third, a fourth, then, looking the Stranger straight in the eye, he said:

“You’re very nervy this morning! What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing ... why?”

“Oh, you old rascal! Do you think I don’t know? Do you think I’m blind, eh?” He slapped the Stranger on the back and added: “You’re a dirty old man. You’re in love with the girl, aren’t you?”

The Stranger felt the blood drain from his face and his legs sag beneath him. He looked at the doctor with terror-struck eyes, praying for silence. He would have abandoned everything, left that very day, on condition that the doctor did not speak.

“In love! In love with the girl!” repeated the doctor.

The Stranger made what was intended to be a smile, drained his glass at one go and managed to say:

“Me, in love?”

“Come now, you needn’t have any secrets from me. What have you done with the kid?”

“Nothing, nothing at all! Are you crazy?”

“Why, you old rascal! I’ve caught you out! Lucky your wife isn’t here, eh?”

“What do you mean, lucky?”

“Oh, forget it. But I tell you what, why don’t you come round one evening and watch television? Would you bring her? We could have a drink together. I’m rather partial to the younger ones myself ...”

The Stranger did not know whether to reply “you too?” or to go on denying everything. He said nothing and the doctor added:

“I like to hear people speak French—it reminds me of school.”

As the doctor started to recite *la cigale ayant chanté tout l’été...* the Stranger almost collapsed on to the bar, exhausted by the shock. He was so relieved that his fear now gave way to a sort of euphoria.

"I'll suggest it to her," said the Stranger. "I'll say to her: 'My love, come with me and watch television at the doctor's!'"

"There! You said 'my love'! You *are* in love with her, you see! Now, what story did you tell her last night, eh?"

"Nothing, I tell you! Nothing at all! I put her up because I couldn't leave her in the street and we slept at opposite ends of the house."

"Bravo! You're a real gentleman! But, believe me, women don't care for that sort of delicacy. Foreigners especially. Now, our women, that's another matter. And perhaps even them too! They all want the same thing, more or less—they all want to be manhandled!"

"All right, then I'll manhandle her."

Then, changing voice and assuming an almost clerical tone, the doctor added:

"I hope I haven't upset you. I do apologize if by any chance I have said..."

"Of course not!"

"You know how it is, sometimes when you're talking, you say one thing, then another and before you know where you are your tongue has run away with you. If I've offended you in any way, please tell me, and I'll kneel down in front of you, in public, and ask your pardon, because, for me, friendship ..."

"Shut up, will you! And I told you, I don't give a damn for the girl."

"What a good fellow you are! You're a saint! We are good friends and I'm just a miserable wretch."

"Stop it."

"All right, I'll stop. But first I must say that you've got excellent taste. She is pretty, blonde, looks healthy and she's got a good figure. Everything a man could want. Perhaps a bit on the skinny side for local tastes ... Oh! I shouldn't have said that!"

"Go on! Say what you like!"

"You're a good friend. I'll tell you something: I too am your friend!"

"Right, well let's be moving now," said the Stranger firmly. The doctor tapped him once more on the shoulder and, as they walked away from the bar, added:

"You're a good liar, all the same, you old rascal!"

They went out into the street, walked around for a while to get some fresh air, came back to the square and mounted the few steps leading to

the hospital entrance. They were met by a nun.

“Good morning, sister, I’ve come about the little …” “How are you, doctor? Is everything well with you?” “Yes, thanks be to God, replied the doctor.

“It’s a fine day today!”

“Yes … Sister, I’ve come about the little girl I brought in yesterday.. .

“You can take her home. There’s nothing wrong with her.” “Nothing at all?”

“The doctor says there’s no fracture on the X-ray.”

“Yes, but what’s wrong with the foot?”

“Nothing. A slight sprain of the ankle, a few bruises on the bones and ligaments. We’ve done all that’s necessary bandaged it up, that’s all! Now, there’s nothing more to be done but to wait for her to get better.”

“Fine! Then we’ll take her home.”

“You’ll find her at the end of the corridor, on the right.”

“Thank you, sister.”

The doctor and the Stranger walked the length of the corridor and entered the women’s ward. Maria-Modesta was in the bed nearest the door. She greeted the doctor and smiled at the Stranger. The doctor asked her:

“How do you feel?”

“All right”

He lifted the bedclothes to examine the foot. Without undoing the bandage, he squeezed the ankle.

“Does that hurt?”

“No.”

He touched the foot.

“That hurts,” she said.

He gave her a smack on the thigh and said:

“You’re better. We’ve come to take you home. Where are your clothes?”

“There,” said the girl, pointing to the chair at the foot of the bed.

“Get up, then.”

Maria-Modesta jumped out of bed and stood on one foot while the Stranger got her clothes.

“Can you dress by yourself?”

“I don’t know.”

"I'll give you a hand," said the doctor.

The Stranger watched the girl as she performed a sort of strip-tease in reverse. Without taking off her white flannel nightdress, she put on first her knickers, then a shoe.

"Haven't you got any socks?"

"No, I came without."

Then she put on her green velvet skirt. The doctor helped her to keep her balance as she took off her nightdress; for a few seconds she remained naked above the waist. The doctor helped her on with her pullover.

"Is that everything?"

"Yes," replied the girl. Then she suddenly remembered: they had forgotten her bodice.

"It doesn't matter. It's not cold. You can carry it in your hand."

"But it tickles!"

"What tickles?"

"The wool of the pullover, against my skin."

"What are we to do about it?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, well, take that off again, then."

Maria-Modesta stood naked to the waist once more, shivered slightly, pulled on her bodice, then her fawn pullover and the three of them finally left the ward without a glance at the other patients.

"I'll sit in the back with her," said the Stranger, getting into the car. If she loses her balance, she might hurt her foot. I'll keep her steady."

The car moved off.

"Are you glad to be going home?" asked the Stranger, squeezing her up against him.

"Yes. I'm starving."

"Didn't they give you anything to eat last night?"

"Yes, but that was yesterday!"

"Being hungry is a good sign," diagnosed the doctor.

"It may be a good sign, but it doesn't fill her stomach," said the Stranger. "Let's go and drink one of those wines you find so marvellous and get her something to eat."

"You're like an old hen!" said the doctor, looking into the driving-mirror. "You look like a nurse comforting the dying."

“She takes up so much room, with this swollen foot of hers! ” said the Stranger, while hugging Maria-Modesta more tightly than ever.

“You’re hurting!” said the girl.

The Stranger looked at her reproachfully, as if to say: “Are you mad? Be quiet!”

The girl smiled at him and added:

“Do you hear, doctor? It hurts when you brake suddenly ... My knee bangs against the seat in front and it moves my foot”

“You should have sat in front, like when we came.” Maria-Modesta smiled at the Stranger again and the doctor added:

“All right, I won’t use my brakes any more, but I hope you won’t object if we end up in a ditch.”

“Oh, no!” said Maria-Modesta. “That would be lovely!”

A man wearing blue overalls came over to the table where the doctor, the Stranger and the little girl had sat down. He knew the doctor, from having drunk with him a few times. “This your girl?”

“No, she’s a patient of mine.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

“Nothing. Sit down and have a drink with us. Let me introduce you to a friend of mine. He’s from abroad.”

“Oh!” said the man, duly impressed, and sat down. “How’s your wife?”

“Very well, thank you, doctor.”

“And the children?”

“Yes, they’re all right. The youngest goes off to do his military service at the end of the month.”

“Do him good.”

“And us too. We couldn’t do a thing with him any more. All he thought about was buying a motorbike. Everything he earned went towards it. Well, so much for his motorbike now! Two years in the army! ”

While the doctor and his friend were talking, Maria-Modesta and the Stranger whispered to each other in their corner:

“Do you like this ham?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like me to cut it up into little bits?”

“No, it’s all right.”

“You should say ‘no thank you’.”

Maria-Modesta burst out laughing, put her hand to her mouth and then gave the Stranger a look of mingled slyness and amusement that seemed to say: "Come now, between us ..."

"Aren't you thirsty?"

"Yes."

"What would you like to drink?"

"Fizzy water."

"*A gaseosa?*"

"Yes ... No, I know what I want! A Fanta."

"Would you like orange or lemon?"

"Both."

"You can't. There's no such thing."

"Orange, then. And a lemon one as well."

"You don't just want to quench your thirst, you want luxury."

"Luxury? What does that mean?"

"It means that you want to be spoilt."

"Is that what luxury is?"

"More or less."

"And what else?"

"Well, for example, it's drinking the same thing, but somewhere else."

"At Santiago de Compostela, for example?"

"Yes."

"Because it's dearer?"

"Yes. And because it's more beautiful there, too."

"Have you drunk fizzy water at Santiago?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last year."

"Were you with your wife?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

"Then you luxury her ... you spoil her."

"No, it's only you I spoil."

"You're lying!"

The girl lowered her head, then, looking severely at the Stranger out of the corner of her eye, blurted out:

"I'm jealous, you fool!"

The Stranger took her chin in his hand and bent down to kiss her on the forehead. The girl, with a rebellious movement, lifted her face and their mouths met.

No one saw what had happened.

The Stranger stroked the girl's hair and went over to the bar. He came back with two small bottles.

"Two?" she said.

"Yes, one orange and one lemon. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"You're spoiling me!" she said, smiling broadly.

"Will you be going to school tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

The Stranger turned to the doctor:

"Can she go to school tomorrow?"

"It would be wiser for her to rest for a few days. At school, she might hurt herself playing with the others ... But if she really wants to ... At her age, you know, things mend quickly."

"You hear? You can go to school if you like."

"I'll go then."

She gave the Stranger a slight nudge and said:

"I'll be able to walk, you'll see ..."

Then, very quietly, almost touching his cheek with hers, she added:

"I'll be on the beach at three o'clock."

Chapter 10

Beneath a stunted fig-tree, Helene and the Stranger were taking what passed for a siesta. Helene was reading a novel and stubbing her cigarette ends into the sand. The Stranger would have liked to smoke too, but refrained from doing so: he had just brushed his teeth and little Maria-Modesta, whom he was expecting at three o'clock, did not like the smell of tobacco.

There she was! She was walking along the beach in front of the house, about fifty yards away. The Stranger did not take his eyes off her. He was not sure whether he ought to go and meet her or wait for her to arrive. She stopped halfway between the sea and the house, staring at the young woman lying near the Stranger on the sand.

"You see the little girl over there?" he said to Helene. "She's a friend who's coming to visit me. But now she's seen you ... she's shy ... I'll go and call her."

Helene had scarcely looked up from her book.

The Stranger ran over towards Maria-Modesta. When he got there, he fell to his knees, started laughing foolishly and played with the sand, letting it slide through his fingers. The girl stood before him, without saying a word, the wind lifting her short skirt; he brought his face up to her thighs and brushed his lips over the skin, caressing her whole leg right down to the bandage.

"How's your foot?"

"Who's that woman?" she answered.

He was expecting the question, but not quite as suddenly.

"I hardly know her . . .

"What's she doing in your house, then?"

"Come along and I'll explain."

"I want to know now!"

"She's a Frenchwoman. She arrived at the village the day you went to hospital. She couldn't find a room, so I put her up."

"I don't believe you. She's some woman you know who you've brought here on purpose."

"I swear I'm telling the truth. Anyway, you can ask anyone in the village—everyone was there when she arrived and anyone can tell you what happened and why she ended up with me."

"All right! Let her stay then! But you won't see me again!"

Maria-Modesta turned on her heels and pretended to leave.

"Wait! Listen!"

"What do you want?"

"Come along with me. I'll introduce you to her and you'll understand."

She followed him.

"Helene," he said in Spanish, "this is my great love, Maria-Modesta."

The young woman smiled at the girl, who stared back at her with hatred and curiosity.

"Your little friend is very pretty, but rather wild."

"Yes, she is very beautiful," he said, stroking her hair. "Do you go to school?" asked Helene.

"Yes, she goes to school," said the Stranger, "but if you don't speak to her in Spanish, she won't understand."

"How old is she?"

"Twelve."

Helene thought for a moment, then made this compliment in Spanish to the girl:

"Eres una mujer muy bonita."

"Yes, I am a woman," said Maria-Modesta proudly.

The Stranger broke in to ask the girl:

"Would you like to sunbathe with us?"

"No. I want to go indoors."

"Are you sure you won't stay here for a while?"

"No. I didn't come here to sunbathe. I'm going to bed." She went towards the door of the house and, before going in, turned round and

called to the Stranger:

“I’ll wait for you there!”

Helene, who still did not speak very much Spanish, but who was beginning to understand it fairly well, made no attempt to conceal her amazement at this scene and the Stranger gave up any hope of finding an explanation for what was all too obvious.

“What are you thinking?” he asked Helene.

She took a long time to answer. In the end, she said:

“I remember what you said the day I came here. I think I know what you meant now. You created a great deal of mystery and said: ‘Don’t try and understand . . . Everyone has something to hide...’ Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“Is this little girl part of your secret?”

“Yes.”

When the Stranger went into the bedroom, Maria-Modesta was lying on the bed, naked. She was crying and gnawing the knuckles of her hand.

“I want her to go away, I want her to go away ...” she said.

While he wiped her eyes, the shadow of Helene appeared behind the curtain that served as a door. Maria-Modesta could not see her, for her head was turned towards the shuttered window. The Stranger whispered in her ear:

“This woman means nothing to me, my darling. I don’t love her, really I don’t. It’s you I love.”

“Then you must tell her so, in front of me.”

“But I did, when I introduced her to you.”

“I want you to make her understand! ”

The Stranger took her head in his hands and whispered: “Would you be satisfied if she knew that we made love together?”

The girl remained silent for a moment, then replied almost angrily:

“Yes!”

“And would you like her to see you do things with me?” “Yes!”

“Then ... turn round quietly and look at the door. But don’t say anything.”

The girl turned her head towards the curtain, behind which the silhouette of Helene could be seen.

“She can’t see us—we’re in the dark. I’ll go and open the shutters.”

“Or we could turn on the bedside lamp, if you like.” “Yes, all right. But get undressed and hurry up and come to bed.”

The Stranger was soon lying beside her.

“Do things to me,” she said. “Do you think she can see us?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll do things to you too and suddenly I’ll put the light on.”

The minutes passed and when the light came on the silhouette was no longer behind the curtain. Maria-Modesta turned off the light that prevented her from seeing Helene’s shadow. No, it wasn’t that: she was no longer there. Maria-Modesta turned on the light again and was astonished to see that Helene was actually in the room. She had come in barefoot, without being heard, and stood between the wall and the big bin where the Stranger kept his clothes. The Stranger and Maria-Modesta looked at each other without saying a word and Helene stood there, watching them and rubbing her nipple through the towel that she had hastily thrown round her shoulders.

Helene walked over to the bed and knelt down on the floor beside Maria-Modesta. She placed her mouth on the girl’s bandage, but Maria-Modesta suddenly withdrew her leg.

“Let me stay,” begged the young woman. “And continue as you did before.”

Helene seemed to be fascinated by the novelty of the spectacle. In fact, it was inside herself that the curtain was rising: what she was witnessing was the birth of strange, new desires, as yet vague in form, but already obsessively present.

“You can stay,” said Maria-Modesta. “And pay attention.”

Chapter 11

He drew about fifteen bucketsful from the well and watered his garden. When he had finished, he undressed, ran out to the sea and dived in. As always, the water was very cold. He stayed in for a few minutes, came out again and ran back to the house. Helene, who was still in bed, was trying hard to understand what Rosalia, a little girl who lived nearby, was saying:

“She woke me up. What does she want?”

“What do you want, Rosalia?” the Stranger asked.

“Excuse me, señor, but my mother’s just had a visit from her sister’s son—they live in the next village. He says her sister’s ill and my mother’s to go straightaway.”

“And she wants me to take her in the car. is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Damn!” said the Stranger.

“What’s going on?” Helene asked.

“She wants me to give her mother a lift.”

“At eight o’clock in the morning? She must be mad’.”

“Her mother’s sister’s ill.”

“Are you going?”

“How can I refuse?”

The Stranger picked up his clothes and went into the kitchen to get dressed, leaving Rosalia near the bed where Helene was lying, awake and angry. Rosalia moved her finger slowly over the wood of one of the bed

posts. She drew furrows in the dust, accompanying the movement of her arm by a movement of the head, as if she were singing.

"Tell your mother to get ready," said the Stranger. "I'll be there in a minute."

"She's ready now."

The Stranger did not ask whether she had got ready in order to walk if necessary, or because she was certain he would drive her there.

"All right, then, wait here for a while and we'll go together."

While the Stranger was looking for his thick, black sweater, Rosalia, who had been watching him, pointed to it on the chair.

"How did you guess what I was looking for?"

Rosalia smiled:

"You wear it every morning when you're gardening—I see you from our house."

The Stranger smiled back, but without saying anything, and the girl added:

"Don't you get cold bathing so early?"

"Yes."

"Why do you do it, then?"

"One has to wash somehow."

"You could wash in the house, with hot water."

"It's too complicated."

"Oh?"

"Right, Rosalia, let's be off!" said the Stranger brusquely. "Are you coming with your mother too?"

"Yes. Her sister will tell her what she needs—then she'll send me to Siveiro to buy the medicine."

"I see. Then I'll have to take you to Siveiro!"

"No, you needn't bother. I'll walk there."

"Rosalia, Rosalia! In my country we have a saying that you mustn't teach an old monkey to pull faces. Do you know what it means?"

"No."

"But you do know that I won't let you walk the ten kilometres to Siveiro and that I'll drive you there, don't you?"

"No."

"Well, you're a beautiful girl, but you're even more of a liar!"

She blushed slightly, not out of shame, but because of the compliment, and smiled, looking at him without the slightest embarrassment.

