Rosario Tijeras
a novel

Jorge Franco

Translated from the Spanish by
Gregory Rabassa

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prayer to the holy judge

If they have eyes that do not see me,
if they have hands that do not grasp me,
if they have feet that do not catch me,
do not let them take me from the rear,
do not let my death be a violent one,
do not let my blood spill,
You who are all-knowing,
know of my sins,
but you also know of my faith,
do not abandon me.
Amen.
Since Rosario had been shot at point-blank range while she was being kissed, she confused the pain of death with that of love. But she realized what had happened when she moved her lips away and saw the gun.

"I felt something flowing all through my body. I thought it was the kiss," she told me on the way to the hospital as she grew weaker.

"Don't talk anymore, Rosario," I told her, and she squeezed my hand and asked me not to let her die.

"I don't want to die, I don't want to."

Although I encouraged her hopes, the expression on my face didn't deceive her. Even as she lay dying she looked beautiful, fatally divine. She was losing blood as they wheeled her into the operating room. The speed of the gurney, the swinging of the door, and a nurse's strict order separated me from her.

"Tell my mother," I managed to hear.

As if I knew where her mother lived. Nobody knew, not even Emilio, who knew her so well and was lucky enough to have
“Almost everyone who comes here has a bullet wound,” the attendant told me.

We’d thought she was bulletproof, immortal, in spite of the fact that she was always surrounded by dead people. I was struck by the certainty that someday we’d all have our turn, but I consoled myself with what Emilio said: she had a bulletproof vest under her skin.

“What about under her clothes?”

“She’s got good, firm flesh,” was Emilio’s response to my bad joke. “You just be satisfied with looking.”

Rosario liked all of us, but Emilio was the only one who had the courage, because you’ve got to admit, it wasn’t just a matter of luck. It took guts to get involved with Rosario, and even if I’d had any, it wouldn’t have done any good because I was too late. Emilio was the one who really had her, the one who’d fought over her with her previous master, the one who risked his life, and the only one who’d offered to make her one of us.

“I’ll kill him and then I’ll kill you,” was Ferney’s threat to her. I remember because I’d asked Rosario:

“What was it Farley said to you?”

“Ferney.”

“That’s right, Ferney.”

“That first he’d kill Emilio and then he’d kill me,” Rosario explained.

I called Emilio again. I didn’t ask him why he wasn’t coming to keep me company; he’d have his reasons. He told me he, too, was still awake and would come by later for sure.

“I didn’t call you for that but so that you’d give me the number where I can reach Rosario’s mother.”

“Have you heard anything?” Emilio asked.
“No, they’re still inside.”
“But what’s going on, what do they say?”
“Nothing, they haven’t said anything.”
“And did she tell you to let her mother know?” Emilio asked.
“That’s what she said when they took her in.”
“That’s strange,” Emilio said. “As far as I know she doesn’t talk to her mother anymore.”
“There’s nothing strange about it, Emilio, this is a serious situation.”

Rosario has always fought hard to forget everything she’d left behind, but her past is like a house trailer that’s followed her right into the operating room and is taking up space beside her along with the monitors and oxygen tanks in the room where they have her, waiting for her to revive.
“What did you say her name was?”
“Is,” I corrected the nurse.
“So what is her name?”
“Rosario,” my voice pronounced her name with relief.
“Last name?”

Rosario Tijeras, I would have had to say, because that was the one I knew her by. But Tijeras wasn’t her name, it was her history. They’d changed her name against her will and to her great annoyance, but she never understood that what the people in her neighborhood had done for her was a great favor, because in a country filled with the children of whores, they took away from her the onus of having only one surname, her mother’s, and gave her a nickname in its place. She got used to it later, and she even ended up liking her new identity.

“I can scare people with just my name,” she told me the day I met her. “I like that.”

And you could see that she liked it because she pronounced her name articulating every syllable and finishing with a smile, as if her white teeth were her second surname.
“Tijeras,” I told the nurse.
“Tijeras?”
“Yes, Tijeras, scissors,” I repeated, imitating their movement with two fingers. “Like the kind that cut.”
“Rosario Tijeras,” she wrote down after a silly little laugh.

We became so accustomed to her name that we could never think of her being called anything else. In the darkness of the corridors I feel Rosario’s anguished solitude in this world, with no identity to fall back on, so different from us, who can dig up our past even in the farthest corners of the world with surnames that produce grins of acceptance and even forgiveness for our crimes. Life didn’t forgive Rosario even the smallest offense, which is why she defended herself so much, creating around herself a wall of bullets and scissors, of sex and punishment, of pleasure and pain. Her body deceived us, we thought that in it you could find the delights of pleasure. That’s what her cinnamon body inspired, provoking the desire to taste her, to feel the tenderness of her clean flesh—you always wanted to get inside Rosario. Emilio never told us what it was like. He had the authority to do so because he’d had her lots of times over a long period, many nights when in the other bedroom I could hear them moaning, shouting hour after hour in their prolonged orgasms, while I, in the next room, stirred up the memory of my only night with her, that crazy night when I fell into her trap, one single night with Rosario, dying with love.
“What time did they bring her in?” the nurse asked me, holding her chart.
“I don’t know.”
“What time do you think it was?”
“Maybe four o’clock,” I said. “What time is it now?”
The nurse turned to look at a clock on the wall behind her.
“Four-thirty,” she wrote down.
The silence in the wards is broken every so often by a cry. I listen closely to hear if any are coming from Rosario. No cry is repeated, they’re the last shouts of those who won’t be seeing the new morning. None of the voices are hers; I fill with hope, thinking that Rosario has already come through a lot of situations like this one, thinking about the stories I wasn’t involved in. She was the one who would tell me about them, the way you tell the story of an action movie you like, with the difference that she, in the flesh, had the starring role in her bloody stories. But it’s a long way from a story that’s told and one that’s lived, and in the one I was involved in Rosario loses. It wasn’t the same hearing her tell about the quarts of blood she’d drawn from others as seeing her on the floor, drying up inside.
“I’m not who you think I am,” she told me one day in the beginning.
“Who are you, then?”
“It’s a long story, my friend,” she told me with glassy eyes, “but you’re going to hear it.”

In spite of our having spoken so much and about everything, I think I knew her only halfway, and now I would have liked to have known her completely. But what she told me, what I saw, and what I was able to figure out was enough to understand that life isn’t what they make us think it is, but that it’d be worth living if we can be guaranteed that at some moment or other we’ll cross paths with a woman like Rosario Tijeras.
“Where’d ‘Tijeras’ come from?” I asked her one night, with drink in hand.
“From a guy I castrated,” she answered, looking at the glass which she then emptied into her mouth.

I was left with no desire to ask her anything more, at least that once. But later curiosity kept getting hold of me, and I would bombard her with questions. Some she answered, and others she told me we’d leave for later. But she answered all of them in due time, even to the point that she would call me at home at midnight and would answer one that had been left behind. She answered all of them except one, in spite of my repeating it many times.

“Have you ever fallen in love, Rosario?”
She would remain thoughtful, looking far off, and as an answer she would only give me a smile, the most beautiful smile ever, which left me speechless, incapacitated for any more questions.
“You really do ask dumb questions,” she would also answer sometimes.

Hurrying doctors and nurses keep coming and going and pushing gurneys with other dying people in and out of the door where they’d taken her, or they converse among themselves in low voices and with somber faces. They would go in clean and come out with their uniforms splattered. I imagine which part of it could be Rosario’s blood. It would have to be different from the rest, blood that flowed at a thousand miles an hour, blood so hot and so full of poison. Rosario had been formed out of something else, God had nothing to do with her creation.
“God and I are on bad terms,” she said once.
“Don’t you believe in Him?”
“No,” she said. “I don’t believe much in men.”

One of Rosario’s characteristics was that she rarely laughed. She never got beyond a smile. Rarely did we hear a good laugh or any type of sound that expressed an emotion. She would remain unmoved by a joke or the most grotesque situation, nor would Emilio’s tender tickling as he tried to get a laugh out of her, be any good, nor kisses on the navel, fingers under her armpits, nor his tongue running up and down her skin to the soles of her feet. The best she had to give was a smile, the kind that gleams in the dark.

“God, Rosario, how many teeth have you got?”

Another thing we never knew was her age. When we met her, when Emilio met her, that is, she was eighteen. I saw her for the first time a few months later, two or three, and she told me that she was twenty, then we heard her say twenty-two, twenty-five, then eighteen again, and that’s the way it went, changing her age the way she changed her clothes, the way she changed lovers.

“How old are you, Rosario?”
“How old do you think I am?”
“Around twenty.”
“That’s right.”

The truth is that she really did look all the ages she was lying about. Sometimes she looked like a child, much younger than what she would say, barely an adolescent. Other times she seemed very much a woman, much older than her twenty-some years, with more experience than all of us. Rosario looked most deadly and most woman when she was making love.

At one time she looked old and decrepit, during her days of drinking and crack, her bones showing, skinny, weary, as if she were carrying all the ages of the world, withdrawn. She also got Emilio caught up in that trip. The poor guy was almost done for. He was in as deep as she was, and they couldn’t get out until they hit bottom. Around that time she’d killed somebody else, not with scissors this time but with a bullet. She carried a gun and was half-crazy, paranoid, hunted by guilt, and Emilio holed up with her in the little hut in the mountains, with only booze and drugs for provisions.

“What happened to both of you, Emilio?” was the first thing I could ask.

“We killed a guy,” he said.
“We killed a lot of people,” she added, with a dry mouth and a heavy tongue. “I killed him.”
“It’s all the same,” Emilio said again. “What one does we both do. Rosario and I killed a guy.”

“Who, for God’s sake?” I asked, horrified.
“I don’t know,” Emilio said.
“Me neither,” said Rosario.

We also didn’t find out how many she’d killed. We knew that before we met her she had a list of several, that while she was with us she’d “tucked in” a few as she would say, but since we left her three years ago until tonight, when I picked her up as she was dying, I don’t know whether she’d “tucked in” someone else during one of her passionate kisses.

“Did you see the guy who shot her?”
“It was too dark.”

“Did they catch him?” the nurse asked me again.
“No,” I answered. “As soon as he was through kissing her he took off.”
Every time Rosario killed someone she would start putting on weight. She would shut herself up to eat, scared to death, wouldn’t come out for weeks. She would ask for candy, desserts, would eat everything that came her way. Sometimes she’d be seen going out, but after a short time she’d come back loaded with bundles of food. She wouldn’t talk to anyone, but anyone who saw the way she was putting on weight figured that Rosario was mixed up in some kind of trouble.

“These lines are stretch marks,” she said as she showed them to us on her belly and legs. “I’ve been fat lots of times.”

About three or four months after the crime she’d stop eating and start getting thin. She’d put away the loose robes with which she hid her weight and go back to her tight jeans, her midriff-baring tops, and her naked shoulders. She went back to being as beautiful as she is always remembered.

Tonight, when I found her, she was thin, which made me think of a calm, recovered Rosario, far removed from her old turbulences, but when I saw her crumple onto the ground, I came out of my brief deception.

“Ever since I was a kid I’ve been pretty wild,” she would say with pride. “The teachers were afraid of me. Once I cut one of them on her face.”

“And what happened to you?”

“They kicked me out of school. They also told me they were going to put me in jail, a jail for little girls.”

“All that fuss over a scratch?”

“A scratch with scissors,” she explained.

Scissors were part of her daily life: her mother was a seamstress. That’s why she was used to always seeing two or three pairs around the house. In addition, she saw that her mother didn’t use them to cut only cloth but also to cut chicken, meat, trim hair and nails, and very frequently, to threaten her husband. Her parents, like almost all the people in the neighborhood, had come down from the country looking for what everyone looks for, and when they didn’t find it they settled in the higher part of the city to devote themselves to scavenging. Her mother got a job as a sleep-in maid, with Sundays off to be with her children and for a conjugal visit.

She was addicted to soap operas, watching them so much in the house where she worked that she got herself fired. But she was luckier and got a daytime job that allowed her to sleep at home and watch soap operas lying in bed. From Esmeralda, Topacio, and Simplemente Maria she learned that she could get out of poverty by taking sewing classes; the hard part was getting in a class on weekends, because all the maids in the city went about with the same dream in their heads. But sewing didn’t get her out of poverty, not her and not anyone else, and the only women who got rich were the owners of the schools for cutting and dressmaking.

“The man who’s living with my mother isn’t my father,” Rosario explained to us.

“So where is he?” Emilio and I asked her.

“I’ve got no fucking idea.” Rosario was emphatic.

Emilio had warned me not to talk to her about her father, but she herself brought up the subject that time. Drinks were making her nostalgic, and I think she was getting emotional listening to us talking about our parents.

“It must be weird, having a father,” was how she started. Then she continued, giving out pieces of her history. She said that hers had abandoned her when she was born.
"At least that’s what Doña Rubi says. Of course I don’t believe a word of it,” she said.

Doña Rubi was her mother. But the one who couldn’t be believed in was Rosario herself. She could be convincing without resorting to too many lies, but if any doubt about her “truth” arose, she would cry in order to certify her lie with the compassion of tears.

“I’m involved with a woman I know nothing about,” Emilio told me, “nothing at all. I don’t know where she lives or who her mother is, whether she has brothers and sisters or not, nothing about her father, nothing about what she does, I don’t know how old she is, because she told you something else.”

“So what are you doing with her?”

“You should ask her what’s she doing with me.”

Anybody could go crazy over Rosario, and if I hadn’t fallen it was because she didn’t allow it, but Emilio . . . At first I envied him, his good luck made me angry, he always got the best ones, the prettier ones, while I, on the other hand, got stuck with their girlfriends, not as nice, not as pretty, because a beautiful woman will almost always keep an ugly one by her side. But since I knew that his affairs didn’t last long, I waited calmly with my ugly one until he changed for the sake of changing, so I could change too, and then I waited to see if this time I got something better. But with Rosario it was different. He didn’t want to change her, and I didn’t want to be stuck with any of her friends: I liked Rosario, too. But I’ve got to admit that I was more afraid than Emilio, because with her it wasn’t a matter of taste, of love, or of luck, with her it was a matter of courage. You had to have plenty of balls to get involved with Rosario Tijeras.

“That woman doesn’t take crap from anybody,” we would tell Emilio.

“That’s what I like about her.”

“She’s been with a lot of tough people, you know,” we insisted.

“Now she’s with me. That’s all that matters.”

She’d been involved with those who are in jail now, with the toughest of the tough, men who were chased for a long time by people looking for a reward, men who gave themselves up and then escaped, and with many who are worm food today. They brought her down from her old neighborhood, showed her the beautiful things money can do, how rich people live, how you can get whatever you want, without exception, because everything can be had if you want it. They brought her to where we were, brought her closer, showing her off to us as if saying, “Look, you shiitasses, we’ve got nice women, too, and sexier than yours,” and she, neither curt nor languid, would let herself be shown off. She knew who we were, proper upright people, and she liked the deal and went for Emilio, who swallowed it whole, without chewing.

“That woman’s driving me crazy,” Emilio kept repeating, half worried and half happy.

“That woman’s a gunshot,” I said, half worried and half envious.

We were both right. Rosario is one of those women who are poison and antidote at the same time. The one she wants to cure she cures, and the one she wants to kill she kills.
two

Ever since Rosario first knew life all she's done is fight against it. Sometimes Rosario wins, other times her opponent does, and sometimes it's a tie. But if you were to place a bet on the fight you'd know with your eyes closed how it came out: Rosario will lose. She would surely tell me, as she always did, that life gets the better of us all, that it ends up killing us one way or another, and I would certainly have to say yes, she's right. But it's one thing to lose a fight on points and something quite different to lose by knockout.