They went out and walked the few hundred yards that separated Rosalia's farm from the Stranger's house. The girl's mother was waiting for them outside—the house was already locked up. She had also closed the shutters, and was looking anxiously at the house, now barricaded up as if for a long absence. And because she was going on a journey, Rosalia's mother had put on her black Sunday dress.

"Forgive me for disturbing you so early," she said to the Stranger, "but my sister seems to be very poorly. You see, here's her little boy who came over to tell me. I saw you in the garden, watering your flowers, and seeing you were already up, I thought perhaps ..."

"We'd better go this way. The car's outside Carmen's tabema."

"Oh, I can't ask you to take me all the way to my sister's. It's too much trouble for you. But I'll pay for the petrol, you know—that's the least I can do. And when you need potatoes, just ask and I'll give you as many as you need."

"Mind the puddle," said the Stranger to Rosalia, holding her arm.

"Can't you look where you're going?" said her mother.

"I didn't get wet," said the girl.

"I sent Rosalia to see you," said the woman, "just to find out whether you were going that way today. I know you go into Siveiro quite often to do your shopping. My sister lives halfway, but a little off the main road. Two or three kilometres. The road isn't too bad."

They got into the car. Rosalia's mother in front, beside the Stranger, her daughter and little nephew in the back.

"Cross yourselves, so nothing will happen to us!" said Rosalia's mother to the two children. Turning to the Stranger, she added:

"Drive slowly. We're in no hurry. The road is very dangerous. Just there, after the bend, two people were killed last year. Two brothers—fine, handsome young lads. The younger one hadn't even done his military service. They were on motorbikes—they skidded off the road and were found next day in the field. It happened at night. I expect they'd had a drop too much to drink."

Rosalia was whistling a Galician song, *A volte da festa*, and, without turning round, her mother said:

“It’s rude to whistle in company. If you don’t know what to do, pray for your aunt.”

When they got to the aunt’s farm, the Stranger said that he would stay outside:

“But I’ll wait for you here,” he added, “to see whether you want me to take Rosalia home or to the chemist’s.”

“Certainly not! You must come in with us! You’ve been good enough to bring us here, and you’re not going to stay outside.”

The Stranger followed the woman and two children. They crossed a yard, without disturbing the hens and pigeons pecking around, and entered the house.

Sitting on the kitchen doorstep was the sick woman’s husband.

“My God, my God!” he exclaimed. “What is happening to us?”

“Well, what is happening?” his sister-in-law asked.

The man made a sign meaning “come and see for yourself” and everyone entered the bedroom.

On the bed lay a woman of about forty, pale beneath the brown, sun-baked skin. Her face was wrinkled, drawn with pain; her forehead was covered with sweat and her lips trembled with cold. Her grey chignon was loose and the hair that fell about her shoulders was wet with tears. At the bed-head was an olive branch that had been gathering dust from the previous Easter. A crucifix lay on the bedside table and there was a chamber pot under it. The woman was biting on a piece of cloth. When she saw her sister come in, she let out a cry and bit convulsively on the doth.

“She’s been like this since the night before last,” said the husband.

The sick woman nodded agreement.

The little boy looked at his mother with curiosity, as one might look at a cow calving; or even with a hint of entertainment, as at a pig whose throat was being cut.

“Have you called the doctor?” asked the sick woman’s sister.

“Yes. He said it might be appendicitis and if it is that she must go into hospital. He even wrote a letter so that they’ll take her in straightaway, because he said it was urgent and that if it’s appendicitis she might die any moment.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

“She won’t hear of it. She says she’d rather die at home. It would be cheaper.”

“Cheap or not, you’re not going to let her die like that, for heaven’s sake!”

“She vomited all night,” said the husband, “and now that there’s nothing left in her body, she has only to give up the ghost”

The sick woman nodded as before.

“This appendicitis,” said the sister, “what is it exactly?” Instead of answering, the husband pointed to the Stranger and said to his wife:

“This gentleman is the Stranger. He’s come all this way specially for you, in his car.”

The sick woman cried:

“Oh! ...”

The husband said to the Stranger:

“The doctors talk and talk, but they don’t know a thing. If you ask me, I don’t think it’s appendicitis. I think it’s an infection—she ate some rabbit that I told her not to eat because it had died of some disease. She wouldn’t listen and that’s the result! ”

His wife took the saliva-drenched doth out of her mouth and said:

“Not much...”

“She says she didn’t eat much, but whether she did or she didn’t, look at her now. If you ask me, it’s the rabbit.” During this conversation, Rosalia put her hand to her crotch and began to fidget. Her mother said:

“What’s the matter with you? Keep still.”

“*Teño ganas de mexar,*” replied the girl, in Galician dialect. “Well, what are you waiting for? Go and pee then!”

Rosalia went out into the yard and crouched down beside the doorstep. The little boy ran out after her, sat down a few metres away and stared between the girl’s thighs. She did not move, pretending to be unconcerned. When she had finished, she stood up, pulled down her skirt and stuck her tongue out at the boy.

“You’ve got no knickers on! ” said the boy, giggling.

“I was in a hurry. It’s your mother’s fault.”

In the house, the sick woman’s sister was saying:

“I’ll stay here until tomorrow, or as long as necessary.” The Stranger, who meanwhile had gone out into the hall where he could hear what was being said in the bedroom and also see what was happening in the yard, went back into the room and said:

“Remember, I’m at your disposal. If I can help in any way, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Oh, how good you are! If only everyone was like you! ” “Is there any medicine to buy?”

“No, the doctor said she mustn’t take anything,” said the husband.

“But when you go back to the village, perhaps you would take my daughter with you,” said Rosalia’s mother. “If you don’t mind, of course.”

Rosalia was playing with the gear-lever. The Stranger put his hand on hers:

“You mustn’t play with that,” he said, “or the car will stop and we’ll have to walk home.”

“It’s not true! ” Rosalia laughed.

“Do you want to see?”

“Yes! ” she said, defying him and touching the lever.

The car slowly came to a halt on the right-hand side of the road.

Rosalia looked at him with a broad smile and said:

“You put the brake on!”

Half-an-hour later, the Stranger said to the girl:

“Of course I put the brake on. You understand why now.” She smiled, looking down at her crumpled skirt.

“Shall we stay a bit longer or do you want to go home?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Listen, we can stay till eleven o’clock, but after that we’ll be seen by the doctor when he comes past here on his motorbike on his round of the farms and he mustn’t see us.” Rosalia thought for a moment.

“I’ve an idea! ” she exclaimed. “Instead of staying in the car, we’ll go back to the village. You can tell the lady who lives at your house that you’ve got to go off and get some medicine for my aunt and instead of going to the chemist’s, you can come to our house.”

The Stranger looked at her in surprise.

“I don’t have to say anything to the lady, as you call her. Helene isn’t my wife and I don’t owe her any explanation. But so that no one sees us, we can leave the car a kilometre away from the village and walk down to the dunes and along the beach to your house.”

“Yes, let’s do that! ”

As they walked up and then down the dunes, and all the way along the beach, Rosalia kept her little hand in his. They had taken off their shoes

and were paddling along the water's edge.

"If you hadn't had that lady in the house, I'd have come in sometimes to do your housework. My mother often told me to go and help you when you were by yourself, but I never dared. It was silly of me, wasn't it? Then the lady came and my mother didn't say any more about it."

"You can come whenever you like. Helene doesn't like housework."

"Doesn't she do any?"

"Not really."

"Well I never! I'd do everything. Since my sister got married and my father went off with the boats, I can't even go to school any more. At home, I look after everything. Mama works in the fields and when she comes back in the evening she wants to find the house clean and dinner ready."

"Are you alone all day?"

"Yes."

"Don't you get bored? "

"A bit."

"Do you listen to the radio while you're working?"

"It's broken."

"Would you like me to come and keep you company from time to time?"

"Yes."

The wind sometimes lifted her pleated skirt and unconsciously she held it down with one hand. Every time she did this, the Stranger smiled at her with a touch of irony. The fifth or sixth time, the girl said:

"I know why you're laughing."

"Why?"

"I don't know how to say it, but I know."

"Shall I help you to say it?"

"No."

"Well I'll say it for you: you're laughing because you think it's silly bothering to hide your thighs when I saw much more than that a little while ago. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Then leave your skirt alone and let it fly about."

"But it's very windy and I haven't got any knickers on."

"All the more reason! "

She did as she was told.

When Rosalia's house came into view, the Stranger said: "This is where we part. You go the top way, through the fields, and I'll carry on along the shore. I'll see you there in a few minutes. Be quick."

In the little girl's house everything was neat and tidy. The beds were made. The bedrooms had been cleaned early that morning, before Rosalia and her mother had left the house. The pine-wood floor had been washed and was still damp in places, especially in the corners, and smelled slightly of disinfectant.

"That's my bedroom," said Rosalia, showing the Stranger a small room overlooking the kitchen garden. My mother's room is bigger, but I can't show you it because it's on the other side: the shutters are closed, and if anyone saw the light they'd know there was someone here."

"Do you sleep in this little bed? "

"Yes. Before my sister got married, I slept with her in the room opposite, which is bigger, but now we've turned it into a dining-room for special occasions."

"Do you often have people here for meals ? "

"Whenever there's a baptism or a big feast or a funeral. In a month, if my father is home by then, a lot of people will come for my Confirmation, but we won't do anything without him."

"You're going to be confirmed too," said the Stranger, thinking of Maria-Modesta.

" 'Too' ? Why 'too' "?

"Because I knew there were a lot of children preparing for their Confirmation, but I didn't know you were one of them."

"Oh, yes! " she said proudly. "Will you come and see me at Santiago de Compostela?"

"Maybe. What sort of present would you like? "

"I don't want anything."

"Nothing? That's not enough! "

"Then I'd like you to meet me when I come out of church, in front of everybody, and take me for a ride in your car." "And do what we did earlier? "

The girl looked slightly embarrassed, and with a half-smile, replied:

"Yes, that too, but... not in front of everybody! "

She hid her face under the Stranger's sweater, and rubbed her lips over his skin. When she reappeared, she said: "You're all salty."

"I'm ever so hot."

"Don't pull the clothes back. You'll catch cold."

"But I'm so hot."

"I'll open the window a bit."

When the Stranger slipped back under the bedclothes, Rosalia said:

"I'd like you to stay all night with me."

"But what if your mother comes back?"

"She won't be back till tomorrow night. And if my aunt doesn't get any better, she'll stay for several days. That would be nice, wouldn't it? "

Without waiting for an answer, she pulled the sheet over her face, dived down the bed, wriggling like a cat in a bag, twisted herself round the Stranger's legs, laid her head on his belly and finally stopped moving. The Stranger lifted the bedclothes to ask what she was doing down there, and she replied, her voice almost stifled by the lack of air:

"I want to smell you . . . Keep the covers up like that... yes, like that... I want to look at you."

As she emerged from the bedclothes, the kitchen clock struck nine.

"We must get up," he said.

"Why?"

"Aren't you hungry? "

"No."

She took a deep breath and added, yawning:

"That was the longest siesta in my whole life."

"Do you often take a siesta? "

"Every day."

"Do you go to sleep?"

"Sometimes."

"What do you do if you don't sleep? "

"Nothing."

"Do you read?"

"No."

"Don't you get bored?"

"No."

"Then you must do something..."

"No, I don't do anything."

"Shall I tell you what you do? " he insisted.

"No."

"I'll help you to say it."

"No."

"I'll say it for you. You do what I did to you in the car, don't you?"

There was a short silence.

"And how many times do you do it? "

"I don't know."

"Several times?"

"Yes."

"Does it take long each time?"

"No."

"Tell me how many times you do it."

"Once or twice."

"No more?"

"Sometimes, but not always."

"When?"

"On Sundays."

"Why on Sundays?"

"Because I take a longer siesta on Sundays, until five o'clock."

"And what do you do afterwards? "

"I go to Vespers with my little cousin."

"And does she take the same kind of siesta as you?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"Have you talked about it?"

"Yes."

"Were you the one who talked about it first?"

"No."

"What did she say ? "

"I can't remember."

"She asked you if you did things? "

"Yes."

"How did she say it?"

"She asked me if I knew how to amuse myself when I was alone."

"And you knew what she meant?"

“Yes.”

“How did you know ? ”

“Because we’d already been talking about things like that”

“Where were you at the time?”

“In the field, with the cows.”

“How old is your little cousin? ”

“At the time she was ten, like me, now she’s twelve. We’re the same age, but she’s five days older than me.”

“Did you already know what she told you or did she teach you?”

“About things?”

“Yes.”

“I knew already.”

“Since when?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always known.”

“Several years?”

“Yes!”

“How old were you ? ”

“I don’t know, I tell you! It was before I even went to school.”

“You were five or six then . ..”

“Yes, about that.”

“Did anyone teach you?”

“No.”

“You found out all by yourself?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I can’t remember.”

“By touching yourself.”

“Well, yes! ”

“Do you know any other girls, apart from your cousin, who do the same as you, during the siesta ? ”

“No.”

“Don’t you think other girls do the same thing?”

“Perhaps.”

“Have you done anything with your cousin ? ”

“No.”

“Hasn’t she ever suggested it?”

“No.”

“And didn’t you ever think of it?”

“Yes and no.”

“What does that mean?”

“When she was there I didn’t think about it, but I thought about it afterwards, when she’d gone to Santiago.”

“Doesn’t she live here any more ?”

“No.”

“If she came back, would you do things with her? ”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you like to take a siesta with another girl?”

“I don’t know.”

“And see? Would you like to see another girl doing things, who didn’t know you could see?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps.”

“If I asked you to come to my house to see things, would you come?”

“I don’t know.”

“More yes or more no? ”

“More yes.”

“You think I’m inviting you to come and see what Helene does, don’t you ? ”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Or perhaps another girl the same age as you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You think I do things with Helene?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think I do with her?”

“Things you do with me.”

“Are you jealous?”

“I don’t know.”

“Just a bit?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want us to see each other every day ? ”

“Yes.”

“Will you be able to?”

“Yes. My mother stays in the fields until evening. At midday she eats there.”

“She takes a snack with her ? ”

“Yes, a flask of soup.”

“Is that all?”

“She also has some bread, cheese and wine.”

“Will you come to my house one afternoon about three o’clock?”

“When?”

“When I tell you.”

“Yes.”

“What would you think if you found another girl from the village there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you do things with me, in front of her?”

“I don’t know.”

“And things with her?”

“I don’t know.”

“If it was now, wouldn’t you want to? “

“A bit, yes.”

“Only a bit, or a bit more than that?”

“I don’t know. Yes, I’d like to.”

“Would you like that moment to be now ? ”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you be afraid ? ”

“No.”

“Ashamed?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’d wait for her to start first? ”

“I don’t know.”

“Or would you start first?”

“I don’t know.”

“If it was you who had to start first, what would you do to her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t you know anything?”

“No.”

“And supposing it was her who had to start, what would you like her to do to you?”

“I don’t know. But that’s enough! ”

She pulled back the bed-doths, slid down the Stranger’s body, twined herself round his legs, squeezing them between hers, and pressed one of his knees between her thighs.

During the meal that Rosalia had prepared, the Stranger ate in silence. They sat opposite each other—she with her back to the window so as not to see the moon.

“You mustn’t look at the moon. Mama says it makes you ill”

After the potato omelette, Rosalia cut a few slices of dry sausage and filled the Stranger’s glass with wine.

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

“I’m thinking about you.”

“What are you thinking about me?”

“I’m thinking ... about what you said about the ride in my car for your Confirmation present.”

“You don’t want to any more?”

“Oh, yes. More than ever. I’ve even got a better idea: how would you like to go away with me for a few days, after your Confirmation? We could make a tour of the coast.”

Rosalia looked at him as if he was telling her a fairy story. “Mama would never allow it.”

“Yes, she would. But you’ll have to help me.”

“Help you ? “

“Look, what if I brought along another girl who is also taking her Confirmation? ”

“Why another girl? ”

“Because it would make it easier.”

“Easier?”

“Of course.”

“Who do you want to bring? ”

“I don’t know yet,” the Stranger lied. “I must think about it.”

“And the lady that’s staying with you, would she come?”

“I hope so. If your mother knows that Helene is coming too, she’s more likely to let you go. The same goes for the parents of the other girl.”

“When you’ve found the other girl, will you tell me who she is?”

“Of course.”

“Perhaps I know her.”

“Probably ...”

Rosalia pushed back her stool from the table, yawned, put her head between her hands and said:

“I’m tired.”

Next morning, Rosalia was the first to get up.

She went out to the yard to draw water. When she came back into the house and banged the door, she woke the Stranger, who, not seeing her beside him, realized that it was she who had made the noise. But he wasn’t reassured until he saw her appear in the room, with her usual smile.

She jumped on to the bed, pulled his ears, nibbled his lips and said:

“There’s no more coffee, but I’ve made you a cup of chocolate. Come and drink it before it gets cold. And I’ve put lots of water on to boil for you, so you can have a wash.”

“Why are you already dressed? ”

“It’s late, you know.”

“Come back into bed, I want to tell you something.” “What do you want to tell me?”

“Come on, you’ll see.”

“I don’t want to. You bit me... And now it burns.”

“I won’t bite you again.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Before God?”

“Before God and before the tail of the Virgin Mary.”

She laughed loudly, but crossed herself as if to efface the blasphemy. She jumped on to the floor, undressed and jumped back on to the bed, naked, tiny and shivering, making the springs jangle with the impact.

“I knew you had nothing to tell me,” she whispered in his ear.

“But I have! Stay like that. Don’t move.”

He slid along the girl’s body, while she, arms outstretched, held his head in her hands.