The earlier one gets to know sex, the greater the possibility that things will go badly in life. That's why I insist that Rosario was born a loser, because she was raped before her time, at the age of eight, when you don't even know what that thing hanging on someone is used for. She didn't know that she could be hurt there, in the place she was told in school to take care of and to wash with soap and water every day, but it was precisely there where it hurt the most, because one of the many men who lived with her mother put his hand over her mouth one night and
climbed on top of her, opened her little legs, and drove into her the first pain Rosario had felt in her life.

"Only eight years old," she remembered with rage. "I'm never going to forget that."

It seems that that night wasn't the only time. The guy grew to enjoy his vileness. And, according to Rosario, even after Doña Rubi changed men he kept after her, at home, in school, at the bus stop, until she couldn't take any more, and she told everything to her brother, the only one who seems to have really loved her.

"Johnefe took care of everything without saying a word," Rosario said. "The one who told me was a friend of his, after they killed him."

"So, what did they do to the guy?"

"Him... they left him without anything to fuck with."

Although they left the man without his wicked weapon, she never lost her pain, it just changed location and rose up into her soul.

"Eight years old," she repeated. "What an asshole."

Doña Rubi refused to believe the story when Johnefe told her in a rage. She had a thing for defending the men who weren't with her anymore and attacking the one who was—the well-known penchant women have for loving the man they haven't got.

"Those are the child's tales. She's already got the imagination of a grown-up," Doña Rubi said.

"The one who's got a big one is you, Mamá," Johnefe answered, furious. "And I'm not talking about imaginations."

He loved Rosario because she was his only true sister: "children of the same father and the same mother," their mother asserted. What seemed strange to them was the big difference in age and that no man was known to have lasted that long with the lady. But in spite of his suspicions, the only one he accepted and called sister was Rosario, the others were simply "Doña Rubi's kids."

"How many brothers and sisters do you have, Rosario?" I asked casually.

"Huh! I don't even know how many of us there are now," she said. "Because after I left I heard that Doña Rubi kept on having babies, as if she could afford to feed them."

Rosario left home at the age of eleven. She began a long foray that never allowed her to live in the same place for more than a year. Johnefe was the first to take her in. They threw her out of the last school, where they'd taken the chance of letting her in in spite of the story of the "scratch" and a few other similar misdeeds, but this last one—holding a teacher captive for a whole morning and cutting her hair with wild snips of her scissors—was unforgivable and brought on new threats of sending her to reform school.

"Well, if they won't take you in jail," Doña Rubi told her, beside herself with anger, "you're not wanted in this house either. Get out of here right this minute."

Rosario cheerily took refuge with her brother. There was no doubt that she loved him more than her mother or anybody else in the world.

"Even more than Ferney," she would say with pride.

Ferney was a friend of Johnefe's, buddies and brothers in a gang. They were the same age, maybe five years older than Rosario. She loved him from the start. From the first time she saw him she understood that Ferney was a brother she could sin with.
“I never imagined I’d have a rival from that neighborhood,” Emilio would say.
“You’re going to get killed,” we would warn him, uselessly.
“He’ll get killed first. You’ll see.”

When Emilio met Rosario she wasn’t with Ferney anymore. It had been quite a while since she’d left his hangouts and his crowd. The toughest tough guys had set her up in a luxury apartment—right near ours, as a matter of fact—had given her a car, a bank account, and anything that struck her fancy. Still, Ferney continued being her guardian angel, her clandestine lover, her dead brother’s replacement. Ferney also became a headache for Emilio, and Emilio was a pebble in Ferney’s shoe. Although they saw each other only a few times, they established a mutual hate in which Rosario acted as go-between. She carried messages of hate back and forth.

“Tell that son of a bitch to watch his step,” Ferney ordered her to say.

“Tell that son of a bitch I’m watching my step,” Emilio ordered her to say.

“So why don’t you just kill each other already and leave me alone?” Rosario would tell them. “I’ve had it with your back and forth.”

Rosario would complain, but she really enjoyed the duel. In a certain way she was the one who encouraged it the most, the one who went back and forth all the time, and, with the help of her lies, found delight in complicating the fight.

When Ferney finally got killed we thought Rosario would be resentful toward us, especially toward Emilio, who’d felt such a strong animosity toward him, but no, that wasn’t how it was. You never knew what to expect from Rosario.

“The police are looking for you,” a nurse told me suddenly.
“Me?” I answered, still thinking about Ferney.
“Weren’t you the one who brought in the woman with the bullet wound?”
“Rosario? Yes, that was me.”
“So go on out, they want to talk to you.”

Outside there were at least a dozen cops. For a second I thought they’d organized a whole operation around us, like the ones during the good times when I would go along with Emilio and Rosario on their crazy capers.

“Don’t be scared,” the nurse told me when she saw my face. “On weekends there are more police around here than doctors.”

She pointed out the ones involved in our case: a pair of dense officers with faces as dark as their uniforms. With the coolness they’d learned, they started their interrogation as though I were the criminal and not the others. Why did I kill her, what did I shoot her with, who was the dead woman, what relationship or connection did she have with me, where was the murder weapon, where were my accomplices, was I drunk, that I was under arrest, that I was to go along with them as a suspect.

“I haven’t killed anyone and I haven’t fired anything, there’s no dead woman because she’s still alive, her name is Rosario and she’s a friend of mine, I haven’t got a weapon, much less a murder weapon, and I haven’t got any accomplices because the one who did the shooting was somebody else, I’m not drunk anymore because the shock sobered me up, and instead of asking me stupid questions and looking where there’s nothing to find, you should be trying to catch the one who got us into this,” I told them.

I turned my back on them, unconcerned with what they might do. They shouted at me not to think I was such a big
shot, that we’d meet again, and I went back to my dark corner, closer to her.

“Rosario,” I kept on repeating, “Rosario.”

I’ve had to struggle with my memory to remember when and where we’d seen each other for the first time. I can’t place the exact date, maybe six years ago, but I do know where. It was at Aquarius, Friday or Saturday, the days we never missed. The club was one of those places that attracted the lower classes who were beginning to rise and those of us among the upper classes who were beginning to fall. They already had enough money now to spend in the places where we paid on credit, and they were already doing business with people of our class. Economically, we were now equals. They wore the same clothing we did, went around in better cars, and had more drugs, which they shared with us—that was their biggest hold on us. They took risks, were bold, and made themselves respected, they were what we weren’t but underneath it all had always wanted to be. We would watch them with their weapons cased in their flies, increasing the bulge, showing us in a thousand ways that they were bigger men than we, bigger hell-raisers. They flirted with our women and showed theirs off to us. Uninhibited women, as determined as their men, unreserved in their lovemaking, hot mestizo women with firm legs from so much climbing up the hills in their neighborhoods, belonging more to this land than our women, more agreeable and less snotty. Among them was Rosario.

“How did you fall in love with her?” I asked Emilio.

“The minute I saw her, I was done for.”

“I know that when you saw her you liked her, but I’m talking about something different, about falling in love. You know what I mean?”

Emilio was thoughtful. I don’t know if he was trying to understand what I was telling him or if he was looking for that moment when you can’t turn back.

“Now I remember,” he said. “One night after partying, Rosario told me that she was hungry, and we went to have some hot dogs at one of those street carts, and you know what she ordered? A hot dog with no sausage.”

“So?” I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“What do you mean, ‘so’? Anybody would have to fall in love with that.”

I don’t know if a hot dog with no sausage can make a person lose himself, but what I am sure of is that there are a thousand reasons for falling in love with Rosario. I can’t narrow mine down to one, there was no one reason that made me adore her. I think it was the thousand of them put together.

“Are you attracted to Rosario?” Emilio asked me.

“Me? You’re crazy,” I lied to him.

“You’re happy when you’re with her.”

“That doesn’t mean a thing,” I lied again. “I like her a lot, we’re very good friends, that’s all.”