The Stranger followed the girl’s rising pleasure, partly by the trembling of her body and the involuntary contractions of her legs, but above all by the pressure with which she gripped his head.

There was a moment when she loosened her hold, her body slackened for a few seconds, then she gripped the Stranger’s head again, jerked up

her body, stiffened to the tips of her toes, emitted two, three, four successive cries and fell back, tugging at the Stranger's hair.

"Stop! Stop! " she begged.

He rose towards her face and, before she was breathing normally again, she said:

"Your mouth smells of me."

"I know."

"Don't you mind?"

"No, I like it."

She looked at him lovingly and said:

"Kiss me again. I like to feel what you feel."

The water had been boiling in the big kettle for some time, and had misted up the window. Rosalia drew a cat with a daisy in its mouth.

"Do you know what that is? It's you and me."

The Stranger took the kettle off the fire and emptied it into a half barrel that Rosalia had pulled over to the middle of the kitchen.

"You wash first," she said.

"No, you first. I'll wash afterwards in your water."

"But I boiled it specially for you I So that you won't have to go and bathe in the sea. I only wash in hot water on Sundays."

"Well, today's a Sunday, then."

"It's not ! "

"It doesn't matter. It's a Sunday for me. The first Sunday I shall see you in this magnificent barrel."

"All right, then. Will you throw water over my hair when I've soaped it?"

"Yes."

"You can use the jug over there by the sink. I'll tell you when to do it."

The Stranger sat behind the table, his back against the wall, looking at the girl's gleaming body as she stood in the barrel. The steaming water enveloped her with a light mist, like incense around the statue of a saint on his feast day. She stood not quite five feet tall, her raven-black, slightly wavy hair falling about her shoulders. Her skin was matt and untanned except for her face, neck, arms and her legs to just above the knees. Her mouth was full, no more, but mobile and expressive. Her eyes were a very pale green, with large eyebrows and long, black lashes.

She washed herself at times with nonchalance, at others with a certain embarrassment. As he talked of things that interested neither of them, the Stranger observed her naked body and the gestures she made. He would have liked to make certain remarks, say this, caress that with a word, to flatter her with an adjective or disturb her with a verb. But he said nothing, for fear that she might hide at the bottom of the barrel. He noticed that there was a certain ease in her movements and words when she was washing those parts of her body that were behind her, but when she washed herself in front, apart from her feet and neck, she looked away from him, her voice rose a tone, she laughed nervously, sang, turned her back, showed her buttocks or even smacked them. For her, the behind was a normal thing, that had always been there, just as it was quite normal to crouch down in the presence of those one knew or among the lettuces in the kitchen garden. But the front was something new, recent, strange, which she had not yet got used to. There the soap had been making more lather for perhaps only a few weeks or months.

When, the day before, the Stranger had asked her whether she kept her eyes open or closed during her “siesta”, she had said:

“Open.”

“Do you look at the ceiling?” he had asked.

“No.”

“Do you look at yourself under the bedclothes?”

Rosalia had blushed and not answered. The Stranger had then rephrased the question in an apparently different form, but one that was even more embarrassing in its precision:

“You follow the movement of your hand with your eyes?”

She agreed.

“And it’s only your hand you look at?”

“No,” she admitted.

To the right of the girl, on the wall, was a crucifix, with a painted figure of Christ dripping with red paint, the feet and hands impaled with nails similar to those used to shoe a horse, a crown stuck slantwise over his yellow hair and a look of astonishment in his eyes. The Stranger thought that although the girl was sometimes shy of him she could hardly hide her secrets from the staring eyes of the Christ who looked down on her puberty every Sunday, as she bathed in hot water in the middle of the kitchen.

“You’re beautiful,” the Stranger said.

He got up from the table, walked over to her, took her by the shoulders and made her stand up, right in front of him.

“I’ll catch cold,” she said, without trying to move.

“Rinse yourself. I want to kiss you.”

He let go of her fragile shoulders, and she immersed herself up to her neck in the barrel. The water became cloudy.

Rosalia stood up again. Her firm body glistened. The Stranger took a step back, to observe her full-length. She did not move, but let him look at her. Her eyelids were almost closed. Her arms hung at her sides, her body curved slightly backwards, her pubis thrust forward. In a tone that might have been that of a supplication, an order or a child’s whim, she said:

“I’ve washed off the soap. You can kiss me now!”

Rosalia’s aunt, who died of peritonitis, was to be buried on the Saturday evening.

The Stranger agreed to go into the nearest town to order the coffin. He found one of the right size already made, fastened it to the rack of his car and brought it back to the farm, which was seething with mourning, suffering, shouting, wretchedness and neighbours’ curiosity.

Hardly was he in the yard but ten hands were already trying to unfasten the coffin and get it down. The rubber straps, with hooks at the end, were very tightly stretched and these peasants were quite unused to working such a contraption.

“It’s just like an octopus,” said one old man.

“Well, mind it doesn’t bite you,” said the Stranger. “You should let me do it”

“All right, it’s done!” said the dead woman’s husband, pulling the coffin.

“Wait!” yelled a voice from the other side of the car. “There’s still another one. All right, carry on!”

The husband raised the coffin, swaying under the weight, but just as he was about to lift it off the car, one of the hooks, which had been forgotten, sprang out and hit him full in the face. He fell to the ground, howling with pain, until the coffin struck him on the head and knocked him unconscious. When he was freed, it was realized that the metal at the end of the highly stretched elastic had literally gouged out his left eye.

Instead of going to the burial, he had to go into hospital, where the doctors were forced to enucleate what was left of the eye. When he came home, his wife had been buried for over a week. The only reminder, and that was not a very pleasant one, left of his wife was the price of the coffin.

“How can I pay for it?” he said to Rosalia’s mother. “And the burial? I’ll have to sell the maize field or mortgage the house!”

“No, no,” the woman answered. “It’s all been paid for— the coffin, the burial and even your eye.”

“You paid for it?”

“Of course not! Where would I find the money? It was the Stranger.”

Chapter 12

The more I see of you the more you disgust me,” said Helene to the Stranger, as they walked across the village square.

The Stranger waved lightly to acknowledge the greeting of the police chief, who had just walked by, accompanied by his wife and two children. He then tinned and smiled at Helene, as if inviting her to continue.

“I’m surprised that people’s hands don’t rot away when you shake them.”

He smiled again and she added:

“You’re foul.”

They entered a cafe. It was empty. Even the proprietress was not there.

“I thought I saw her at the fountain, getting water,” the Stranger said to Helene. “If you’re in a hurry, we can go somewhere else.”

“I’m not thirsty.”

“Do you want to sit here or would you rather walk?”

“Let’s go.”

They returned to the square, where, once again, they met the police chief flanked by his family, on their way back from their evening stroll.

“Why did I agree to be your accomplice? And what would happen if I withdrew? ”

“Go on. I’m not stopping you.”

“You say that now, but you must admit that it wouldn’t be very convenient for you. My being here suits you very well.”

“You’re useful, I admit.”

“So that’s what you see in me—the means to an end! I wish I had the guts to leave you to it. Why can’t I just go? Why!”

“Because you too are hoping to go to the Confirmation ceremony in Santiago cathedral, kiss the bishop’s ring, and sleep with the two girls we’re taking on a sexy ‘honeymoon trip through the holy places of Galicia. Because you too want to take off their beautiful wedding dresses and share, with them, in those other ceremonies which you have hardly stopped thinking about since I told you of my plan.”

“Do they know what’s in store for them? ”

“Yes.”

“And they agree?”

“Yes.”

Helene and the Stranger had reached the pier. The sea was calm and there was no moon. The lighthouse, which threw a beam of light across the water, sheltered the two strollers in a cone of shadow. The Stranger took Helene in his arms and she pressed herself against him.

When she moved away, a dimple had appeared in the middle of each of her cheeks.

“I know the fact that I despise you scarcely troubles you,” she said. “You don’t believe it. But if I said that I love you, would that bother you?”

“I’d be flattered.”

“Haven’t you ever wondered if I loved you? ”

“No.”

“It’s never occurred to you that if I stayed on with you it was because I was in love?”

“You’ve convinced me. But in love with whom?”

“Are you insinuating that I might be in love with Maria-Modesta?”

“I didn’t say that”

“Who’s the other girl you’re hoping to take with you after the Confirmation?”

“Our little neighbour, Rosalia.”

“I thought so. And she agrees too?”

“Yes.”

“And her mother?”

“She will.”

“How old is she?”

“Twelve.”

“Twelve ... How long have you been devoting your attention to little girls ? ”

“A few months.”

“Not more?”

“No, alas! ”

“And how many have you had ? ”

“Two. Maria-Modesta and Rosalia.”

“Rosalia too?”

“Yes. Only during the past few days.”

“Do you go to her? ”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you get her to come to the house?”

“She will.”

“You think so?”

“She must.”

“What will Maria-Modesta say?”

“We’ll see.”

When they got to the end of the pier, they stopped at the foot of the lighthouse. Helene rubbed her lips against his and said:

“Bite me.”

In the distance, the village was plunged in darkness and nearer, two hundred yards away, the square was feebly lit by a few electric bulbs and by the light that spilled out from the open doors of the cafés.

“I want to make love,” said the young woman “Here... standing up...

Voices reached them, like waves.

“Do you think anyone would see us?”

The Stranger took Helene’s hand, walked round the lighthouse and helped her over the parapet. They were on the other side of the pier, where there was a small platform and a flight of steps that led steeply down to the sea. Helene, leaning with her back against the wall that shielded them from the shore wind, looked out to sea over the Stranger’s shoulder.

“Stay like that,” he said, caressing her naked breasts. And, standing on the step below her, he added:

“No one can see us here.”

“What did you do before you took up interfering with little girls?”

“I slept with my wife.”

“Were you unfaithful?”

“Hardly ever.”

“How did this passion for little girls come about?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always liked them. But my desires were still vague.”

“And it was here that they became more precise? ”

“No, in Paris.”

“Tell me about it It interests me.”

“I was living in Paris and I started to write a novel because I had nothing to do and my wife nagged me if I spent all my time in cafes. I imagined a love story with a twelve-year- old girl called Maria-Modesta, the same Maria-Modesta you know, whom I had met the year before. After a few weeks I became so excited by what I had written that instead of carrying on with the novel I came here, to try and put into practice what I had imagined.”

“Well, well! And what’s happened to the novel?”

“It’s in my wastepaper basket. I’d written about a hundred pages of it when I left for Spain.”

“So?”

“So here I am. I’m entirely satisfied with the way things have turned out. I get more pleasure out of leading a healthy life here than out of writing a sick novel for debauched Parisians.”

“I see. And did I have any place at all in your novel?”

“No.”

“And Rosalia?”

“No, nor did Rosalia.”

“Have you any idea how it’s all going to end?”

“None whatsoever.”

They had reached the square.

“Do you want to sit down somewhere?” the Stranger asked.

“Not just yet. Let’s go as far as the church. There’s a bench under the trees. I often go and sit there.”

As they sat down, Helene asked:

“Aren’t you afraid of being stoned in front of this very church or having your house burnt down, if one of those girls happens to let fall a word about what’s going on?”

“I’ve thought about it”

“Well, why do you run such a risk?”

“Their faces, their voices ... When I look at a little girl’s face as she listens to my questions, I see how much I disturb her, I detect all her embarrassment in the hesitant way she replies.”

“You like to shock.”

“On the contrary! I like to be shocked.”

“By a little girl?”

“Yes. Watching her speak, rather than listening to what she’s saying, watching her experience desire, tremble, laugh nervously, confess what she feels, or blush, watching her do all these things, I rediscover in her loins what we all felt when we were children.”

“Aren’t you afraid for them? Aren’t you afraid that they will be marked for life?”

“I hope they will. I’ve had a few great loves in my life, but there’s only one I remember with any precision—and a great deal of nostalgia. She was called Constance. Even at the time her hair style was a bit old fashioned: she wore ringlets that fell over her cheeks and reached to her shoulders. I used to look at her and she looked at me and she filled my dreams. We met at the local school. She was about twenty—I was nine. She was my mistress.”

“Schoolmistress? ”

“Of course!”

“What dreams did you have about her? ”

“I dreamt of marrying her.”

“At nine?”

“Why not?”

“What else?”

“Of saying to her all my life that she was beautiful and that I would always love her. Spending all our lives in bed, naked, with me cradled in her arms. We would never eat or drink, never go out of the house, never grow old and never die.”

“Did she know you loved her?”

“I don’t know.”

“And haven’t you ever wondered what you must mean to Maria-Modesta or Rosalia?”

“Yes. A game, a pastime.”

“It’s true that they play with you of their own free will, but there’s still a certain risk in this pastime as far as you’re concerned. Apart from being

publicly stoned, hasn't it ever occurred to you that one day you might end up in the dock for the corruption of minors?"

"I've thought about it."

"Could you defend yourself?"

"No. The only witnesses who could speak in my defence would be my own victims. In any case, I'd be damned by the psychiatrists' report and the decision of the jury, who'd be obsessed by the thought of the dangers in store for their offspring on their way home from school with maniacs like me on the loose."

"And if the girls did give evidence, what do you think they'd say?"

"They'd either lie or tell the truth—they wouldn't do me any good either way. In the mouth of a child, the truth can be made to seem as damaging as lies—and children can do nothing about the conclusions adults draw from what they say. In that kind of trial, the child is both witness for the prosecution and plaintiff, whatever she says and whatever actually occurred. The penalty is not relative to the facts, but to the conclusions of the prosecution."

"As in any trial."

"Yes, but even more so in a case of this kind where the defendant is condemned in advance. His only chance would be to call as defence witness one of the girls with whom he had committed his horrible crimes, once she was an adult woman. Take Rosalia, for example. She comes into court and looks at me. I have aged quite a lot. She's now twenty-five. We hardly recognize one another. In order to find out what I'm really like, the judge asks her to describe what I subjected her to. Do you know what she'd say? She'd talk of nothing but herself. Her account would be a film of events in which I never appeared, or perhaps only briefly, towards the end. She'd say: I was bom and grew up in a poor village, among fishermen and peasants, where the only entertainment we had as children was to watch the grown-ups fall drunk into a ditch on Sunday nights, see the pig having its throat cut once a year and walk in a procession once a month. The only toy I ever had was a ball washed up by the sea. I remember cutting it in two and when I was alone in the house, slipping the two halves under my pullover to see what I would look like when my breasts had grown.' "

"Do you think she'd say all that?"

“Probably not. But if she did, she might add this account, which she told me only yesterday afternoon: ‘One day I even took the beard from some ears of maize and stuck them with honey on my pubis, to see how it would look when I was the same age as my sister. I used to get bored being alone in the house. My mother worked in the fields, my father was abroad and I couldn’t even go to school because I had to do the housework. My only amusement was the meeting I had with myself every afternoon. I’d have a bite of something standing up, so as to save time, then go and shut myself up in my bedroom, where my body awaited me. It was always about three o’clock. I knew that my cousin, whom I saw only on Sundays because she lived at the other end of the village, had her siesta at the same time as me and was thinking about me. I saw her and she saw me. Only in imagination, of course. We’d never done anything together. We just talked, that’s all. One day we told each other what we did during our siesta. After that, we invented a sort of guessing game, which we called Vespers-Confession. On Sunday evenings we went to Vespers together and during the service I’d show her some pieces of paper that I had hidden in my prayer book, and she did the same. We never talked about it—we didn’t need to. There was no winner or loser in our game, so there was no point in cheating. It was really a sort of obscene examination of our consciences for the past week.’”

“Well, what was this game?” Helene asked.

“Wait, I’ll tell you as she told me. ‘During the siesta, each of us tried to guess how many times the other had come. She would then set out to do as well. Before *beginning* the siesta each of us wrote the day on a piece of paper—Monday, for example. Then a number—for example, if I wrote a three, it meant that I thought my cousin would come three times that day and, as agreed, I had to try and do so as well. My cousin did the same thing and abided by the same rules. And so on throughout the week. By showing each other our pieces of paper, we told each other without saying a word how many times we had come on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The mental arithmetic that each of us did was not inspired by a spirit of competition, but by simple curiosity or, perhaps, by an unconscious desire to prolong the pleasure. Sometimes my total came to sixteen and hers twenty; at others mine came to twenty-two and hers fourteen. It all depended on what we’d eaten at midday or how tired we were after our work in the house. I remember one week in

September: we each had a total of fifty—I because I had heard noises coming from the next bedroom, where my sister was doing things with her husband, and she because she knew that I couldn't stop. Sometimes it gave me cramp in my fingers and I had to change hands.' ”

“She surely didn't tell you all that?” said Helene.

“Every bit of it—I haven't made any of it up.”

“ ‘Before we came out of the church, we exchanged our papers, so that we could study them during the siestas of the coming week and then we burnt them in the kitchen stove. One day that winter, my cousin left the village with her parents—her father had found a good job in a garage in Santiago. So I was now alone. I had no one to talk to—even through bits of paper. No one to say the words that I'd like to have heard, even in the form of numbers. I continued those meetings with myself, but it wasn't the same after my cousin went away. Whereas before I was quite used to being alone, I now became bored, then angry because I couldn't see any way out of the boredom. I would have liked to feel forever the pleasure I felt in my mind when I thought of my body, but my body didn't provide anything new. My imagination stagnated ... then came puberty. That did provide something new, but the pleasure of curiosity was crushed by the little physical pains and by embarrassing talks with my mother. When I managed to forget both, I tried to introduce a new element into my siestas by watching how my body changed from day to day. Sometimes my daydreams continued on into my dreams at night. There was one dream which I had several times: some birds had made their nest among my hairs, then they abandoned their young who started to peck at their nest for food. When I woke up, I realized that the birds had gone. The nest was empty. The dream had been very pleasant and I felt disappointed when I woke up. I switched on my bedside lamp and examined the nest. Yes, it was certainly empty I touched it and found that it was all moist. And I wanted to come again, but the birds were no longer there. I almost wept with despair ... Then, one day, something happened. It was the happiest day of my life. My aunt was dying and my mother was at her bedside night and day. A man had driven us over to my aunt's and brought me back to the village— there were just the two of us in the car. On the way back, we stopped at the roadside ... With him I discovered at last how much more exciting someone else's hand could be than one's own. I recognized with joy those words, made more powerful by someone else's

voice, that had so aroused me when I said them secretly as a child. He got me to talk too, but the words I said sounded different now that he was there to hear them. He made me confess all those things that I had always kept to myself and yet longed to share with someone. And that someone was there—now—that someone was him. With a word, a look or a smile he could make me go weak inside. Only he, members of the jury, could get me into such a state of embarrassment and excitement that I wanted to pee every five minutes.”