“So what do the two of you talk about all day?” Emilio asked in a tone I didn’t like.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” he asked again, his voice rising a bit.

“Well, about things, OK? We talk about a little of everything.”

“That sounds strange to me.”

“What’s funny about it?”

“Well, she doesn’t talk about anything with me.”

Rosario and I could spend a whole night talking, and I’m
not lying when I say that we talked about a little of everything, about her, about me, about Emilio. The words just kept pouring out of us. We didn’t feel sleepy or hungry when we settled down to talk. The hours passed and passed without our realizing it, without dampening with our conversation. Rosario would look into my eyes as she spoke, she would hold me with her gaze no matter how silly the subject might be. With her dark eyes, she would take me with her into the deepest part of her heart, and, leading me by the hand, she would show me the foulest moments of her life. Every look, every word were a journey that she would take only with me.

“If I were to tell you,” she would say before telling me everything.

She spoke with her eyes, with her mouth, with her whole face, and she spoke with her soul when she was talking to me. She would squeeze my arm to emphasize something, or she would put her thin hand on my thigh when what she was telling me became complicated. Her stories weren’t easy. Mine were like fairy tales compared to hers, and if in mine Little Red Riding Hood returned happily to her grandmother, in hers the little girl ate the wolf, the hunter, and her grandmother, and Snow White massacred the Seven Dwarfs.

Almost nothing remained to be discussed between Rosario and me. For years we dedicated hours and hours to our stories, she following my voice with her gaze, and I losing myself in her words and in her dark eyes. We talked about a little of everything, except love.

“Is she your girlfriend?” a passing nurse asked me.

“Who? Rosario?”

“The wounded girl you brought in.”

I never knew exactly what kind of relationship I had with Rosario. Everybody knew that we were good friends, maybe closer than usual, a lot of them said, but we never went beyond what people saw. Well, never except for one night, that night, my only night with Rosario Tijeras. Otherwise we were just two good friends who opened up their lives to each other to show themselves as they are, and only today do I realize that one couldn’t live without the other, and that from being together so much they became indispensable to each other, and that from loving each other so much as friends, one of them loved more than he should have, more than what friendship allows. Because in order for a friendship to last, everything is permitted except betraying it by bringing love into it. “My friend,” Rosario would say to me. “My friend.” From the years I spent with her I’m only left with two questions: the one she never answered and what would have happened with us if Emilio hadn’t been in the middle. Now I think that perhaps nothing would have happened. I say that because of that absurd tendency women have for getting together not with the man they love but with the one they feel like having.

“Rosario is attracted to you,” Emilio insisted.

“Cut the bullshit,” I insisted.

“It’s just that it’s so weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“That she doesn’t look at me the way she looks at you.”
A neighbor from farther up the hill, almost where the neighborhood ends, was Rosario Tijeras's first victim. She got her nickname because of him, and she learned from him that she could defend herself all alone without the help of Johnefe or Ferney. He taught her that life has its dark side and that that side had been the one she'd been dealt.

"That day I'd gone downtown to buy some clothes with the money that Johnefe had given me. Gloria went with me to make the rounds, and on the way back, since she lived farther down, she got home first and I went on alone. You hear a lot of stories, but going along those streets never scared me. I never thought anyone would mess with me, being Johnefe's sister. But just when I was almost home two guys from farther up the hill came at me. They belonged to Mario Malo's gang. He was a guy everybody kept away from except for Johnefe, and that's why I thought that not even they would mess with me, but that night they did. It was very dark, and I only recognized one, the guy they call Cachi. I couldn't see the other one too well. The two of
them dragged me into a ditch kicking and screaming, but you know how up there the more you scream, the more people get scared, and the more they shut themselves in. What happened was that they fucked up my dress and then they fucked me up. The other guy held me and covered my mouth while Cachi did what he did. When it was the other one's turn I was able to scream because he took his hand away so he could make himself more comfortable, and some people heard me and came over to take a look, but that pair of faggots ran off down the gulley. You can just imagine the shape I was in when I got to my brother's place. I was feeling worthless and crying like a crazy woman, but he went even crazier when he saw me, asking what had happened to me, who'd done this to me so he could kill the son of a bitch. But I didn't tell him anything. I knew they were Mario Malo's people, and that if I talked, the toughest kind of gang war, would break out and they were capable of killing Johnefe. But he insisted, he told me that if I didn't tell him he'd kill me, and I told him to kill me then, because I didn't get a good look at them, that they were probably people from the hill.

Rosario interrupted her story and sat staring some point on the table. I looked somewhere else because I didn't know where to look, then I saw her shrug her shoulders and smile at me.

"What then?" I ventured to ask.

"Then? Nothing. I was a piece of shit for a long time. Besides, Johnefe wasn't talking to me, he was mad because I hadn't told him who it was, but I didn't want anything to happen to him, my troubles were enough. But what Johnefe never found out was that I was able to get my revenge. About six months later, when I went to visit Doña Rubi one day, I ran into Cachi on the street. I almost died with fright, but he didn't seem to recog-

nize me. I think he didn't get a good look at my face that night, because I know that people like that get paranoid when they mess with someone because they think you're going to snitch on them or get even, but this guy, you know what he did? He started flirting with me and telling me a lot of stupid things. Can you believe?"

"And then?"

"Then? Every time I went to Doña Rubi's I'd find him there, and when I wasn't afraid of him anymore, when I decided that it was payback time, then I went along with his little game of giggling and flirting until I got him all happy. After a time, about a month, one day when I didn't find Doña Rubi at home, I invited him in, I asked him to come in because my mother wasn't there, and you can't imagine how wide he opened his eyes, and, naturally, I already knew what I was going to do. Then I brought him into my bedroom, put on a little music, let him kiss me, let him touch me where he'd mistreated me before, told him to take off his clothes and to lay down nice and quiet next to me. And I began to rub him down there, and he closed his eyes, saying he couldn't believe it, that it felt so good, and right there I took out Doña Rubi's scissors, which I'd put under the pillow, and snip! I sliced off his nuts."

"No!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, just imagine. The guy began to scream like a crazy man, and Iscreamed even louder that he should remember the night in the gulley, that he should take a good look at me so he wouldn't forget my face, and I began to jab him all over, and the guy ran out bleeding, without any balls and without any clothes, and all people could do was stare."

"And then?"
“Then? I never saw or heard of him again. And anyway, Doña Rubi got hysterical over the bloody mess I’d made of her house and told me she didn’t want to see me there ever again.”

“And when all this happened, Rosario, how old were you?” I asked her.

“I’d just turned thirteen. I’ll never forget that.”

Every time Rosario told a story it was as though she were living it again. With the same intensity she would open her big eyes and become frightened the way she’d been before or wave her hands from the anxiety of a recent experience and would revive the hatred, the love of that time, accompanied by a smile or, more often, by a tear. Rosario would tell a thousand stories, and they all seemed different, but when you put them all together, it was just one story, the story of Rosario fruitlessly trying to win out over life.

“Win what?” Emilio asked me, not knowing much about these matters.

To win over it, that’s all, bend it over to her ways, have it at her feet like a humiliated competitor, or at least fool herself the way we all do, those of us who believe that it’s all resolved by a career, a wife, a safe home, and children. Rosario’s fight isn’t so simple, it has very deep roots, from long ago, from earlier generations. Life weighs on her with the weight of this country, her genes drag along a race of sons of plenty and sons of bitches who with the blade of a machete cleared the pathways of life. They’re still doing it. They ate with the machete, they worked, shaved, killed, and settled differences with their wives with a machete. Today the machete is a shotgun, a nine-millimeter, a chopper. The weapon has changed but not its use. The story has changed, too, has become terrifying. Once proud, we are now ashamed, without understanding how, why, and when it all happened. We don’t know how long our history is, but we can feel its weight. And Rosario has borne it since time immemorial, for that reason, when she was born, she didn’t come bearing bread under her arm, but misfortune.

“What’s happening? What have you heard?” Emilio asked me as soon as he answered the phone.

“Nothing. They’ve still got her inside.”

“But what’s going on? What do they say?”

“They don’t say anything. Nobody knows anything.”

“Then why did you call me?” he said, confused. “Call me when you know something. I’m worried, man.”

“What time is it?” I asked him.

“I’ve no idea,” he said. “It must be around four-thirty.”

Johnfe thought that Rosario had gotten pregnant when she was raped. He saw how she was gaining weight, but when he tried counting the months, he couldn’t be sure. He made her go to the health center to settle his doubts even though insisted that there wasn’t any pregnancy.

“You’d better not be pregnant,” he told her, “because we’re not going to raise any bastards in this house.”

What Johnfe didn’t notice was that Rosario could clean out the refrigerator in one day. She devised ingenious ways to hide it. She would put back the empty packages of what she’d devoured, she would replace what she had eaten with what she charged at the corner store, if she didn’t swallow it on the way home, that is. In fact, it was the bill from the storekeeper that put an end to Johnfe’s doubts and, at the same time, betrayed Rosario.

“Explain it to me,” he told her with the bill in his hand. “Five pounds of bacon, three of sugar, two quarts of ice cream, a
cake, twenty-three chocolate bars—when could anyone ever eat twenty-three chocolate bars?—six dozen eggs, eight pounds of meat, twelve quarts of milk, and the only ones eating here are me, you, and Deisy, and the bill is for this month, only this month. Please explain it to me.”

“What do you want me to explain?” she answered defiantly. “I ate it all, and if you’re going to scream over that fucking bill, I’ll pay it.”

“Anybody can see that you ate it from a mile away. Do you think I bust my ass so you can stay here doing nothing, fattening up like a cow, while I have to go out there and risk my neck to bring back some cash so you can freeload and live like a queen?”

“Well, if it bugs you so much,” Rosario went on in the same tone, “I’ll go back to my mother’s.”

“You know Doña Rubi doesn’t want to set eyes on you again. I don’t know what you did back there, but since you fucked up her house, just what did you do, Rosario? Because nobody believes your story about your period, because if it were true, you must be dying. And don’t start crying, don’t cry, don’t you cry either, Deisy, hell, why do women start crying when you talk to them?”

“I’m not crying,” Rosario said, crying. “Me either,” said Deisy, drowning in tears.

Rosario almost always cried because of rage, I only saw her weep a few times because of sadness. The truth is she wasn’t addicted to crying and only resorted to it in extreme situations, and seeing her brother, the love of her life, angry at her was one of those situations.

“I always got thin again for him,” she said, remembering. “He didn’t like to see me fat. He’d yell at me until my ears burned when he saw that I was overweight. Besides, when he saw me all bloated he would try to find out what I was up to. He didn’t like it when I got into trouble.”

I saw her fat a few times, the same times she was involved in some bad situation, the times she synchronized a kiss with a bullet.

“I can’t understand this thing you’ve got for kissing dead people!” Emilio would tell her in a rage.

“What do you mean, dead people?” she answered. “I kiss them before they die.”

“It’s all the same, but what do kisses have to do with death?”

Emilio had learned to talk about death with the same ease with which she killed. In his urge to follow her, he slowly getting mixed up in Rosario’s strange world, and when he realized how far he’d gone, he was up to his neck in crimes, debts, and problems. In order to have her, he’d come down to her level, and I became an occasional companion in his fall.

“I feel sorry for them,” Rosario explained to us. “I think they deserve a kiss at least before they go off.”

“So if you feel sorry for them, why do you kill them?” I asked, butting into what was none of my business.

“Because it happens. You know.”

I didn’t know anything. I got involved with them because I liked them, because I couldn’t live without Emilio and Rosario, and because at that age I wanted to feel life more, and with them I was guaranteed adventure. Now, I can’t understand how I had the courage to go along with them. It was like closing your eyes to jump into a cold swimming pool.

“What’s your opinion?” Emilio would always ask me.
“My opinion about what?” I would always answer, knowing where the conversation was headed.

“Of Rosario, of all this.”

“We have nothing to gain anymore by having opinions,” I told him. “The ground has already swallowed us up.”

The first situation with no way out took place after we had known her a few months, in the club where we’d first met her. Emilio was already Rosario’s official boyfriend, and it didn’t bother him to show her off everywhere. He was riding high. He showed her off as though she were one of the princesses of Monaco, and he paid no attention to what people said about her and her background. I was always with them. He also didn’t care about the threats from Ferney and his gang—to him for taking her away and to her for having given herself. That night one of them complained to Rosario in the bathroom:

“You’re a cheap woman, giving yourself away like that,” the guy told her.

“Don’t fuck with me, Pato, don’t get involved in this,” she warned him. “Do you want a snort?”

It seems that when she opened the packet he blew it all in her face, and she filled with rage. She wiped her burning eyes and saw that the man was still there.

“This stuff isn’t going to go to waste, Patico,” she said. “Lick it off my face and then give me a little kiss on the mouth with your tongue.”

Patico didn’t understand Rosario’s reaction, but to make amends he did what she said. As he licked her on the cheeks, along the nose and eyelids, he left a damp trail in the white powder. Then, just as she’d ordered, he arrived at her mouth, stuck out his tongue, and passed the bitter taste on to Rosario.

She, in the meantime, had taken the piece out of her purse, held it against his belly, and, when she had sucked everything off his tongue, she fired.

“You respect me, Patico,” was the last thing the guy heard. She put the pistol away and came calmly back to the table. “Let’s go,” she said. “I’m bored.”

There was a great commotion in the bathroom because they’d found a dead man. The people in Ferney’s gang went wild, they shouted and took out their weapons, and one of them pointed to Rosario. Emilio and I looked at each other. Rosario, putting on lipstick, tried to look as if nothing had happened.

“Let’s get out of here, Emilio,” I said. “I’m bored, too.”

In the midst of the turmoil I felt bullets whizzing by. Rosario took her gun out again and began to fire behind her. People left in terror and in a confusion of screams and hysteria. I don’t know how we got to the car. I don’t know how we managed to get out of the parking lot. I don’t know how it is we’re still alive.

When we got home Rosario told us all about it.

“You did what?” Emilio asked in disbelief.

Yes, she’d killed him right under our noses. She admitted it and wasn’t ashamed. She told us that he wasn’t the first and that he certainly wouldn’t be the last.

“Because anyone who insults me like that gets paid that way.”

We couldn’t believe it. We cried from the scare and the shock. Emilio became desperate, as if he were the murderer, kicking the furniture, crying, and pounding on the doors with his fists. More than being affected by the crime, what was driving him out of his mind was the realization that Rosario wasn’t a dream
but something real. He, of course, wasn’t the only one who had been deceived.
“T’ve had it!” she told us. “Hanging out with a pair of faggots like you two.”
That night I thought that that was as far as we would go with Rosario. I was wrong. I don’t know how she managed it, but she wasn’t charged with the murder, and we never knew at what moment we put aside the dream and became part of the nightmare.

From the hospital window Medellín looks like a Christmas crèche. Tiny lights encrusted in the mountainside twinkle like stars. There are no dark spaces along the slopes, which are covered with lights from top to bottom, and the “silver cup” shines as never before. The lighted buildings give it a cosmopolitan look, an air of grandeur that makes us think that we’ve already conquered underdevelopment. The metro crosses through the middle, and when we first saw it snake through the city, we thought that we’d finally emerged from poverty.
“How pretty it looks from up here,” all of us who viewed the city from above would say.
A five-minute car ride in any direction, and you got a sweeping panorama of the city. Seeing its glow light up Rosario’s face, puzzled as she watched the crèche, made us feel grateful to those who’d invaded the mountains and settled there. Rosario took me to that other city, the one of the little lights. She was slow in showing it to me, but with time she lifted her finger to point out where she was from. It was a slow learning process, where trust,
This was a favor she often asked of me and that put me up against the wall. I felt I was betraying my best friend, who I had more reasons for loving than I had for Rosario. But since she was the one who manipulated feelings, I would finally go along with her and say nothing. This time, however, the secret didn’t last very long. She couldn’t hide it.