“You’re getting off the point,” said Helene, getting up from the bench.

“Wait, listen to what she has to say. She’s nearly finished.” “Yes, all right. But let’s walk a bit. I’m getting cold.”

“ ‘I only had to see him from a distance, or even think about him, and I’d throw my head back as if feeling the pleasure he knew how to give me. Now, as you say, members of the jury, I am a respectable married woman, not the depraved, little girl that I was. I have children and my husband earns a good living. On Saturday night he pinches my bottom and says: “Turn round, I feel like a bash.”

“ ‘As I obey I sometimes think of those far-off days when I was a queen in the arms of a king who spoke the language that a woman of twelve and a little girl of twenty-five wants to hear ... I fear, gentlemen of the jury, that I cannot add anything to the case against this man, If out of love of justice, you want more information, I suggest that you let your own daughters consort with men like him. You would gain one thing at least—an understanding of little girls.’ The end.”

“Bravo! But even if all this is true for Rosalia, do you think it would be so for every little girl?”

“Of course not. You’re forgetting that it’s me you’re putting on trial and that I’m defending myself by allowing one of my supposed victims, or potential victims, to speak for herself. Since I’m not a brute who strangles little girls in the undergrowth or drowns them in ponds after raping them, but simply a man who politely offers to help them satisfy their desires, and then hands them back to their parents with a smile; and since, I repeat, I only approach girls who I feel want to know me, I let them speak for me, in the certainty that they can say something in my defence.”

They had reached the spot where the path that led to their house forked off the highway.

“Do you want to go back now or shall we go and have a drink in Nestor’s *taberna*?”

“I don’t think I know it.”

“Yes you do. It’s the cafe with the canaries.”

“I’m not very thirsty.”

“Neither am I, but I don’t want to go back just yet.”

“Then let’s go and have a drink.”

In the *taberna* was the doctor, who had just finished a glass of red wine and was about to leave.

“Ah! The happiest couple in the world! ” he said, shaking hands. “I’d like to have another drink with you, but I must run along to see one of my patients.”

“In the state you’re in, I shouldn’t think you’ll run very quickly! ”

“Oh, you can talk! I know you! You like a few drinks after dinner as much as I do.”

Helene and the Stranger were left alone.

“I’ll get you your drinks,” said the proprietor, “then I’ll be off to bed. Just shut the door after you when you go.”

“We’ll have a bottle of red wine.”

The proprietor came back with the bottle.

“Would you be so kind as to switch off the light when you leave? Good night”

And he went up to bed.

“To return to your monologue,” said Helene. “I’d be curious to know what Maria-Modesta could say in your favour.”

“Her story wouldn’t be very different from Rosalia’s. She’d say that when she met me she was innocent. She didn’t know the pleasures of the siesta, as Rosalia did. Instead of devising ways of coming to satisfy my post-prandial desires, she ran around on the beach and made sand castles with her friends. But in actual fact her amusements did not stop there. She admitted to me at the beginning that she had ‘played at doctors’ with one Teresa. But supposing I had found her in a state of perfect purity, mightn’t she say:

“ ‘Yes, gentlemen of the jury, I recognize this man. It was he who taught me when to lie and advised me to say certain things to my parents. He also taught me how to lie by omission, when he advised me not to tell everything at confession. He destroyed my faith in God, by persuading me

to ignore His caprices, His petty grudges, His tyrannical decrees as to what we should and should not do—this helped me to feel better whenever I committed one of those tender, delectable sins of the flesh. Thanks to him, I know what it is to be at ease with my conscience. I am happy to be alive because I have lived.

“ ‘As for the precise facts which bring me here, I would say that the memory of those afternoons still haunts my nights, although at my age I shouldn’t be dreaming such things any more. At a time when my school friends hid behind a wall to watch the boys pee or scribbled dirty words on the wall, I felt I was a privileged being. I had the love of a man who could make me weep for love or jealousy while my friends cried over trifles. And he treated me like a princess. When I left him in the evening to go home, he would kiss my hands, thank them and ask me not to think of him while we were apart, but of myself, of my body, which he loved so much. When I saw him again, the next day, I would still be shaking from the tremors that had kept me awake for so long. I would have to stifle them, so that my sister, who slept in the next bed, would not know that my thoughts were more beautiful than hers, and that my imagination was no longer that of an ordinary village child, but that of a girl whose eyes were ringed with the stigmata of pleasure ... Would you, gentlemen of the jury, condemn the only man who, at the risk of his own life, drank of my youth and taught me to appreciate its advantages? A man who passed quickly through my life, but who has left, as you say, deep indelible marks?’ ”

“Your little Maria-Modesta talks like a cheap barrister!”

“She talks with the memory of her belly, the only voice that speaks for long and justifies the existence of a memory. It’s an unhappy woman who misses the opportunity of storing up memories when they can be got. The regret that mars her gaze will never fill the emptiness in her heart.”

“You make me laugh. It’s just as well you didn’t write your book about all this—it would have been either trite or pornographic.”

The Stranger had never looked at her so coldly. There was a moment’s silence, then he said, almost with indifference: “You’re a fool.”

Chapter 13

For the first time since he had lived in the village, the Stranger appeared in the square wearing a suit, town shoes, a white shirt and a tie.

It was a Sunday morning and the sun was shining.

He made his tour of the *tabernas*, smiled at everyone and bought people drinks.

No sooner was he in Maria-Modesta's cafe than he went up to her father and whispered in his ear:

"I'd like a word with you, but not here."

The man wiped his hands, came out from behind the bar and, with the look of someone expecting events of some moment, he nodded to the Stranger to follow him.

In the kitchen, Maria-Modesta's mother was tasting the fish soup simmering in a huge pot. Maria-Modesta was sitting on a chair, looking bored, her skirt up over her knees. She had taken off her best shoes and with her bare foot was drawing lines and circles in the sawdust on the floor.

"Get up and let the señor sit down," said her father.

The girl stood up, leaning forward, her elbows resting on the table. Her chin in one hand, she bounced the tip of a knife against the edge of a bowl filled with salt.

"Stop that noise," ordered her father angrily.

He fetched a bottle of white wine, filled two glasses, brought up a stool and sat down opposite the Stranger.

"Well, what is it?" he said.

“Well, you see, I’d like to ask you a favour. I know you don’t usually provide meals here, but since your wife has the reputation of being the best cook of the whole region ...”

“Oh, I don’t know about that...”

“I’d like her to cook me a really good meal.”

“Now?”

“No, no! For Saturday night.”

“Of course, how could we refuse?”

“Wait a minute. I haven’t finished. You see, it’s for twelve people.”

“Twelve? But we can’t deal with so many customers at once!

“I’m sure you’d manage.”

“We haven’t even got enough plates.”

“Of course, we have!” his wife cut in. “We can use the china service.”

“Ah, that’s true. I’d forgotten that,” the husband said to the Stranger. It was a wedding present. How time flies! Twenty years ago this year and we haven’t used that service more than three or four times.”

“It’ll give us a chance to air it a bit,” said his wife.

“You see?” said the Stranger. “Everything will work out.”

“Right,” said the husband. “Twelve persons for the meal, you say?”

“Yes. Let’s see now ... the doctor and his wife, the schoolmaster and his wife, the chairman of the Fishermen’s Guild, the hunchback, the young lady staying with me, myself and, lastly, a friend of mine who is manager of the bank in Siveiro.”

“Well!” said the husband, with obvious approval of the distinguished list of guests. “And what would you like to eat?”

“Just simple things that you can get locally. Plenty of shellfish, spit-roasted chickens, green salad with tomatoes and onions—and plenty of good wine. Make sure there’s some Scotch—and for the brandy, I’d like the one you gave me the other day.”

“You mean the real stuff, from France?”

“That’s right. Oh, and one more thing—have two extra chairs ready. I’d like you and your wife to join us for the dessert.”

“Oh, no. We couldn’t do that!”

“I won’t pay up if you don’t!”

The man brought his fat hand down on the Stranger’s, which was lying on the table, and gave a great laugh.

“I’ve no fear of that!” he said.

"It's agreed, then?"

"Agreed."

The Stranger took a few sips of wine, giving the parents time to exchange a look of satisfaction. This was exactly what he wanted: they would earn some money while at the same time giving the impression that they were doing him a good turn.

The girl moved off towards the door.

"You're going just when I was about to say something about you," said the Stranger, coming round to the real point of the meeting.

"I'll be back in a minute," she said and went out.

Through the window, the Stranger saw her chasing a small cat across the yard.

"The cat!" said the father. "She's been gone for two days."

"It's not the mating season though, is it?" said the Stranger. "No. And anyway she's still too young. We thought she'd been killed."

Maria-Modesta came back with the little animal in her arms. She kissed its belly and nose and nibbled its ears and mouth.

"Naughty, naughty pussy. Where've you been all this time?"

The cat purred frantically.

"What's her name?"

"Penelope."

"Well, now, this is what I wanted to propose," said the Stranger. "In a few weeks, your daughter will be confirmed. I'd like to make her a present which would be both instructive and amusing. After lunch in Santiago, to which I will invite you all after the ceremony, I'd like to take Maria-Modesta on a little tour."

"Is that the present?" the girl asked, pretending to know nothing about it.

"Yes, it is. But you don't know what kind of tour I have in mind."

Then, turning to the parents, he said:

"The young lady who is staying with me would like to visit some of the characteristic spots in the region. So we decided to make a sort of pilgrimage through part of Galicia. Starting at Santiago de Compostela, we'd go south to visit the Monasterio del Poyo. We'd stop off at the Cracero de Hio and pray for the protection of the Virgen de la Roca. Just before reaching the Portuguese frontier, we'd drive up to the Mirador de Santa Tecla and then back to the village. Since there'd be two empty seats

in the car, we thought Maria-Modesta might like to come with us. And so that Maria-Modesta won't be bored with us two grown-ups, we thought of taking another little girl of the same age, Rosalia—the girl who has just lost her aunt."

"Yes, we knew her very well, poor woman! Her husband, who lost an eye, is my first cousin. Everyone knows what you did to help him in his troubles."

The Stranger turned to Maria-Modesta:

"Well, what do you think of the idea?"

"I'd like it."

"And what do you say?" he asked the parents.

"I don't know what to say," said the father. "You'd better ask the *patrona*."

"We'd only be away for a few days—a week at most"

"I don't think you realize what you're letting yourself in for with Maria-Modesta," said the mother. "She's impossible —worse than a boy."

"No, no, I'm sure she'd behave herself."

"She'll drive you mad—you'll see! "

"Is what your mother says true?"

"No, I'll be good."

"You see? So it's settled?"

"Yes," said the mother. "But how can we accept such a present!"

"Come now, it's not a present! I assure you that this proposition is not entirely disinterested on my part. I expect to enjoy it as much as Maria-Modesta and Rosalia. I'd even go so far as to say that I hope to amuse myself at their expense, because, without them, I'd get very bored. It will make me feel young again, seeing everything through their eyes—the car ride, the restaurants, the hotels. People will take us for a family of Americans."

"They might take you for one, but not her! All her clothes have shrunk—nothing fits her any more. During the past few months, she's been growing before our very eyes. You'd think she was doing it on purpose to just annoy us, now that her Confirmation is coming up."

"But that's excellent! It means she's a healthy child. Now look, if you let me take Maria-Modesta on this trip. I'll see to it that she has some new clothes. It'll be a great pleasure. In fact, to tell you the truth. I'd already thought about it."

“You’re out of your mind!”

“Not at all. I’ve no little girl of my own and it would give me so much pleasure to take her to the shops to choose dresses and shoes ... You must let me take her and Rosalia to Siveiro one day. I’ll buy them both their Confirmation dresses and some town clothes.”

“I agree with my wife. You really are out of your mind! ” exclaimed the father.

“It’s too good of you. You’ll be ruined! ”

The Stranger rose from the table, to the accompaniment of every Spanish and Galician blessing, and Maria-Modesta’s parents stood in their doorway, watching him disappear in the distance like the apostles watching Christ disappear over the Lake of Tiberias.

The Stranger came to the edge of the village and took the narrow path leading to his house. On his way, he looked in at Rosalia’s. She was busy laying out the washing on the grass, putting stones on it to stop it blowing away.

“Is your mother in, Rosalia?”

“Yes, she’s in the kitchen.”

He entered the house.

“Oh, it’s you!” said the woman. “Sit down. Have you eaten yet? I’ll make you a cup of coffee.”

“No, don’t bother. I haven’t been home yet and I’m in a hurry. I just wanted to know if you had any news of your brother-in-law.”

“The poor man! Don’t talk to me about him! There’s a misfortune for you! And no one can help him. Are you sure you won’t have some coffee? As you see, even though I’m poor, I can’t complain so far, except for the loss of my sister of course.”

“Everyone has his troubles.”

“There are troubles and troubles. Look at my brother-in-law: he lost his wife and an eye all in one go. He really has no luck, that one!”

“How is he at the moment?”

“I went over to see him a few days ago and he told me his eye still hurt, just as if he still had it He never stopped complaining. It was unbearable. I don’t like to see a man crying. And with only one eye, it’s a funny sight, I can tell you. Whenever I tried to console him, he said: ‘My eye! My eye!’”

“And what about the work in the fields, how does he manage without his wife?”

“That’s the worst of it His son is still too young and he certainly can’t manage on his own. It couldn’t have happened at a worse time! Just when I can’t give him a hand because of Rosalia’s damned Confirmation.”

“But at least it’ll be a break for you.”

“That’s what you think! God’s all very well, but not when He costs money. But there’s no getting out of it. There are certain occasions in life you just have to go through with, whatever the expense. If I didn’t let Rosalia be confirmed, no one would speak to me any more. It’s not like in the big towns where you can do as you please. Here, even if nobody says anything, you can tell what they’re thinking. Have you ever noticed how they all leave their front doors open?”

“As a matter of fact, I have.”

“You know why? Because they don’t want the others to think they have anything to hide, or that they’re too rich or too poor, or that the place is in a mess, or that they don’t eat their fill, or that they gorge themselves, or quarrel, or stay in bed and have children instead of working.”

The woman turned to her daughter:

“Have you done the washing yet?”

“Yes.”

“Then go outside and stay there till I call you. Where are your manners, listening in to grown-ups’ conversations! ” Rosalia went out and her mother continued:

“Take my eldest daughter—the one who married when she was eighteen. The whole village never stops talking about her. And yet she didn’t have a child till two years after she got married. So because they couldn’t say that she had to get married, they said that she was sick of being a virgin and that was hardly surprising being my daughter, and taking after me. What difference does it make to them if I did marry when I was seventeen and had Rosalia ten years after my first daughter! That’s my business, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is.”

“Of course it is, but that doesn’t stop them saying behind my back that I’m always on heat and that the reason my husband spends all his time at

sea is because he doesn't want to be sucked dry. It's no joke having a bit of spirit round here I can tell you!"

She wiped her greasy hands on her apron, ran her fingers through her hair and said, more quietly:

"You being a travelled man, you can understand what I mean."

"Yes, I understand," said the Stranger, for want of anything better to say.

"You know, it's hard for a woman to live alone and only see her man one month in twelve."

"I understand," repeated the Stranger, ill at ease. And he added: "But you're not the only one. Most of the women round here live without their husbands."

"That's not my affair! I don't meddle in other people's business, and I don't want them to meddle in mine!"

"Quite right."

"Thank you. You're a man. You understand. Ah, give me a man any day! But there aren't many of them in this Godforsaken village. Just females, kids or old men! All the able-bodied men are away working. Sometimes I wonder what I get out of this! "

And tapping her loins with the flat of her hand, she repeated:

"What the devil do I get out of it?"

Rosalia came back into the kitchen.

"Mama, I'm thirsty."

"Drink, then!"

"Is there any lemonade left?"

"No!"

The Stranger seized the opportunity to change the subject.

"You know how much I sympathize with you. Besides, we're neighbours and it's only natural for neighbours to help each other."

"You've done so much already! I can hardly keep count of what you've done for us in the past few weeks. The coffin for my poor sister, the hospital for my brother-in-law—you're always there when misfortune strikes!"

"As you say, always there when misfortune strikes I Well, for once, I'd like to be there for something more pleasant. I'm sure you don't want to remember me only in connection with catastrophe! Do you know what I

want to do? I'd like to pay for Rosalia's Confirmation dress and all the town clothes she'll need after the ceremony."

"You can't do that! What will people say?"

"They won't say anything—or perhaps just how lucky you are to have me as your neighbour."

"Well, that's true, anyway. But, tell me, what makes you want to do this?"

"Don't ask questions. I'm making this offer because it gives me pleasure to do so. But there's more to it. After lunching with you in a good restaurant in Santiago, I'll be setting out on a little tour of about a week along the Galician coast together with the young lady who's staying with me ..."

"Oh, congratulations!"

"Don't misunderstand me! We're only good friends. But I know that people in the village will start talking. Everyone knows I'm married, and to put a stop to any talk of a honeymoon I'm taking little Maria-Modesta with me—the one whose father has the *taberna* down by the harbour. One has to keep up appearances, as you know. And since she's always wanted me to take her somewhere in my car, the trip is going to be my Confirmation present to her."

"Well, isn't she a lucky girl!"

"Yes, especially as I also promised her that she could bring a friend to keep her company."

"Which friend?"

"Why, Rosalia!"

"My daughter?"

"Why not? You're my neighbour, aren't you? The others will be furious."

"They certainly will! And they'll respect me, because the Stranger chose my daughter."

"Well, are you pleased?"

"Oh, señor, pleased is hardly the word. But I'm afraid you're doing all this just to help me out, and that you'll regret it afterwards."

"Of course I won't. I shall be delighted to have Rosalia with me and, anyway, she'll be doing me a favour. This way the trip with the French girl will be seen for what it really is, a perfectly innocent little outing."

“I understand, but you’re really doing too much! I’m taking advantage of your kindness! ”

“Well, so you must! ”

“Don’t worry.” And, stroking Rosalia’s hair, he added, “it’ll benefit me as well. But now I must be getting along.” The woman withdrew a few steps to let her benefactor get to the doorway.

“And don’t forget,” he said, turning round, “you mustn’t worry about the white dress and the town clothes. I’ll take Rosalia with me to buy them one day soon.”

The woman took the Stranger’s hands in hers, raised them to her mouth, kissed them and said:

“You’re Providence itself.”

“Why are you so late?” asked Helene, who had cooked lunch and hated to see her food get cold.

“I had to speak to Maria-Modesta’s and Rosalia’s parents.” “About the trip?”

“Yes.”

“What did you say?”

“I asked them if they’d let me take them with us.” “Well?”

“They agree.”

Chapter 14

It was three o'clock one Monday afternoon.

Helene had gone to cash a cheque at Siveiro and the Stranger was expecting Maria-Modesta and Rosalia. Sitting on the step, his back against the door, he stared into the distance. The horizon was bordered on the left by the well and on the right by a row of vines growing beside a wall on top of which some thick-leaved plants that thrived on sunshine and damp nights hung to the stone with their naked roots.

The little garden gate squeaked on its hinges. It was Rosalia. The distance from the gate to the house was no more than fifty yards, but the time she took to cover it seemed interminable.

"Good afternoon. I don't think I'm feeling up to my best," he said in French.

"What did you say?"

"I said that you were beautiful, that I love you, that I adore watching you walk on your long legs and that I'd like to eat you from your ankles to your navel."

"You didn't say all that!"

"Yes, I did."

"Say something else in French."

"But you won't understand it if I do."

"It doesn't matter. I just like to hear it."

He started to sing: "*La Madelon pour nous n'est pas sévère...*"

★”

"What does that mean?"

"It means that in a few seconds you'll have a surprise." "What?"

"Come and sit beside me and you'll see."

She sat down.

"Well?"

"Look over there to the left."

She looked to the right.

"Left! Too late. Wait a minute ... There, straight ahead." Maria-Modesta came into the garden.

"Is that the surprise?"

"Yes."

The girl arrived, smiled at the Stranger and said to Rosalia:

"Hello!"

"You know each other?" the Stranger asked.

"We were at school together," said Maria-Modesta.

"But not in the same class," Rosalia explained.

"Did you know the Pope is ill?" said Maria-Modesta to the Stranger.

"No."

"We heard it on the radio."

"What's the matter with him?"

"I don't know."

"My mother says that when a pope dies they make another one," said Rosalia.

"Anyway, I bet you the priest will make us pray for him to get better."

"Praying for that or something else is just as boring," said Rosalia.

"And it's never any use. Have you noticed how popes are always ill?"

"That's because you only become a pope when you're old." "My grandfather's as old as the Pope and he's never ill." "Look, come and talk in the shade," the Stranger suggested. "If we stay here much longer we'll get sunstroke."

He got up and, followed by the two girls, went indoors. He paused for a moment in the hall, opened the door to check whether anyone on the path had seen them go in, shut it again and locked it.

It was five o'clock.

"Are you there?"

It was Helene, returning from Siveiro.

"I'm in bed," said the Stranger.

"Why've you dosed the shutters? I can't see a thing."

She came into the room.

“Are you ill?”

“No.”

“Were you asleep?”

“No.”

“I had trouble cashing that cheque—I’d forgotten my identity papers.”

“How did you manage, then?”

“I mentioned your name to the manager. Aren’t you getting up?”

“I’m all right where I am. Come and join me.”

“I’d rather dean myself up first I got covered in dust on the road, behind a lorry I couldn’t overtake and at Siveiro it was absolutely stifling. Can I open the window?”

“If you like.”

“That’s better. Now we can breathe, can’t we?” said the Stranger, as Helene was fixing the shutters to their metal hooks. This observation was not addressed to her, but to the two girls; they had been hiding in the bed and had just thrown off the bedclothes to reveal themselves. When Helene turned round, she was confronted by three naked bodies.

Rosalia and Maria-Modesta were huddled against the Stranger’s hips and started to laugh with short, nervous cries.

“Did you expect that?” asked the Stranger.

“No,” Helene admitted. “Not like this, anyway.”

She paused for a moment, disappeared for a couple of minutes into the bathroom, then came back and stood by the bed:

“May I?” she asked.

She took off her dressing-gown and lay down naked beside Rosalia. On the other side of Rosalia was the Stranger, with one arm round Maria-Modesta.

Rosalia glanced surreptitiously at Helene’s beautiful breasts, pointing firmly up to the ceiling, with small dark circles around the long, fleshy nipples. She held her arms in a cross as on the standard of the Franciscan tertiaries. Her left hand partly hid her right breast, her right hand her left breast. This position might have been attributed to shyness if she had not been rolling her nipples under her fingers. She turned to Rosalia, who had not taken her eyes off her, and smiled. The girl did not return her smile, but looked down at her own chest, where, for some time now, her own breasts had begun to grow.

Helene continued to stimulate one of her breasts and with her other hand began to stroke Rosalia's leg.

So silent was the room that everyone could hear his own heart beat and everyone else's as well.

The young woman brushed her hand lightly up the girl's body to her chest and whispered:

"Do they hurt sometimes?"

"Yes, always a bit," said the girl.

"It's because they're growing," Helene explained. "Would you like them to grow like mine?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why I do that to my nipples?"

"Yes."

"Are yours sensitive too?"

"Yes."

"Show me what you do."

"Leave her alone," the Stranger interrupted.

"I wanted her to make them harder," said Helene. "Don't interfere."

The Stranger tinned round suddenly, took hold of Rosalia by the waist, lifted her up until her head reached the bars of the bed-head, pivoted on her body and placed his mouth to her sex. As she opened her thighs and raised her knees, he slid his hands under her little buttocks. He might have been a thirsty man raising a bowl of water to his mouth.

When Rosalia's body began to tremble, Helene whispered to the Stranger:

"Let me do it, please. Let me finish her off."

The Stranger lowered his head and lay back beside Maria-Modesta. Together they watched Helene bend down over Rosalia, who, eyes closed and hands gripping her own knees, waited. She gave one cry, then another, then a third. She seized hold of the head that would not leave her overworked membranes and, bending forward slightly, drew it towards hers. The two faces met. The long kiss of the young woman and the girl was so voracious that it was almost a rape. A mutual rape, during which their teeth hit against each other, their mouths swallowed each other avidly and their insatiable tongues ranged over the bruised lips of the enemy, seizing the blood and saliva that collected in their tiny wounds.

When the two mouths parted, Rosalia remained inert. Helene turned round and fell back beside the Stranger; she sat up on the bed, her eyes wild, as if she had just emerged from a nightmare. Leaning forward, her arms stretched stiffly at her sides, her hands flat on the bed, her fingers outstretched to keep her balance, she murmured:

“I can’t wait any longer.”

The Stranger made a sign to Maria-Modesta and Rosalia to move away and put his hand on Helene’s shoulder, inviting her to lie down. She lay back and he began to stroke her hair, cheeks and throat.

“Get on top of me,” she said, “I can’t wait any longer ... No, not like that, wait! ”

She turned over on her belly. Her face hidden in her hands, she bent her knees so high that they touched her elbows and almost dug into her arm-pits, to form a ball of flesh. When she felt the Stranger’s weight on her, she breathed deeply and turned her head towards Maria-Modesta. She was no longer there. She then turned to the other side, to Rosalia: she too had left the bed. She was standing against the wall, with her arm round Maria-Modesta. The two girls were waiting to see how the scene would end.

The Stranger had also turned to look at the two girls and smiled, still keeping constant control over his movements, which he wanted to be clear and precise: total penetration would be followed by a precisely calculated withdrawal so that the girls could understand the mechanism and appreciate its functioning.

“You’re not paying attention today,” said Helene.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. And move more quickly.”

The Stranger accelerated the rhythm and the two girls, who had moved closer to the bed, now stepped back. It was as if they were frightened by this increasingly violent ride that shook Helene’s body and made the old bed creak faster and faster, so that in the end it produced a single, continuous screech. From the cry that Helene emitted, one might have thought that she was in the throes of the most acute pain, were it not for her face, smiling through her tears, as they brought the demonstration to an end.

The two girls, still standing, were now holding hands.

Helene turned on to her back and the Stranger lay beside her.

“Come into the bed with us,” said Helene.

The two adults moved over to make room.

Several minutes passed in silence, then Helene put a question to the two girls—a question to which she anticipated the reply:

“Have you ever seen that done before?”

They shook their heads.

“Did you like it?”

They nodded.

“When you’re older, you’ll do it too. Are you afraid?” They shook their heads.

“Did it make you want to do anything?”

They said that it didn’t.

Helene took Rosalia’s hand and placed it on Maria-Modesta’s belly and one of Maria-Modesta’s hands and placed it on her friend’s belly.

“Now you do something and we’ll watch.”

Maria-Modesta opened her thighs to receive Rosalia’s hand and Rosalia did the same. But their hands did not move.

“Go on, please,” begged Helene. “As soon as you start, we’ll begin again.”

Slowly, Rosalia and Maria-Modesta started to stroke each other, still looking at Helene, who smiled back, encouraging them to go on.

The Stranger lay on Helene’s body and began again.

Only at the last moment did Helene stop stroking the hair of the two girls. When Maria-Modesta recognized the same cry that had earlier emitted from the mouths of the two adults, she too replaced her usual deep sighs with a similar cry. Her hand weighed heavily on Rosalia’s sex, and Rosalia, irritated by her slowing down, expressed a brief outburst of anger. Her thighs opened wider, her back arched.

“Don’t stop!” she ordered. “It’s coming!”

Maria-Modesta’s hand resumed its former rhythm, but it was overtaken in its movement by Rosalia’s belly, which now required of her friend’s fingers not action but merely contact: she would have come on her own, providing Maria-Modesta had kept her hand pressed upon her.

“Stop, it’s coming!” said Rosalia.

With her finger, Maria-Modesta made a more rapid, circular movement in the opposite direction to that of Rosalia’s sex.

Outside there was barking followed by the screeching of frightened hens. Then, in the distance, more barking.

In the room, Rosalia came.

It was nine o'clock.

The Stranger, Helene, Maria-Modesta and Rosalia left the house. The Stranger was holding Maria-Modesta's hand and Helene Rosalia's. They all went to the village together: they had decided to get a breath of fresh air, have a bite to eat, see other people and exchange looks in public which would reveal nothing but ordinary friendship.

The priest drove by on his motorbike just as they entered the village. He saw them and raised his hand in greeting. It was his usual gesture, but that evening it seemed like a blessing.

All four began to laugh helplessly. But none of them realized how discordant their laughter really was.

Chapter 15

The two children sat at the back, the two adults in front. Through the open window, the Stranger reassured Maria-Modesta's mother:

"Don't worry, we'll drive slowly. We'll be back by suppertime."

They drove slowly through the village—the narrowness of the main street prevented them from doing otherwise. Then they were out on the highway. The Stranger recognized the place where, the year before, a little girl had stood, waiting to hand him a bunch of flowers. He turned round to see whether Maria-Modesta also remembered that far-off day. No, she was in animated conversation with Rosalia.

"I'd like it like this, and this, and very long, ankle-length. All white, of course. And white shoes too."

"I'd like mine like yours," said Rosalia, "but not ankle-length. Shorter and fuller."

"Yes, perhaps I'll have mine fuller too, but it must be really long, even if it trails on the ground."

They came level with the last dune, where the Stranger had stopped for half an hour with Rosalia.

"Remember?" he asked, as he caught her eye in the driving-mirror.

"Yes," she said, smiling. And with her long, undernourished adolescent's fingers, she stroked the back of his neck.

When they entered the shop at Siveiro, three unoccupied assistants rushed up to them.

"We'd like to see some Communion dresses for the little girls."

"But they're big girls!"

“I mean Confirmation dresses,” the Stranger corrected himself. “I don’t suppose they’re very different in style.”

“It’s more a question of size.”

“Well, there they are,” said the Stranger, indicating the two girls.

“Yes, señor.”

Two of the assistants disappeared and came back laden with tulle and silk.

“We have dresses at all prices.”

“It doesn’t depend on the price. It depends on what they want,” said the Stranger, making a broad gesture in the direction of the girls.

“I’d like this one,” said Maria-Modesta, fingering one of a pile of dresses placed on the counter.

“I’d like the same,” said Rosalia, “but shorter.”

“Wait a minute!” said Helene. “You don’t know whether they fit you yet.”

“They can try them on over their dresses,” said the assistant. “They are so full that the clothes underneath won’t be in the way.”

“No, they’d better try them properly,” said Helene. “We must see if they hang right.”

“As you wish,” said the assistant, waiting for the two girls to take their clothes off.

“Isn’t there a changing room?” the Stranger asked.

“Of course,” said the assistant, “but I thought that at their age they could undress here. Follow me.” And, leading the way, he added: “I have two daughters of the same age.”

“So much the worse for you,” said the Stranger. “These two young ladies are not my daughters—they’re my fiancées.”

The amazed assistant did not understand what the Stranger meant, but he looked very shocked when the Stranger asked:

“And when can we undress your daughters in public?”

The assistant drew the curtains and withdrew, leaving his four customers in the changing room.

“My knickers too?” asked Maria-Modesta, giggling, when she was almost naked.

“Don’t be silly and be careful not to tread on the dress,” said Helene.

Maria-Modesta and Rosalia tried on several dresses that they liked themselves; but, guided by the Stranger and Helene, they decided in the

end on the most beautiful ones.

When they came out of the shop, laden with parcels, the two girls were laughing and jostling each other as they did when they came out of catechism class. Behind them, Helene and the Stranger exchanged a smile tinged with hatred.

“Right! Let’s get back to the village,” said the Stranger. “Quick! Into the car!”

They drove back at full speed. Instead of the usual twenty minutes it took to cover the ten kilometres of bumps and holes, they were there in only fifteen. The girls bounced up and down on their seat, trying to hit their heads on the car roof, laughing and touching imaginary bumps on their foreheads.

“We’ll go back tomorrow for the other clothes,” said the Stranger.

The girls yelled with delight, hugged each other and, with their hands over their mouths, whooped like Indians.

“I want to go into town without you,” said the Stranger to Helene next day. “I’ll take the girls, buy them what they need and come back straightaway.”

“Will you be back for lunch?”

“No, don’t wait for me.”

By midday, they had finished their shopping. Rosalia and Maria-Modesta had more or less the same clothes. The Stranger had bought each of them two dresses, two pairs of shoes, a pair of sandals, two pullovers, two skirts, three blouses, half a dozen pairs of knickers, a bathing costume, and a mac; a case to put their toilet things in; and also a pair of gloves with which they were infatuated.

They went for a stroll along Siveiro harbour to see the big boats, for there were never any that size in their village. Then the Stranger suggested going to a restaurant.

Rosalia, who had drunk the most mineral water, was the first to leave the table. Not to be outdone, Maria-Modesta followed her. They were away for a long time and the Stranger went to fetch them. He found them leaning over the washbasins squirting water into each other’s faces.

On the way back they went a longer way round for a change. The road did not follow the coast, so the sea was hidden from view; instead it crossed a very beautiful pine-tract, deserted except for a few Sunday strollers. He stopped the car in the middle of the forest, turned to the two

girls, looked first at one then at the other, smiled and kissed their hands. The girls giggled and simpered, convinced they were behaving like women of the world.

They set off again.

Just before entering the village, he stopped the car.

“You two get out now. Don’t lose your parcels on the way home. I’ll park the car here and walk across the fields. Come round tomorrow, if you like.”

He made his way back to the house.

Helene was still in bed after her siesta.

He undressed and lay down beside her.

She pushed him gently away, like a married woman who no longer expects the long-hoped-for tranquillizer from her husband and has returned to the old habits of her schooldays.

“I wasn’t expecting you, love. I’ve done it.”

“I’m thirsty and can’t sleep,” said Helene in the middle of the night.

“Will you get me a glass of water? Be an angel.”

When the Stranger came back with the water, she asked:

“Wouldn’t you like to talk for a bit?”

“I’m all ears.”

She sat up, leaning against the pillow. He remained lying on his back.

“Are you asleep?” she asked.

“No.”

“If you want to go to sleep, I don’t want to stop you.”

“I’d like to see you.”

There followed a long silence.

“What makes you so ridiculous is your naiveté!” said Helene.

“What you say is naive and ridiculous.”

“Oh, it’s no use talking to you.”