The strong woman who’d spoken to me on the phone had succumbed to reality, and when I picked her up, I had to help her into the car. She was all broken up; possessed by grief and anger, she was crying and cursing, threatening to kill God himself. She was armed. I had to stop the car and tell her that if she didn’t give me the pistol, I wouldn’t take her. She didn’t listen to me and got out and, aiming the gun at a cab, forced it to stop. I got out and grabbed her. It was the first time I’d seen her cry. She lowered her gun and cried into my neck. Then, back in the car, she won again, she didn’t give me the pistol, nor was I capable of leaving her all alone. Later, as though she’d taken something, she calmed down.

“They’ve killed the love of my life, my friend,” she said. “The only one who ever loved me.”

I felt jealous. The jealousy that Emilio had never awakened in me I felt for her dead brother that day. I thought I ought to tell her everything I felt for her, take her out of her sweet state of ignorance and tell her that there was someone who loved her more than anyone else in the world.

“I love you, Rosario . . .” I began decisively. “We all love you,” I added, turning cowardly.

I wasn’t able to say it that time either. Besides—and I know I was right about this—it was neither the time nor the place for a declaration of love.
“Thanks, my friend,” was the only answer she gave.
When we reached the lower part of her neighborhood she began to guide me. We were in the labyrinth now, in foreign territory. All I could do was follow her instructions and put the car in first gear. After that it was nothing but astonishment at the surroundings. The eyes that followed our climb unsettled me with looks that I had never experienced, that made me feel like an outsider, gestures that made me ask myself what I, a foreigner in that place, was doing there.
Rosario interrupted my ruminations. “Drop me off here. I’ll continue on foot.”
“But, why? I’ll take you to your house.”
“The car can only go this far. You have to walk the rest of the way.”
She got out, trembling, pale, and overcome by a fear she couldn’t hide. She clutched her purse and put on dark glasses to shade her eyes from the sun that was beginning to appear.
“I’ll go with you, Rosario,” I insisted.
“It’s best if I go alone. I’ll tell you all about it afterward.”
She turned and began climbing up an unpaved hillside path. She did it smoothly, as if she were walking on level ground. I saw her firm legs, her raised behind, her figure straight, in spite of carrying the weight of the worst sorrow she had known. Someone said hello from a doorway. Rosario had returned to her own people.
“Rosario!” She managed to hear me though I shouted from inside the car. “Don’t do anything that’ll hurt me!”
Her whole life pained me as if it were my own. It filled me with sadness to see her suffer. I would search among the possibilities that were within my reach for some way to make her happy.

“Miss! Miss! Excuse me!” The nurse had fallen asleep at her post.
“Huh?”
“Excuse me, but I want to check on Rosario, the woman who’s in surgery.”
“Who?” she asked as she struggled to insert herself into reality.
“Rosario Ti—” I was only able to say, because when she felt awake she interrupted me.
“If there hasn’t been any word, it’s because there hasn’t been any word yet.”
I tried a different approach, using time:
“I wonder what time it is.”
She didn’t answer me but closed her eyes, seeking the warmth of her chair once more. I looked at the clock on the wall.
“Four-thirty,” I said quietly so as not to awake her.
How time flies! I could swear that it was barely a month ago that I saw Rosario last, when Emilio and I decided that if we didn’t stop we’d end up worse than she. Rosario was prepared to get what she wanted, no matter who was in her way. She’d got it into her head to get money on her own, to get richer than the ones supporting her, and what frightened us was that she knew only one way to get it, the way they had.
“It’s so easy, so very easy,” she told us. “All you need are the right people, and I’ve got them.”
It wasn’t only a question of people; you also had to have Rosario’s drive and her balls, and we had no drive left after all the trouble she’d gotten us into. We didn’t need more money, either. And we’d lost our balls a long time ago. So instead of going along with her in her new adventure, we began preparing our goodbyes.
A week after her brother’s death Rosario called me at three in the morning. I had been looking for her all week, so it didn’t bother me that she woke me up.

“Where are you?” I asked as soon as I recognized her voice.

“We buried Johnfe today,” she told me.

“But that was a week ago.”

“We were hanging out with him.”

“You were what?” I asked, bewildered.

“I’ll tell you about it later. I can’t talk much now,” she said, lowering her voice. “Look, my friend, I’m going to be away for a few days. I’ll call you when I get back.”

“What do you mean, Rosario? Where are you going?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll call you later. But tell Emilio that I had to go with my mother to . . . to Bogotá, where she’s got a sister.”

“Rosario! Wait, tell me what’s going on.”

“Bye, my friend. I’ll tell you about it later,” she said and hung up.

Emilio, of course, understood less than I. He would fall apart when she disappeared on him, the mystery surrounding her would unhinge him completely. Whenever something like this happened, and it happened quite a lot, he would swear to me that he was going to put an end to it. But she knew how to deal with him, she’d let him go on with all his ranting, and later, in bed, she’d go about driving him crazy.

“What pisses me off is that she never asks me about anything!” Emilio said, furious. “It’s like I didn’t exist!”

“But she called me and told me to tell you everything,” I said, trying to make excuses for her.

“That’s even stranger!”

“What is?”

“That she called you and didn’t call me!”

Emilio was right. But he never had the patience to sit down and try to understand Rosario. Maybe because he had her he became accustomed to what was immediate, while I, on the other hand, had to imagine her. I studied every way there was to have her close to me, I observed her carefully so as not to do anything imprudent. I learned that you had to win her bit by bit, and after all that silent examination I was able to understand her, to get closer to her than anyone ever had, to have her in my own way. But I also understood that Rosario had given herself in two parts: she gave me her soul and Emilio her body. What I still haven’t been able to figure out is which of us got the better deal.

A month after the phone call, Rosario turned up. She was fat. She wasn’t the same person I’d left in the hills. There was something about her manner that scared me, that foreshadowed the evil winds that were blowing. She asked me to meet her in a mall near her apartment, in the food court. I found her greedily devouring some french fries and drinking a malted. She was wearing dark glasses and a sweater. She shocked me, she was wilder than ever.

“What’s going on, Rosario?” I asked after saying hello.

“Want some french fries?”

“I want you to tell me what’s going on with you.”

“Buy me another malted, my friend. I didn’t bring more money.”

It wasn’t easy to get things out of her unless you bought her five shots of aguardiente. But I didn’t have the patience to wait for her to decide to tell me.
“Emilio's going to kill you,” I told her. “He's furious. He doesn't want to even see you.”

“Well, he can go to hell!” she exploded. “I don't want to see him either!”

“It's not that, Rosario, it's that we were worried. You took off like that, without any warning, and then you show up like this.”

“What do you mean, 'like this?'” she asked, challenging me. “I'm going to be frank with you, Rosario, you're looking very strange.”

“What's strange about me? Eh? What's strange about me? Tell me.”

If I'd answered her, who knows what might have happened. My comment was enough for her to sweep everything off the table with her arm, then she stood up, furious, and challenged everyone who was looking at her.

“What! Did you all lose something or what? Mind your own business, you bunch of bastards!”

They all obeyed. In the silence, you could hear her furious footsteps moving away. Everyone looked at me out of the corners of their eyes. I didn't know what to do, but I was at an even further loss when, as I was about to get up, I saw Rosario coming back. She came over and stood with her face only inches from mine, and although she tried to speak in a low voice, she couldn't help shouting at me.

“What are friends for, faggot? For what?” I could see through her glasses that she was crying. “If I can't count on you, then who can I count on? You're good for nothing, you shit. I didn't call you so that you could fuck with me or tell me I'm fat.”

“I didn't say you were fat,” I corrected her.

“But it was obvious that you wanted to! And I'm going to get fatter, because I don't give a damn about any of you, not you, not Emilio, not anybody. Did you hear me? I don't give a damn about anybody. The only one who mattered to me was killed, and it didn't make any difference to you.”

Her rage and her tears prevented her from going on. She was trembling, smothered by her own words. I felt the urge to hug her, to grab her and kiss her, to tell her that everything about her mattered to me, more than anything of mine, more than my life. I wanted to cry along with her, cry for her rage, for her sorrow, and for my silence.

“You do matter to me, Rosario,” was the only thing I told her. And although I had thought of it first, she was the one who hugged me.
“Marry me, Rosario,” Emilio proposed to her.
“Are you an idiot or what?” she replied.
“Why? What’s so strange about it, if we love each other?”
“And what’s love got to do with marriage?”

I was relieved when I heard of her negative answer. Emilio had already mentioned his intentions to me, but I didn’t say anything to him, first because I knew Rosario, and second because the proposal was more an act of rebellion on Emilio’s part than an act of love. His family was putting considerable pressure on him to drop her. They cut his income and his privileges and began to treat him like a criminal suspect.

“My mother has to put everything under lock and key,” he told me. “It’s so strange. All that’s left for her to do is padlock the phone or charge me for my calls.”

What I found interesting about Emilio’s proposal was Rosario’s answer. She saw the discrepancy in the association everyone makes between love and marriage. It confirmed for me that behind her beauty and her violence there was a point of view
and a sensible one at that. Everything I discovered about her made me go on loving her, and the more I loved her the further away from me she got.

“So,” I asked Emilio, “are you going to get married or not?”

“Hell, no!” he answered. “That woman comes out with the strangest things. Besides, what would I have used for money? They don’t even say hello to me at home anymore.”

“What’s that all about?”

“My mother’s got herself tied up in knots.”

Emilio’s family belongs to Latin American royalty, loaded down with ancestry and lineage. They’re the ones who never stand in line anywhere because they think it’s beneath them, and they never pay anyone because they think their name is credit enough. They speak English because they think it’s classier, and they love the United States more than their own country. Emilio always tried to rebel against the establishment. He got himself kicked out of his bilingual high school and went to the one where all the loafers ended up. He tried to get into the public university, but this time it wasn’t his family that put a stop to it, it was his grade-point average. And afterward, to top it off, he brought them Rosario.

“It’s obvious that she doesn’t have any class,” his mother told him the day she met her. “She doesn’t even know how to eat properly.”

“She knows how to eat me,” he told them. “And that’s all that matters.”

Although I’m bothered by any kind of rejection of Rosario, I was glad when I heard about her rejection by Emilio’s family. In spite of his disobedience he never dared challenge them with any relationship other than the one he had with her. And, as almost always happens, the establishment won. After Rosario, Emilio once again swam skillfully in its waters. He earns a good salary now, works with his father, is careful with what he says, and has a girlfriend who everyone loves except him. I changed too. Yet I would venture to say that it wasn’t pressure from our families that forced us to change, but that the bomb Emilio, Rosario, and I assembled finally blew up.

I never imagined that my capacity for jealousy could reach such heights: the rejections she received and that caused me such pain were the ones that sank her into that loneliness where I was her only island. Now I think that it was adversity that always brought us together. I feel that way at this moment, in this hospital, with her inside, hoping for a final miracle, and I feeling privileged to be the only one with her.

“She’s got bullets everywhere,” one of the doctors on duty told me when I asked him to translate the diagnosis for me.

“So what now?”

“We have to wait,” he said. “They’re doing everything they can.”

I could see the anguish of my premonition mirrored in the eyes of an old man sitting in the sofa opposite me. We were the only ones left at that hour, and although the man had been dozing the whole time, I found myself facing his alert gaze immediately after the doctor’s report.

“Have faith, everything is possible,” the old man said to me.

I felt that he, too, was hoping for Rosario’s resurrection, that he also loved her as much as I, that he might be a relative, maybe her unknown father. I wasn’t in the mood to start a conversation, but I found out later that a son of his, about the same age as Rosario, had also come in all shot up, and that to the both
of us, he the same as I, had fallen the task of having faith and waiting.

"I wonder what time it is," I asked him.

He looked over my shoulder at the clock on the wall.

"Four-thirty," he answered.

Rosario felt that Emilio's mother had rejected her from the very first moment. The lady made no effort to hide it, and Rosario's nerves put an end to her good intentions. That was when Emilio suggested inviting her to the wedding of a cousin of his, I think, supposedly so that his whole family could meet her at one time.

"When she saw me the lady wrinkled up her nose as if I had an unpleasant smell about me," Rosario told me.

She'd greeted her with a "How are you, young lady," and didn't say another word until after Rosario had left. Emilio told me afterward that what his mother didn't say during the festivities she later unloaded on him without stopping for breath, that she had run out of words with which to insult Rosario.

"Goddamned old bitch!" Rosario kept repeating. "And she didn't talk—imagine if she had! I would have cut her tongue out with the steak knife!"

Her eyes would fill with tears when she recalled that night, and she would clench her teeth if the lady in question were mentioned. She disappeared and didn't speak to Emilio again after that night. When she got into the car she was already weeping with rage and wouldn't let him drive her home. Halfway there she got out and climbed into a taxi. As soon as she got home she called me.

"If only you could have seen them, my friend." She could hardly speak. "I'd bought myself a fabulous outfit where the old lady buys her clothes, and they charged me an arm and a leg for it. I had my hair done where they fix up the old lady, and they left me looking great. If only you could have seen me, I looked like a queen. He'd suggested that I not speak too much so as not to go and mess things up. I practiced a cute little laugh in the mirror and even hid my scapulars with some very fine chains. In other words, you wouldn't have recognized me. But as soon as I got there the old bitch starts looking at me like I was a piece of shit, and that was it, the hairdo, the little laugh, the jewelry—none of it mattered. I began to stutter like an idiot, to spill the wine. My food fell onto the tablecloth. I choked on some rice and couldn't stop coughing until I left. And everybody asking me, not because they like me but because they want to screw me up, what do you do, and your father and your mother, and where do you go to school, and all that shit, as if I were the only topic of conversation."

"What about Emilio?" I asked.

"Emilio had to answer for me because I hadn't prepared myself for any of that, and with all the choking I couldn't open my mouth again. And that's not the worst of it. We had barely finished eating when the first one to stand up was the old lady. Without a word, she just left the party, and then they all began leaving, saying excuse me, they had to leave, and within three minutes there was nobody left sitting at the table, just Emilio and me."

Every word carried the pain she was feeling. She would pause every so often to curse the lady, to say something bad about the rich and the poor, to curse God, and then she would go on with her story. She said she was going to leave Emilio, that nothing could be done, that they were so different, from two different
worlds, that she didn’t know what she was thinking—and I thought I’d die when she included me—when she got involved with us.

But if it was raining in my Medellin, in hers it never cleared. It seems that the scene Doña Rubi threw was worse than what Emilio’s mother had subjected her to. At first we didn’t know why, because the woman had nothing to lose, but we later realized that she sensed what was going to happen to Rosario.

“Tell me what you’re doing down there.” Doña Rubi asked her.

“You should ask him what he’s doing getting mixed up with me.”

“All he wants is to do you,” the lady replied.

“So let him,” the daughter answered.

Doña Rubi warned her about everything that could happen with “those people,” and she predicted that after they’d done with her what they wanted they’d put her back on the street like a dog, even poorer and more degraded than a tramp. Rosario stopped defending herself and listened to the harangue her mother was giving her in silence. Then, when she saw that her mother was also silent, she asked:

“Are you finished?”

Doña Rubi lit a cigarette, without taking her eyes off of her. Rosario stood up, picked up her purse, and headed for the door.

“Those people aren’t for you, child,” her mother managed to say before she closed the door.