The Stranger jumped out of bed and, like a Roman emperor gone mad, he yelled:

“Lies! I demand proof! Guards, arrest her!”

Though furious at being given such a fright, Helene could not help laughing.

The Stranger got back into bed, pretending to snuggle up to her, and when she placed a maternal hand on his head, he pinched her bottom.

“Are you crazy? You hurt me!”

She switched off the light.

For about a quarter of an hour perhaps, the Stranger and Helene kept watch on their own and each other's breathing. In the night, their wounded pride took on curious forms: neither wanted to be the first to go to sleep. Both persevered in their unhappiness and took pleasure in their perseverance. In this they were no more mad than the average couple. They were simply two people for whom a letter that had to be posted next day took on the proportions of a packet, then a parcel, then finally a whole carriage full of parcels, entailing endless discussion with customs officers, police and torturers demanding the truth. Thinking in the dark sometimes leads even the most balanced individuals to the craziest reasoning. Only the simple-minded can avoid arguing with themselves during an attack of insomnia. The normal individual becomes talkative, deep-thinking, creative; he constructs a novel, writes it, publishes it and carries off the Nobel Prize. Then he turns on the light to go for a pee and the Nobel Prize disappears down the waste pipe.

In the end, it was Helene who went to sleep first.

Her breathing was calm, rhythmic, hardly perceptible. The Stranger nudged her in the ribs:

"You're snoring!" he said, quite gratuitously.

The young woman started, mumbled a few confused words, probably by way of excuse, and, still half asleep, she cuddled up to him.

The Stranger waited for her to get back to sleep, then got up, put on his trousers and went out, barefoot and bare-chested. He walked slowly to the end of his piece of land, reached the beach and started to run, pursued by the thought of his actions which he now found unpardonable. The beach was clearly visible in the moonlight. Throughout his flight, he had hurled insults at himself, furiously pounding his feet against the pebbles; he ran on and on and, finally, threw himself down on a dune, breathless, his face covered with tears and sand.

Chapter 16

Rosalia was expecting him—the door was open. The Stranger crossed the hall and went into the kitchen. She received him in her usual way, without a word, just her little smile. Then she looked at him, waiting for the signal for the game they had invented one day, quite by chance, and which they had played ever since; she would throw herself into his arms at the precise moment when he held them out to catch her; he then lifted her well above his head, nibbled her tummy and she laughed.

It was early afternoon and very hot. The south wind had come up, making the atmosphere close and heavy. Rosalia's face was moist with sweat.

"Is your mother still working in the potato fields?"

"No, she's much further away, in the maize fields. She won't be back till tonight. Come here, I want to show you something."

She led him into the unused dining-room, with its ever-closed shutters and its imperishable plastic flowers.

"Look!" she said. "My uncle bought it in America. We took it to be mended and now it works."

It was a statue of Our Lady, surmounted by half a dozen angels, holding a star made of electric light bulbs.

Rosalia pressed a button, the lights went on and the angels started moving round on their axis, accompanied by music from a row of bells placed at the Virgin's feet.

"Isn't it beautiful? If it was mine I'd give it to you, but it belongs to my mother."

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Do you want to go into the yard? We’ve got some newborn chicks.”

“I want to go to your room.”

Rosalia took the Stranger by the hand.

“I know why you want to go to my room …” she said. “No you don’t.”

“Yes I do! I’m sure I know!”

They sat down on the bed: the Stranger sitting upright, with his legs crossed and Rosalia sitting back on her heels, her hands joined between her knees. She was looking at his profile. He was staring at the damp stains on the whitewashed wall.

“Your nose is longer than my father’s,” she remarked. The Stranger forced a smile.

“I’ve come to talk to you seriously.”

“Seriously?”

“Have you thought about the journey we’re going to make after your Confirmation, with Helene and Maria-Modesta?”

“Yes. I think about it all the time.”

“What would you say if we didn’t take Helene with us?”

“I don’t mind.”

“You don’t think it would be more fun with four of us?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t explain, but I know it couldn’t be.”

“Try”

Rosalia frowned, as if she was making a great effort of thought.

“I’m glad Maria-Modesta’s coming with us, but with Helene I’d feel out of it,” she confessed, biting her lower lip.

“How do you mean?”

“You see, you’re a man, Maria-Modesta’s a little girl and I’m a woman. That way, there’s one of each—but with Helene there’d be two women.”

The Stranger turned to Rosalia, hugged her, turned her over on to her back, kissed and ruffled her hair, caught hold of her arms and stood her on her feet.

“You, a woman? Since when?”

“Never mind when,” she said, looking rather vexed. “I’m a woman and Maria-Modesta isn’t at all.”

“Well?”

“Well, I’d like to teach her things, like what you and Helene have taught me.”

“You mean teach her or do it with her?”

“It’s all the same.”

“And you think Maria-Modesta could learn things from you?”

“Yes.”

“What, for example?”

“I don’t want to say yet.”

“When will you tell me?”

“During the trip.”

“Would you like us not to take Maria-Modesta either?”

“Oh, no! I’m glad she’s coming. You know, I don’t like it when Helene watches me, but when Maria-Modesta watches I like it! I feel a bit proud.”

“Proud of what?”

“Of what you do to me when she’s there.”

“I see. Well, our plans are quite dear and we can set off with our minds at rest for the sacrament of Confirmation.”

Rosalia smiled and hid her face in her hands.

“By the way,” said the Stranger. “I suppose you’ll go to Communion and Confession as well. Where will you go for Confession?”

“In Santiago. I’ve already told our priest. Modestina has told him too.”

“What did you say to him exactly?”

“I told him that it was the first time we’d had the dunce to confess in a cathedral and that we wouldn’t like to miss it”

“And what did the priest say?”

“He said we could confess where we liked.”

“And how will you tell your sins to the priest at Santiago? The recent ones, I mean, the things we’ve ...”

“I understand. You mean the things we’ve done together. Well, that’s simple. We just won’t tell him, that’s all.” “Don’t you believe in the secrecy of the confessional, then?”

“Yes, but you never know. What if he just let it slip?”

“Will Maria-Modesta do the same?”

“Oh, yes. We’ve agreed on it In fact between ourselves. We won’t be going to Confession at all.”

“Why, you clever little vixens!”

Rosalia seemed very amused by this compliment to her intelligence.

"If you're our godfather, you should go to Communion too, shouldn't you?"

"No, not necessarily."

"But will you?"

"I might"

"And will you go to Confession too?"

"Of course."

"With our priest here?"

"No."

"In Santiago?"

"No."

"Where, then?"

"Here, in your room. I'll get an old tin, make a few holes in it put it to your ear and tell you all my sins. You'll give me absolution and, as penance, you'll make me kiss you three times here and three times there."

"You're the craziest person in the world!" the girl exclaimed, clapping her hands and bending over double. "What will you say to me when you make your Confession?"

"All my sins, plus a secret."

"Tell me the secret now."

"No, I'll tell you my secret during the trip too."

"I want to know now."

"No. All I can tell you now is that it's a plan I have, something I'd like to do to you."

"To me?"

"Yes, didn't I say so?"

"Will I like it?"

"I think so."

"And I think I know what you're going to do to me."

"Are you afraid?"

"No."

"Will you like to do it?"

"If it's what I think, yes."

Someone knocked at the door. The Stranger went out of the bedroom and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Hello. Is he there?"

"Yes, I'm here," said the Stranger, recognizing Helene's voice.

“May I come in?” the young woman asked.

The girl shut the door and preceded Helene into the kitchen.

“I knew you were here. I saw you come in an hour ago. In the meantime, I’ve worked out a plan I’d like to discuss with you while Rosalia’s here. I’m not disturbing you, I hope.”

“Let’s sit down,” the Stranger suggested.

All three sat round the table, looking at their fingernails, their hands placed face downwards with the fingers outstretched, as in a spiritualist stance.

Helene ran one hand through her hair and looked up at the ceiling, where a number of insects were buzzing: from the middle hung a strip of sticky paper, on which a few flies were making a last desperate attempt to free their legs.

“I don’t want to know what you’ve been doing, but I’d like to know what you’ve been talking about.”

Rosalia didn’t bat an eyelid. With the tip of one finger the Stranger was picking the crumbs from the table, one by one, and dropping them on to the floor. He felt that the situation was not too serious. Annoying, certainly. He had no desire for a lengthy discussion at that moment. But since sooner or later Helene would have to be told that they no longer wanted her with them during the trip, he thought he might as well tell her now. But how could he tell her? He wanted to find a way of putting it that wouldn’t hurt her too much. He decided that it might be a good idea not to speak first: Helene had probably come to tell them that she had made up her mind not to go with them and refused to be their accomplice. If that was the case, then she would spare him a lot of trouble. In view of her secretive, reserved behaviour during the past few days, it was quite possible that she had come to announce her withdrawal at the last minute. If so, all the better.

“Have you talked about the trip?” asked Helene, breaking the silence.

“Have you arranged an itinerary and decided where we’re going to stay?”

“Not at all,” said the Stranger, with all the assurance of someone telling the truth.

“Good, because I’ve thought of an itinerary that may surprise you.”

“Well, let’s hear it”

“We’ll set out from Santiago de Compostela in my car: I’ll put the luggage that won’t go into the boot next to me and Rosalia and Maria-

Modesta will sit in the back. We'll just drive around for a week. Oh, there's one more thing you should know—though I dare say you've guessed it already— there won't be room for you in the car."

Rosalia looked at the Stranger, but he didn't turn a hair. Helene added: "There'll be less risk for the girls, their parents will feel happier about it, and you ... well, you'll be able to expiate your sins in peace and recover from the pangs of conscience that have been troubling you recently."

Those last words hit the Stranger like a whip-lash: suddenly, he remembered the night when he ran along the beach shouting in self-reproach. But that was at night...now it was daytime. He pretended to be overcome by the attack. But he could not help smiling; his smile became broader and broader, showing all his teeth and stretching his mouth as if he wanted to devour Helene. She observed the phenomenon with growing fright. And still no sound came out of the mouth, which, unable to stretch any further, just stayed as it was, until Helene, recovering from her initial shock, banged her fist on the table:

"Stop acting the fool!" she hissed. "That doesn't work with me any more."

She turned to Rosalia:

"You see what a down he is? What would you say to the three of us going on this trip without him?"

The girl turned to the Stranger, with a bewildered look which was an appeal for help, but he still said nothing. He just stared back at her, got up from the table and went outside, leaving her alone with Helene.

Helene then moved round to sit next to Rosalia, stroked her cheek, took her hands in hers and whispered:

"I need you."

Outside, the Stranger spoke to a dog he knew:

"If you bite me, I'll bite you back," he said, crouching down and nibbling the side of the dog's muzzle. The dog growled and wagged its tail. He gave it a sandal that was lying by the path to play with.

In the kitchen, Helene was saying to Rosalia:

"Let me convince you ..."

Going back into the house to fetch his cigarettes, the Stranger stopped at the end of the hall and listened to the avowals that Helene was making to Rosalia.

“I’m only a few years older than you and, like you, I’ve got all my life to know men. Now, if only for a short time, I’d like to know women. Perhaps you too will never have another opportunity of knowing women. And here, in this village, you’ll certainly have less opportunity than I. I’ve a feeling it could be wonderful. Don’t you think we should take advantage of it?”

Rosalia did not answer. Helene stretched her hand out to Rosalia’s face and slowly moved her fingers over the girl’s closed mouth. The finger tips parted Rosalia’s lips and succeeded in touching her teeth. Then the gums. Helene wet her fingers with the girl’s saliva, then wiped it over her own lips. Her eyes wide open, Rosalia watched Helene perform this Ceremony, this transfer of moisture from one mouth to the other, and touched her own lips, as if to make sure that nothing was missing.

“Don’t you think it would be wonderful to live for a time as a woman, with another woman?” Helene asked.

“I don’t know ...” Rosalia murmured.

She got up from her chair, but Helene caught her by the waist.

“Don’t go ...”

Side by side, there was now Rosalia, standing up, her arms at her sides, and Helene, who, still sitting, looked down at her breasts, pulling on the neck of the Stranger’s pullover, which she was wearing next to her skin, and peering inside it. Rosalia watched her. Helene picked up a spoon that was lying on the table and started playing with it, turning it between her fingers. After a while she put the handle down her pullover and started to rub it gently against her nipples. The harder they became, the more Helene rubbed them until they stood out as far as they would go. She then stopped, took off the pullover with both hands, and stuck out her swollen breasts, as if she was begging on their behalf:

“Suck them!” she begged. “Please!”

Rosalia bent down, fascinated, put one hand on one of the breasts, her mouth on the other and, without opening her lips, rubbed them once or twice over the distended nipple. She then moved away.

“Don’t stop, please. Not now!”

Rosalia opened her lips and took the long, fleshy nipple between her teeth.

“Suck it!” said Helene, trembling. “Pull it, bite it, bite it off if you like! You can keep it as a souvenir.”

The girl pushed the young woman away, ran towards the window, put her forehead against the pane, recovered her breath and turned round. Helene had covered up her breasts and lay over the table, prostrate.

“I don’t want anything to do with you!” Rosalia blurted out in a quavering but determined voice, “I don’t mind doing things with another girl, but not with you ”

“Listen ...”

“No, I won’t listen! You can listen to me now, and afterwards I won’t speak to you again! What I want to tell you is this: I like doing things and watching, but he’s got to be there too. And I like it when a girl does things to me, but it’s got to be Maria-Modesta. I mean she does what I’ve taught her to do, or what we’ve found out by ourselves. And I know we’ve got lots of things to learn yet, but we want him to teach us, not you. You understand? Do you understand?” she added ferociously. “We don’t want you!”

She almost shouted those last words, her face streaming with tears. She then threw herself into Helene’s arms. The young woman hugged the girl to her, put her head on her breast and stroked her hair until she stopped crying.

Chapter 17

A disorderly array of taxis from Siveiro and a few other small towns stood in the village square. Never had so many cars been seen there at one time. The drivers, knowing that they would be taking their customers to Santiago de Compostela for the Confirmation, were wearing their best suits. As they waited, they gave the chrome a last polish and shouted threats at the little boys who came up and left their handprints on the cars simply for the pleasure of touching them.

There were about forty taxis to carry about twenty children, their parents and grandparents.

The doctor was using his own car. The fact of having one of his own allowed him to regard himself as a privileged being, and everything in his behaviour showed him to be a man well pleased with himself. That day he had embellished the dashboard with a small vase of purple glass containing some plastic carnations.

The mothers of Maria-Modesta and Rosalia got into the Stranger's car with their daughters—the supreme honour in the eyes of the other mothers, who had to be content with hired cars. Maria-Modesta's father and elder sister went in Helene's car, with Rosalia's one-eyed uncle. This was not quite such an honour as travelling with the Stranger, but it was better than a taxi, with its degrading "S.P." plate, which dearly showed that the vehicle was irremediably intended for public use, for the *Servicio Público*.

The first to leave were the taxis, followed by the doctor, then Helene, and finally the Stranger. Without being aware of it, they were respecting

the ecclesiastical order, by which the most important in the hierarchy came last: first the congregation, then the choir, then the priests, the bishops, the cardinals and, finally, the pope.

“Don’t bite your nails,” said Maria-Modesta’s mother. “Don’t forget you’re going to Communion.”

The girl took her fingers out of her mouth, joined her hands as if for prayer and stuck them between her thighs. Rosalia tickled her between the ribs and Maria-Modesta gave her a smack, which Rosalia immediately returned. Two more smacks landed on the girls’ cheeks from their respective mothers.

The entry into Santiago de Compostela was fraught with difficulty. This rity, which in the Middle Ages could accommodate thousands of pilgrims on foot and horseback, seemed incapable of dealing with an assault from the motorized faithful. Because of the traffic jams, the Stranger had some difficulty in reaching the cathedral square, but when he finally got there he was lucky enough to find a place to park—just opposite the hotel where, a few hours later, he would be staying with the two girls. He turned off the engine, helped his guests out, got the suitcases down off the roof and locked them inside the car. Then, turning to the girls’ parents, he declared that he was entirely at their disposal, and left them the privilege of deciding how they would spend their time.

“This way!” said Maria-Modesta’s father. “And keep close to me. With a crowd like this, we might lose each other.”

The small group crossed the Plaza de España, casting excited glances at the four facades—those of the Hostal de los Reyes Catolicos, the Town Hall, the school of San Jeronimo and, lastly, the Cathedral of San Diego de Compostela. Hardly had they begun to ascend the first steps than Helene said to the Stranger:

“I’ve forgotten something. You carry on—I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

Before the Stranger could say a word, she had disappeared in the crowd.

The entry into the cathedral was as chaotic as the entry into the city, in spite of the efforts of several priests and seminarians to get the endless stream of the faithful into some kind of order. They sweated, gesticulated, wiped their foreheads and shouted instructions: “To the right, to the left, girls on the right, boys on the left, stop, move on, stop pushing, move on,

do you want a smack ...” One little boy had tears in his eyes because a priest had pinched his arm. A quarter of an hour later, the chaos had ceased. The children were seated at the front of the nave and the parents behind. For this solemn occasion, the *botafumeiro*, a huge censer operated by a complicated combination of pulleys, had been erected in the middle of the transept.

The ceremony ended in a restaurant.

“How will you find Señorita Helene?” asked Maria-Modesta’s father.

“I’ll leave her a message on the windscreen and she’ll join us at the hotel.”

“Give her our regards!”

Everyone got into the bus that was to take them back to the village and the conductor walked up and down handing out tickets.

“And you’ve no change either? Everyone’s rich today!”

The Stranger stood on the pavement, holding the two girls by the hand.

Rosalia’s mother lowered the window and said:

“Be careful! The roads are full of madmen!”

The Stranger reassured her and promised that he would bring them back safe and sound “in a week’s time, not a day longer, because he didn’t want to be driven crazy by these two brats.”

Maria-Modesta’s mother reminded the Stranger “that he mustn’t leave without finding Señorita Helene,” and the father warned his daughter: “You’ll cop it if you don’t behave yourself.”

The bus moved off and its passengers continued to wave their arms in a way that could be interpreted either as signs of farewell or as threats.

“She’s disappeared,” said Rosalia, when they realized that Helene’s car was no longer in the same place.

“Perhaps she’s gone back to the village.”

“I doubt it,” said the Stranger. “She must have left.” “Won’t you ever see her again?”

“Probably not.”

“It’s funny ...”

The two girls, still wearing their long white dresses, trotted along beside the Stranger.

“Where are we going now?” Maria-Modesta asked.

“To the hotel.”

“To sleep?”

“No, to change and rest for a while.”

“Are you tired?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not,” said Rosalia.

“Neither am I,” said Maria-Modesta. “What will you do afterwards?”

“Afterwards I’ll abuse you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Go to bed.”

“But what did you say?”

“I’m not saying it again. You might repeat it.”

“Is it wrong to go to bed?”

“No.”

“Well, then?”

“Well, stop asking questions.”

At the hotel reception desk he asked for two communicating rooms:

“One for me with a double bed and one for the girls with two single beds.”

As soon as they were in their rooms, the Stranger asked Rosalia:

“Which bed do you want?”

“I don’t mind.”

And she rushed over to one of the two windows in her room.

“Come and look! Isn’t it beautiful? It’s like a monastery.” The window looked out on to one of the four courtyards in the hotel, arranged symmetrically, paved and surrounded by marble arcades; at the centre of each courtyard was a well, surmounted by a piece of sculpture.

“What’s that round thing on the floor by the bath?” cried Maria-Modesta, who preferred to examine the bathroom.

“A bidet.”

“What’s it for?”

“To wash yourself in.”

She then inspected the two bedrooms, opened and shut all the drawers, signed her name three or four times on the hotel writing-paper, said she’d like to write to her mother but had nothing to tell her and, finally admitted that she was tired.

Rosalia had taken off her Confirmation dress and the Stranger said to Maria-Modesta:

“Take yours off too. Then you can have a bath. It will relax you.”

“A bath? Oh, goody!” said Maria-Modesta. “But not too hot. I don’t like the water to be too hot.”

“Oh, I do,” said Rosalia.

“Look, one of you can use my bath and the other this one.” “Which is the nicest one?” asked Maria-Modesta. “They’re exactly the same.”

“Then I’ll go in yours.”

The Stranger ran the water and, when the two baths were full, he said:

“Hurry up, because I’d like a wash too.”

Maria-Modesta started to complain that the water was too hot. She ran more cold water and started singing and calling to Rosalia in the other room. They asked each other silly questions, laughed, whistled, put their heads under the water and announced:

“I’ve counted up to forty without breathing!”

“I’ve counted to fifty!”

“It’s not true! You’re cheating!”

“No, I’m not.”

The Stranger had to intervene and beg them to calm down. “You’ll get us thrown out.”

He lay down on the bed and looked at a religious picture he had found in his pocket. He must have picked it up without thinking. At the back of the four-tone reproduction of Jose Ribera’s Christ was written: “Go in trust and be the light and salt of the world. I am with you.” This was followed by a name: “Juan Antonio Sanchez Diaz.” And beneath that the words: “On this day of his priestly ordination, he asks for all those who were, are and will be near Thee, O God, Thy blessing, O Lord, and thy protection, O Mary.” Finally, at the bottom, was the name of a Spanish town that he had never heard of and a date. He did some arithmetic and concluded that this priest must have said his first mass fifteen years before.

Rosalia had come out of the bathroom and, without drying herself jumped into the bed beside the Stranger.

“Are you praying? Smell me. Don’t I smell nice?” “You’ll drench me! Go and dry yourself!”

“I’m hot.”

“You’ll catch cold if you don’t put something on.”

Rosalia slipped in under the bedclothes and sighed:

“I feel so good now!”

“Have you emptied the bath?”

“No, I didn’t know how.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll have a quick bath in your water, then we’ll go down to dinner.”

Before going into the bathroom he went to see what Maria-Modesta was up to: they hadn’t heard anything from her for some time. He found her asleep, her head resting back on the edge of the bath.

“Are you asleep, my love?”

The girl woke up, looked around her and, without answering, lay her head back again, to go back to sleep.

The Stranger lifted her out of the water, wrapped her in a big bath towel and carried her over to the bed.

“Make room for her,” he said to Rosalia. “And mind that she keeps herself covered up.”

“I’m tired,” wailed Maria-Modesta.

“Well, go to sleep, then. You’ve still got another half hour.”

“It was nicer in the bath.”

“Did you want to drown?”

“I can swim.”

“Look at her fingers I Look at the state they’re in! All crinkled up by the water!”

“It’s true!” said Rosalia, examining her friend’s finger-tips. “They look as if she’s been doing things for hours!”

“Shut up, you little bitch, and leave her alone.”

The Stranger had his bath and emerged in a huge white bathrobe that reached to his ankles. He had also wrapped his head in a red towel, in the hope of amusing the two girls who had surely never seen anyone rigged out like this before. But Rosalia too was now asleep, with Maria-Modesta in her arms. Maria-Modesta’s still damp head lay on Rosalia’s chest and they were holding hands. The Stranger looked at his watch and lay down on one of the beds in the other room.

After half an hour he got up, dressed and, when almost ready, gently woke the two girls:

“My loves, my pretty roses, my magic powders, you must get up now ... Wake up...”

Rosalia yawned, disengaged herself from Maria-Modesta’s body and gave a deep sigh:

“Wee-wees,” she said.

“Go on, then,” said the Stranger, stroking her hair. Maria-Modesta woke up and pulled a face, as if she about to burst into tears:

“I’m hungry,” she complained, “but I’m still sleepy.” “We’ll go to bed early. I promise.”

“What will there be to eat? I want some soup.”

“You’re not very hard to please ...”

“Me too,” said Rosalia, who had come back from the bathroom.

“You’ll have some too. Now get dressed. You know what to put on for the evening?”

“No...!”

As they were going into the restaurant the Stranger had to push the girls inside—they had stood stock still at the door, dazzled by the sight of so many tables, so many lights and so many waiters in tails moving ceremoniously among the diners.

The head-waiter saw the young ladies to their seats, while a waiter stood expectantly behind the Stranger’s chair.

They had taken a corner table. He sat with his back to the room so as to allow the girls to see everything that happened.

Throughout the meal the Stranger talked to them as if they were young ladies, which was very educational. All went well until the dessert, when Rosalia spilt some cream on her skirt. The Stranger was unaware of what had happened until he saw the look of horror on the girl’s face.

“I’ve stained the dress,” she said.

The Stranger tried to reassure her:

“Don’t worry. It could happen to anyone. Wipe the worst of it off.”

“I have. It’s left a stain.”

“We’ll send it to the cleaners. Don’t worry about it.” Maria-Modesta examined her own skirt, made sure she had made no stains and said proudly:

“Mine’s clean.”

A few minutes later, trying to drink too quickly, she spilt a few drops of her diluted wine, which dribbled inexorably over her chin, onto her blouse, and finally onto her beautiful new skirt. The magnificent oblong stain that resulted dissipated all Rosalia’s chagrin.

“You’re a couple of little pigs!”

They fell laughing into each other’s arms, then demanded some more dessert.

When the meal was over, the Stranger led them into a handsome lounge with leather armchairs, where people of every nationality were reading the newspapers of their respective countries. The girls sat on a sofa and grew bored. They asked if they could go for a little walk.

“A walk? Where?”

“In the hall, where the shops are, where they sell postcards, souvenirs and things...”

“All right. But don’t go outside the hotel. And don’t be long. We must go to bed soon.”

After about ten minutes they came running back.

“Look, look!” and they showed him some bracelets and scarves.

“Who gave you those?”

“Guess.”

“Come now, who gave you them?”

“Helene.”

“Helene? Have you seen her?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

“What was she doing?”

“We don’t know. She was in the hall. She said she wanted to see us before she left for Paris and she bought us these.”

“What else did she say?”

“Nothing. Oh, yes! She said that if you wanted to see her in Paris, you could telephone her. And that we were to say good-bye for her.”

“What else?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Oh, yes... she said thank you to us over and over again She said thank you, thank you, thank you. Then she kissed us and started crying.”

“And what did you say?”

“We didn’t say anything.”

The Stranger put down his paper and said to the two girls:

“We must go to bed.”

As soon as he was in the bedroom, he noticed that the beds had been remade. The chamber-maid had noticed that the sheets were damp and had changed them.

“That’s the last time you get into a bed without drying yourselves!” said the Stranger. “What will they think of me?”

The girls didn’t even answer. As they were getting undressed in their room, they sang and jumped from one bed to the other.

The Stranger went and kissed them, wished them sweet dreams and asked them to be more quiet.

He was tired, but could not sleep; all kinds of thoughts kept him awake. In the next room, the girls had switched off the light, but were still talking in low voices, without a pause. He did not want to tell them again to be quiet and just hoped that they would finally go to sleep.

The whispering soon stopped. They were asleep at last. But then there they were, tiptoeing into his room.

He took them into his arms, one on one side, one on the other.

“But you’ve nothing on!” he said, in a tone of mild reproach.

“What about you, then?” said Maria-Modesta, laughing. They remained in silence for a moment, without moving, then Rosalia began to rub herself against him.

The room was in complete darkness, but one could have followed the course of their activities by ear.

“No, you do nothing,” said Rosalia to the Stranger.

And as if the two girls had arranged everything beforehand, Maria-Modesta repeated the phrase, adding:

“You do nothing. Just say things ... and leave everything to us.”

Chapter 18

For six days they had driven up and down the coast and made several incursions inland. They were now only fifty kilometres from the village. The girls were highly pleased with their “honeymoon”, and with all the things they could tell their parents as well as those other things that they must keep to themselves—provisions that the Stranger had stored up as memories for the long winter nights, when, hugging their pillows, they could repeat the words of love he had taught them, and forget their loneliness. Even during such a long absence, he would be the phantom hand that moved over their bodies, the cause of those dark rings beneath their eyes. And they would await his return.

But why, in fact, should he leave? He could stay in the village, for them, for himself ...for that matter he could stay there for the rest of his life.

“Stay with us. Don’t ever leave us!” said Rosalia.

“You will stay with us? You won’t go away again?” said Maria-Modesta.

“Stay! Say you’ll stay!”

Was he dreaming, or had they really said that? Only one voice was really definite, that of his fear: the reality that awaited him, his city, his street, his house, his everyday problems, and the waiting for the months to pass.

“If you stay with us, I’ll be so happy, so happy that I might die of joy!”

Yes, one of the girls really did say that!

“In the winter, you can come in our kitchen. There’s always a fire. And when my mother’s not at home, I’ll come over to you, like in the summer.”

“Yes, like in summer, me too,” the other promised.

The Stranger wiped his forehead, ran his tongue over his lips and replied unsteadily:

“Yes, I’ll stay ... forever.”

The hotel was beautiful and almost empty.

The Stranger said he wanted the best room with the biggest bed. He was asked where the two girls would go. With the assurance of one about to commit suicide, he replied:

“With me. They’re used to it.”

But, when asked for his passport, he added, to make sure there would be no nasty surprise:

“While I’m getting my papers out of my case, take this.” And in exchange for the key of the room, he slipped a few notes that must have been the equivalent of six months’ salary into the manager’s hand.

The man bent double to thank him and said that there weren’t many fathers who had such pretty daughters.

“They’re not my daughters,” said the Stranger, “but I appreciate them all the same.”

They went up to their room and locked the door behind them. The Stranger lifted the two girls in his arms, spun round and round in the middle of the room like a top, faster and faster, until he lost his balance and fell with them onto the bed...

Rosalia took off her shoes and went and sat on a sofa in the long, flower-filled veranda that ran the length of the room. Through the innumerable small panes of glass, she looked out at the sea.

The two others joined her.

“Are you glad you took us with you?” Rosalia asked. “Infinitely.”

“Have you enjoyed yourself?”

“Enormously.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

“I didn’t enjoy everything,” Maria-Modesta interjected. “What makes you say that?”

“Because you didn’t want to do to me what you did to Rosalia.”

“But I explained that, my darling. You’re not old enough yet”

“If you did it to her, you should have done it to me too!” “No, no! She’s a bit older than you and, even so, you saw that it hurt her.”

‘Td have liked it all the same. Even if it did hurt a bit. I don’t want to be different from her.”

“Don’t sulk now! I’ll do whatever you like, but just wait a little. A few months, that’s all. You can have it as a Christmas present—would you like that?”

“Yes! Even before. As soon as possible. I’m curious to know, you know?”

“Know what?”

“Rosalia said it wasn’t like the other thing, it feels ever so nice inside and I’d like to try.”

“Where was I when you talked about all this?”

“In bed, with us, but you were asleep.”

“What did you say to Maria-Modesta?” the Stranger asked Rosalia.

“Just what she said. That it’s different.”

“She said it was extraordinary.”

“I didn’t say that. I said fantastic.”

“In any case, you said you liked it!”

“Yes, I said that because you asked me what it was like!” “And you explained?” the Stranger interjected.

“Yes,” said Rosalia.

“What did you say?”

“I can’t remember.”

“I remember,” said Maria-Modesta. “She said she felt suddenly warm inside, and it was as if someone was pulling her feet. And if she couldn’t stop crying, it was because she couldn’t stop coming. That’s exactly what she said!”

“Did you do things when you were talking about all this?”

“No. Rosalia didn’t want to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wanted her to do to me what you did to her.”

“But how could she?”

“With her finger!”

“You asked Rosalia that?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you?” he asked Rosalia.

"I thought you'd have wanted to do it yourself."

"But would you have liked to?"

"Yes," Rosalia replied.

"And what about you, Modestina, would you have preferred Rosalia's finger or me?"

The girl thought for a second.

"You see ... I can't explain it very well, but I think it's like this: before, I thought you'd leave us, but now that you've promised to stay in the village for ever, I've changed my mind."

"I don't understand."

"Look, I mean if it's you who does it to me for the first time, you can never leave me. But when I thought you'd go away, I thought it should be Rosalia who did it, because I would go on making love with her."

"That's what they call fidelity," the Stranger muttered to himself.

"I don't know," said Maria-Modesta, as if he had asked for her opinion.

"And you think the same?" he asked Rosalia.

"Yes, a bit."

The Stranger got up from the sofa and went up to the window to look at the sky, which was getting darker. He then turned to the two girls, who were still sitting side by side on the sofa, and said:

"The day before yesterday, when we were at the hotel where there were only two single beds, one for me and one for you two, I woke up next morning and found you still asleep, dead to the world. Do you remember?"

"Yes," said Maria-Modesta.

"I wondered at the time whether you preferred making love between yourselves or with me?"

They looked at each other for a moment and Rosalia answered:

"With you. What we do by ourselves is only a sort of practice."

"Yes, but it's different, all the same," Maria-Modesta added. "How is it different?"

"When you're not there, we like saying terrible things that we wouldn't dare to say to you... You see, we think a lot of things, we tell each other what we think, even if we're ashamed to. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You see," Rosalia went on, "it's like making love by yourself, but with two of you. It's marvellous."

"Yes, especially when we try things out," said Maria-Modesta.

“Try things out?”

“Yes. Sometimes we try to keep it hard for as long as possible and sometimes we try to finish at the same time.” “Which do you like best?”

“I don’t know,” said Maria-Modesta. “It depends. When it’s completely dark, we try to keep going as long as possible, and when there’s a bit of light we try to finish at the same time and watch each other come.”

“Then what do you do?”

“That depends too. Sometimes we just say things to each other and look at each other. Sometimes we kiss each other on the lips just as we’re coming. Sometimes we change hands.”

“How do you mean?”

“Near the end, I lend my hand to Rosalia and she lends me hers, so that we finish each other off. You see? Or if we began like that, when one of us can’t hold out any longer she gives up and looks after herself.”

“That’s not very nice for the other one!”

“Yes, it is. Because when Rosalia takes her hand away, I know that she can’t go on any longer. I do the same and, in two seconds, I’ve caught up with her—we watch each other and, there you are, we’ve come together. It’s wonderful, really it is!”

“Oh, I believe you. It’s a pity I never saw you making love together.”

“What? You’ve seen us hundreds of times!”

“Not when you try things out, as you say.”

Maria-Modesta looked questioningly at Rosalia, who, by way of reply, simply winked. Maria-Modesta then took Rosalia’s hand and said:

“Come on, then.”

They leapt up off the sofa, ran into the bedroom and jumped on to the bed. As they got undressed they sent their clothes flying all over the room. When they were quite naked. Maria-Modesta called to the Stranger, who had remained standing in the doorway between the veranda and the bedroom:

“Are you coming then? We’re going to try things out. Come and watch.”

It was a cool night. At dawn, the Stranger got up to shut the window. Maria-Modesta, who was lying in Rosalia’s arms, coughed. The bedclothes had slipped off, leaving both girls only half covered. Rosalia’s buttocks were ice cold. The Stranger readjusted the bedclothes. By the weak light of his bedside lamp, he watched them sleep. He followed every tiny

unconscious movement made in their dreams. He saw Rosalia frown, shudder, smile; Maria-Modesta lick her lips, purse her lips, like a baby at the breast, move her fingers, and, without waking, half-open her eyes.

He dozed off with the light on. When he woke, he saw that the two girls were still asleep. They had changed position slightly. Maria-Modesta was no longer in Rosalia's arms and her long, fair hair lay across her friend's chest: one of Rosalia's nipples merged into the •brown red of Maria-Modesta's lips, which rested against it.

The Stranger lifted the bedclothes: their bodies were not touching, but one of Rosalia's hands was stuck between Maria-Modesta's thighs and one of Maria-Modesta's hands lay inert between Rosalia's. The Stranger removed Maria-Modesta's hand, placed it on her own body and replaced it with his own. He then switched off the light and gently woke the two girls.

Rosalia turned to the Stranger and, with a movement of her hand drew him down on her.

"I want to watch you," said Maria-Modesta, switching on the light.

She stretched out beside Rosalia, but with her head nearer the bed-head, so that her mouth would be at the same level as the Stranger's when he was making love with her friend.

When Rosalia cried out, and then again and again, Maria-Modesta bit the Stranger's lips, as if to say, "Go on!" The Stranger remained a moment longer inside Rosalia, made a few movements, then came out. He jumped up to the head of the bed and plunged his sex into Maria-Modesta's open mouth, which had been waiting, ready to receive the product of Rosalia's activity.

Rosalia stopped sobbing, wiped her tears with the back of her hands and, with the greatest seriousness, announced:

"I'm going to pee."

When she came back into the room, she waited patiently for Maria-Modesta to finish before resuming her place in the bed, for her friend's whole attitude—the heavy way of breathing, with her mouth open, and the way she was waving her arms in the air—told her that Maria-Modesta was about to reach the peak of her pleasure.

Rosalia did not take her eyes off Maria-Modesta until the end.

"Do you feel better ? " she asked, getting back on to the bed.

"Oh, yes!" Maria-Modesta replied, with a broad smile.

After breakfast, which they had in the hall, the Stranger told the hotel manager:

“We’re enjoying ourselves too much here. We’ll stay for another night.”

They went down to the beach, a vast, deserted expanse of fine golden sand, which reminded them of their village. There were dunes, too, but they were much smaller. The water was less cold and the sun a little warmer, because it was more sheltered.

The girls played with a large yellow ball that the Stranger had bought them. They looked very touching in their two-piece bathing costumes—especially Rosalia, who had very little to fill her brassiere. Maria-Modesta, who had nothing at all to hide, took great care all the same to keep raising the upper part of her costume whenever it started to slip. At one point, in the heat of the game, she did not realize that in raising it she had twisted it right round, so that the straps were across her chest and the two small cups on her back. Rosalia burst out laughing, and Maria-Modesta, quite unconcerned, readjusted the brassiere, shared in her friend’s laughter and resumed their game.

Then they swam out to a raft, about nine feet long and six feet wide, from which hung unravelled ropes supporting cultivated mussels. They clambered up on to the raft to sunbathe. Maria-Modesta did not want to lie down and walked up and down the tiny floating prison. As she came by, the Stranger stretched out a leg to trip her and she fell into the sea.

“Well done!” cried Rosalia.

She was still applauding when she found herself lifted up and thrown into the water beside her friend. The two girls climbed back on to the raft, rushed upon the Stranger, who stood there waiting for them and, with good grace, allowed them to push him into the water.

“Are you hungry?” the Stranger asked, when they were back on the beach.

“Very.”

“Well, this is what I propose: instead of having lunch at the hotel, we take the car and go over there, to the other side of the bay. I know a good restaurant. And it’s very beautiful.”

“Hurray! Let’s go there, then!”

Night, sleep, dawn, morning.

The sun was already high over the sea when Rosalia woke. She went into the bathroom and came back without making any noise. She admired her full-length reflection in the wardrobe mirror, then looked out of the windows of the veranda, which was separated from the room by thick curtains.

Then the Stranger woke and saw Modestina stretching her arms all over the place and pulling faces: he realized that it was she who had woken him.

They smiled at each other, but did not say a word: they lay quite still watching Rosalia, who was standing absolutely naked in the middle of the room. She had her back to them, but they could see her reflected in the mirror. As she was examining her body, their eyes met. She swivelled round on tiptoe, stayed for a few seconds in this dancer's position, raised her arms, flexed her knees slightly, leapt into the air and landed gracefully on her feet. She then clapped her hands and cried joyfully in Galician dialect:

"Veña, veña, o forasteiro, veña beilar connigo!" Come, come Stranger, come and dance with me!"

The Stranger jumped out of bed, bounded over to her, lifted her in his arms and improvised a rapid, absurd dance in which Rosalia never touched the ground.

Maria-Modesta stood on the bed and made them go on dancing by singing Galician folk songs. Since she had no bagpipes, she seized a pillow, stuck it under her bent arm, moving it up and down rhythmically, and imitated the sound of the instrument by disguising her voice and holding her nose.

She jumped off the bed as if it were a springboard and landed on the couple. They all ended up in a heap on the floor, knocking two chairs over. When they got up, Maria-Modesta started looking for a bump on her head. She nearly choked with laughter when she discovered that the Stranger was also complaining of having hurt himself somewhere. Rosalia had disappeared. She was leaning out over the window-sill, spitting —aiming at a baker's basket fixed to the handlebars of a bicycle.

The Stranger gave her a smack on her bare bottom and she turned round furiously. He picked her up and hugged her, but she continued to fight back. He put her down on her feet. They stared at each other, as if at

attention. They both wanted to laugh, but didn't. Maria-Modesta watched them, an amused smile on her lips as she rubbed her head.

"It's the last day of our holidays," said the Stranger at last. "What do you say to trying to make love till we wear ourselves out?"

"Good idea" said Maria-Modesta.

Rosalia was examining her buttocks in the wardrobe mirror.

"You hurt me," she whined. "Look, it's all red."

"Come over here and I'll kiss it better," said the Stranger.

She walked over reluctantly and he said to her:

"Don't you feel like making love?"

"Yes ..."

"Come on, then. Don't sulk."

"I'm not sulking," said Rosalia, sulking even more. Then suddenly, a smile spread over her face. She flung herself at him, pummelled him with her fists and threw him back on to the bed.

Maria-Modesta started to move her hand back and forth like a metronome, left, right, left, right, touching first her own left shoulder, then pointing at Rosalia. As she did so, she muttered to herself the Galidan equivalent of eeny-meany-miney-mo.

The hand came to rest on her shoulder and she announced:

"My turn to begin!"

Chapter 19

The rainy, windy autumn of Galicia. That night the wind had been particularly violent, making the trees creak and whine, whistling under the tiles and throwing sand against the windows. At seven in the morning, when the Stranger got out of bed to make some coffee, he found that the house had been flooded. The south wind, which had brought the storm, was still blowing the rain under the front door. It was not the first time that it had happened, but he had never had so much water in the house. He got dressed, put on his gum-boots and as he drank his coffee looked out through his kitchen window at the raging sea and the branches of the fig-tree that would snap off at any moment. Then, as usual, he started to mop up the water. But this time in vain, for, instead of dropping as it usually did in the morning, the wind grew more and more violent and drove more and more water under the door. He decided at last to do what he should have done weeks ago to solve the problem: with a hammer and chisel, he hollowed out of the concrete floor a small gutter, about an inch wide and an inch and a half deep, forming a curve linking the two extremities of the door, and ending outside, on either side of the step. His work was rewarded. The driving wind and the endless rain could do nothing against the little gutter: the water came in under the door, but fell at once into the gutter and flowed outside.

For a whole week it rained continuously, turning the path in front of the house into a small torrent. To get to the village he had to go by way of the beach. Then, at last, the south wind dropped and the region was swept

by the north wind, which, although cold, brought fine weather, with blue skies and sea.

The Stranger's days were not monotonous, but they were alike. In the morning, he worked in the garden, part of which he had turned into a kitchen garden. The peasants who walked by on their way to the fields stopped to pass the time of day and to chat for a minute over the low, dry-stone wall. When the sea was rough, the fishermen did not go out in their boats and instead gave their wives a hand in the fields. It was these men that he saw most of, in the cafes in the evening. Most mornings, they ended up in his kitchen having the first drink of the day.

After lunch, the Stranger studied for an hour, for pleasure, while he waited for Maria-Modesta or Rosalia, or both girls together, to arrive. Using his old schoolbooks, he worked at Latin on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays and Greek on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. In the evening, when he made his tour of the cafes, he often saw Maria-Modesta or Rosalia again, doing errands for their parents—a box of matches, a kilo of salt or a bottle of oil—last-minute purchases before the shop shut. He greeted them with a smile: the same smile he had given them a few hours before as they stood at his door, ready to run back home as fast as they could.

“You're never on time!” Maria-Modesta's mother would say. “Go and get some bread! ”

The girl would dash off and come back without any bread.

“There's none left.”

Her mother would raise her hand to give her a smack, but it never landed, for the girl would put her arms up to hide her face and the mother would keep her hand in the air without carrying out her threat. Taking advantage of her hesitation, Maria-Modesta would dart out of the way, then stop, jump forward, seize her mother's huge hand, kiss it wildly and run out again to play on the beach by the harbour before it got dark.

The children would play at throwing sand at each other, pushing each other over and yelling like beings possessed. The fishermen, sitting on the steps of the *tabernas*, or leaning against the wall, watched over their boats, which had been dragged up onto the beach, and threatened the kids who came too close to them, fearing that they would fill them with sand.

“Get away from there, or I'll kill you! ”

Sometimes the children hid sand in their hands and ran round, arms outstretched, pretending to be aeroplanes and when they got near the boats dropped their handfuls of sand on them.

“Your mother’s a good woman, but you’re a son of a bitch!”

When the child was one of the family the fishermen went further:

“Me cago en el coño que te cagó!”

They were afraid of the sand, one of their perpetual enemies, for if it got between the planks the boat would be “useless, and not even God would be able to do anything with it”. Once the boat was out at sea, the wood would swell, the cracks dose up except in the places where sand had got in and the boat would be leaky for the rest of its days.

The village idiot, Julito, a lad of uncertain age with the beginnings of a moustache, wandered about, dribbling at the mouth. Every now and then he emitted guttural sounds. Sometimes he whistled between his uneven teeth. He amused himself for weeks dragging behind him a pebble tied to a string, or a tin can, a big key or an old shoe. The village people were kind to him and not even the children made fun of him; if he did something funny, they laughed, or just ignored him; they regarded him as part of die scenery, part of their world, like the sea, the sun, burials, the village dock, the fountain in the square, the school, the cats. But once the idiot managed to attract everyone’s attention: for several days he was seen walking on the square holding something like a book in both hands. His regular, awkward step was an unconsdous imitation of the priest reading his breviary. Everyone was astonished to see *him* reading, for they knew he had never learnt to read. When they came doser to look at what he was reading, he would quickly hide the book inside his coat, waiting for the usual question:

“What are you reading, Julito? Let’s see.”

Julito would step back, hugging the object to him, and continue on his way, waiting till he was alone to carry on reading. One Sunday, when the square was full of people, two young men derided to settle the matter. Julito offered no resistance: he let them take the book and, just as they realized that it was in fact a brick, Julito was heard to laugh for the first time in his life. It was a terrifying laugh. He moved off, but every now and then turned round and pointed his finger at the crowd. Someone was heard to murmur: “He’s been having us on.” Julito walked on with a more jerky step than ever; sometimes his body was bent double and sometimes

twisted by his monstrous laughter. His face had gone purple. Suddenly he collapsed, though he did not stop laughing. His mother ran over to him, picked him up in her arms and carried him to the *taberna* opposite, where a football match was being shown on television. Someone called for silence: it was the last few minutes of the match and the score was still a draw. But, in any case, nothing could have been done for Julito— he was already dead.

The great topic of conversation for the last few weeks had been the preparations for the fiesta.

“This year we’ll have two bands. And good ones! One from Pontevedra and one from Vigo. The best in Spain.” “Oh, I wouldn’t say that”

“What do you know about it? You’d do better to keep your mouth shut.”

“I was dancing to the Vigo municipal band before you were bom.”

“What does that prove?”

“It proves that I know what I’m talking about.”

The Stranger tried hard to show interest in these discussions and to pretend that he too was looking forward to the three-day *fiesta* with impatience. He knew what these *fiestas* were like and he didn’t care for them. One year, in order to plunge himself into village life, he had danced in the street under garlands of brightly coloured electric lights, drunk at improvised bars, made of four wooden planks with barrels serving as stools, and tried his strength by hitting a block of wood with a dub, thus firing a shell, which usually exploded in a cake of powder. Now he had to say how well he remembered the “magnificent” fireworks, the “fantastic” wine that flowed endlessly, the “extraordinary” tight-rope walkers. But his only real memory of that *fiesta* was the very precise image of a little girl to whom he had given a doll he had won in the shooting-gallery. Of this, he could speak to nobody. Yet from that moment his life had taken a new course.

At last *fiesta* day arrived.

In his grey flannel suit the Stranger walked round the stalls with the fishermen, dressed up in their Sunday best. Rosalia, on an errand in the village, seized the opportunity of finding him alone to whisper:

“I’ll be here at eleven o’clock tonight with my married sister. Will I see you?”

Maria-Modesta came out of the grocer's with a basket full of lettuces. She stopped at the fountain, put down the basket, drank a few mouthfuls of water, put her basket back on her head and went over to the Stranger.

"Will you be coming over to our café tonight? If you come, I'll dance with you, but only if you come, because I won't be able to go out. There'll be a lot of people there tonight and my mother will want me to help."

That night, the Stranger danced until dawn among people too drunk to notice the tender looks that he exchanged with Rosalia, or to imagine what was stirring in Maria-Modesta's loins as he held her close. At one point, they danced to the sounds of the *gaitas*, to the same Galician tune that Maria-Modesta had hummed a few months before, jumping on to a hotel bed and turning a pillow into bagpipes.

The *fiesta* ended in merriment, fireworks and filth. The harbour square was littered with empty cigarette packets, crushed cardboard beakers and broken bottles.

A winter storm blew up, waves swept over the promenade and cleared everything away in a single night.

Christmas came round. And the New Year. For the New Year too, three fair stalls were erected in the harbour square. Portable stoves kept the churros warm, as well as those who fried them.

On the morning of the New Year, the Stranger wandered over to one of the stalls, followed by a dozen children begging him to buy them something. He gave each of them a ration of *melindres*, small biscuits in the form of rings threaded onto a stick. As he handed them out, the children disappeared one by one, to nibble the biscuits in secret, like wild animals with their prey. When he had finished, he noticed that a little girl still stood there, motionless and silent, her hands empty. She did not take her eyes off him.

"Didn't you get anything, then?" the Stranger asked.

"No."

"What sweets would you like?"

"I don't want any sweets."

"Do you want anything else?"

"No, I don't want anything."

The girl just stood there, watching the Stranger, her head slightly tilted, without moving and without saying a word.

Winter had still not erased the freckles on her face. Her green eyes—a darker green than Rosalia’s but just as beautiful, despite a certain sadness in them—stared at the Stranger with a curiosity verging on rudeness. Her cheeks were reddened by the cold wind, and she had the same full, protruding lips as Maria-Modesta. In her hands she was holding a white knitted beret with a pompom that attracted the Stranger’s attention. He looked at it more closely and felt sure that he recognized it. When Helene left the village, she had left behind a suitcase full of old clothes. “Give them to whomever wants them,” she had said. “They might earn you a pound of onions. They’ll help you to cry your tears of repentance.” And he had given them to the old sacristan, who called in regularly to see whether the wind had moved any of the tiles on the roof. “I don’t know what to do with these,” he had said. “If you know of anyone who might be interested, they’re welcome to them.” Some time later, the sacristan announced that he had found just the people—a family “who have need of everything, who have nothing, who have had a lot of trouble with their little girl who has been so ill, it was a miracle she was saved . . .”

The girl was wearing a very short blue cape and small dogs made of natural wood, obviously new and decorated with cat’s fur. Her very long legs seemed thin in spite of the thick, homespun, white woollen stockings. Bundled up as she was, like a little ball of warmth perched on two sticks, she reminded him of certain marsh birds, with their long, slender legs and delicate bones. A scarf was wrapped round her neck, twice at least, so that her head looked as if it rested on a muff made of cotton-wool. It must have been very impeding: she pulled on it several times to free her pointed chin. She stuck the beret back on her head, tugging it as far as it would go with no attempt at elegance, then freed her ears and some of her short, black hair.

“I’ve never seen you before,” said the Stranger.

“I’ve only just come back ...”

“Where were you before?”

“In a sanatorium. Then at my grandparents, in the mountains.”

“But you’re from the village?”

“Yes.”

“Are you staying or going away again?”

“I’m staying.”

“So you’re better now?”

“Yes, I’m better.”

“How old are you?”

“Eleven and a half.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, you’re the Stranger.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

They were now alone in the square, except for an old woman over by the fountain who had her back to them. Everybody had gone home to lunch. The girl’s cape flapped in the wind.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“A bit.”

“Well, let’s go over there where it’s more sheltered,” said the Stranger. But as they crossed the square, he added: “You really ought to be going home. It’s getting late.” She did not answer and continued to walk beside him. When they reached the other end of the square, the Stranger leaned back against the wall, which had been warmed a little by the sun; the girl did the same. Side by side, they stared ahead at the jetty, the lighthouse, the boats, the sea.

“You’re very beautiful,” said the Stranger, still staring in front of him, as if he were talking to himself, but pressing the edge of his shoe against the girl’s foot.

“You’re hurting,” she said, without turning towards him. But she did not take her foot away. On the contrary, she tried to keep it pressed against his, and there was a smile at the corner of her lips.

First published 1971 by Anthony Blond Ltd.

56 Doughty Street London WC1

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SBN 218 51149 3

Printed in Great Britain by Clarke, Doble & Brendon Ltd., Plymouth