Rosario said that her mother’s problem was that she was envious, that she had spent her whole life looking for a man with money and flirting with her employers, that the lady didn’t have the moral authority to judge her and less so now that she wasn’t living with her, and even lesser still now that she was going about looking very suspicious with her hair dyed blonde and wearing miniskirts Rosario’s size.

“Doña Rubi thinks she’s still fifteen,” Rosario said mockingly. “Who knows what she’s up to?”

In the end, both ladies hit the mark when they guessed what the future would bring, in spite of the great effort by Emilio and Rosario to maintain the relationship. But I insist that it wasn’t the scolding nor the pressure. It was us, yes, the three of us, because the relationship was supported by three pillars, as is always the case: the soul, the body, and reason. The three of us contributed a little bit of each. The three of us collapsed at the same time. We could no longer support the weight of what we’d created. Still, they couldn’t escape those hateful “I told you so’s.”

“I warned you, Emilio.”

“I told you, Rosario.”

I, on the other hand, got chastised by life, not at the end like them, but every time I looked into Rosario’s eyes. There was always an “I told you so” after seeing her go out with Emilio and for Emilio, after hearing her say that she loved him. There was always an “I told you so” every time I heard them horsing around behind closed doors, when I would imagine how their play ended, because that was what the sudden silence of their laughter, the creaking of the bed, and an occasional involuntary moan, told me.

“What were you doing?” Rosario asked me.

She would come out wearing a long T-shirt with nothing on underneath and with the smile of someone who had just had great sex.
“Reading,” I lied.
She’d come out to smoke a cigarette because Emilio didn’t like anyone smoking in his room. I couldn’t understand how you could deny Rosario anything after making love to her.

“Reading?” she asked me again. “What are you reading?”

I let her smoke in my room. She never asked me if she could, but I let her. Through the half-open door I would see Emilio, still naked, stretched out on the bed savoring the last little thrills of sex. She would sit on my bed, wearing only her shirt, and would lean against the wall, lifting her feet up onto the bed and crossing them, slowly release the smoke from her mouth with little drops of sweat still on her upper lip. She would ask me some silly question that I sometimes wouldn’t even answer because I knew she wouldn’t hear me. She didn’t always say something. Most of the time she would smoke her cigarette in silence and then go shower. And I, after watching her leave, would always look for the spot on the sheet where she’d been sitting to find the great gift she always left me: a small damp stain that would cling to my nose, to my mouth, and tell me what Rosario tasted like inside.

“Did you ever notice that death rhymes with breath?” Rosario observed.

I was dabbling in poetry those days, and since she was curious I got her a little involved in what I was reading. She related everything to death, even the explication of my poetry.

“This stuff would be great to read when you’re high on pot,” she said, and the proposal sounded fine to us.

There was a time when the three of us would shut ourselves up for an entire Sunday to smoke marijuana and read poetry. We would find phrases that made us think that we understood the world now, others that made us nod our heads, leaving us speechless, some that made us die laughing, and still others that made us terribly hungry. Those were peaceful times, times of reading and music and an occasional mood-altering drug. But there were other days, other Sundays, and other retreats, and I still can’t understand how we got out of them in one piece. We weren’t we three anymore, but part of a strange crowd.

“They’re friends of Rosario’s,” Emilio explained to me.
You didn’t need a mirror to see that they were different from us, even though we eventually ended up just like them. They had shaved heads, but above the nape of their necks they had long, uneven pigtailed. They wore shirts three sizes too big that hung down to just above their knees. Their blue jeans clung to their bodies like tubing and beneath was a pair of sneakers two stories high with fluorescent reflectors and neon stripes. I’d always seen them from a distance but had never noticed the details. Now that they were in Rosario’s apartment, however, I began to observe them closely and, reservedly, to imitate them. First came the hair, which we cut quite short, leaving more discrete pigtailed. Then we wrapped bracelets around our wrists and got into some old blue jeans. At parties we would swap shirts, which is how clothes from Fierrotibio, Charli, Pipicito, Mani, and others ended up in my closet. Johnefe, in a moment of affection, gave me one of his scapulars, the one he wore over his chest, which is why, according to Rosario, he was killed: it had hung over the spot where the bullet entered his body.

“Rosario talks to me about you a lot, man,” Johnefe told me that night. “She says you’re cool,” and he opened his shirt and squeezed the medallion. “People who love Rosario are something special in my book.” He took the scapular off very carefully, as if it had a gold chain. “Take it, man, put it on and take care of her for me, so that nothing will happen to my Rosario. You’ve got the look of a responsible guy, man, so take this. It’s of the Christ Child and will look after the two of you.” He took my face in his hands, squeezed my cheeks, and kissed me on the mouth. “Are we going to have another drag, or what?”

After he was killed I gave the scapular to Rosario. I thought she was going to put the blame on me, but she didn’t say anything.
everything, who laid out the money and could therefore allow
themselves the luxury of having her unconditionally. She’d go
off without letting us know. If two days went by without signs of
life from her it was because she was with them. You could also
deduce Rosario’s activities from the look on Emilio’s face.
“This is really the end now,” he would say every time that
Rosario was missing. “It really is.”
“You always say—”
“You’ll see,” he’d interrupt me. “I’m really going to send it all
to hell now.”
He was never able to keep his word. Rosario always came
back looking for him, sweet as honey, loaded with money, and
dying with desire for her sweet baby. She’d call me first to test
the waters.
“He told me that this time it really is over,” I told Rosario.
“Again?” she said.
“No. This time he said it really is.”
Rosario would show up with a gift for him, dressed as if for a
party, more beautiful than ever, ready to shut herself up with him
for whatever length of time was needed to make him happy.
“Why more presents, Rosario?” I thought when I saw her.
“You yourself are the present.”
She told me that coming back to Emilio was like drinking a
glass of iced water on a hot day.
“You can’t imagine the filth I’ve come from,” she said.
While she was with them she missed what she liked most
about Emilio, his flat stomach, his firm behind, the tickle of his
Sunday chin stubble, his big clean teeth, everything that they
couldn’t give her, no matter how much money they had.
“But there are other things that Emilio can’t give me, my
friend.”

What about me? I’ve also got a flat stomach, a firm behind,
large teeth, and a sincere heart that’s for loving only her.
“Nobody,” she would say, “nobody can give me what they
give me.”
It was true. There was no way of taking her away from them.
We always ended up going along, Emilio, Ferney, and I. We satis-
fied ourselves with the fact that she’d come back with whatever
affection she had to offer, to be divided up.
“Who are they, Rosario?” I asked her once.
“You know them. They’re in the news every day.”
As soon as they’d seen Rosario, what happened to everyone
happened to them: they wanted her for themselves. And since
the one with the most money is the one who gets to choose,
they got her.
“Johnefe and Ferney were able to place themselves within the
Cartel,” she told me. “That’s what every boy wants. That’s how
you stopped being a scrummer and had a chance at becoming a
tough guy. In those days there was great demand because things
were out of control, and they were looking for gang leaders to
arm their forces.”
“Translate, please,” I told her.
“War, my friend, war. You had to defend yourself. They were
paying big money to anyone who could bring down a cop. They
hired Ferney and Johnefe. Ferney didn’t have good aim, but he
was good with a motorcycle; Johnefe, on the other hand, was
eagle-eyed. The bullet hit where he trained his eye. After they
proved their skills, they were promoted. Things began going
good for them. They got new motorcycles and guns, and we
added a second story to the house. With that kind of money,
who wouldn’t want to work? We all wanted to be hired. Later, I
was also recruited.”
“Don’t tell me that you too…” I didn’t know how to say it. “You know… the police.”

“Noooo, my friend! I wasn’t any good at that. I didn’t know how to shoot from a distance. After all, it was Ferney who taught me and Ferney misses even at point-blank range. To be respected, you’ve got to have good aim. If not, it’s best to do something else.”

“Then,” I asked her, “why does everybody respect Ferney?”

“Ferney,” she corrected me. “Because he’s amazing on a motorcycle. Besides, he once saved us from a jam where if it hadn’t been for him, we’d have been pushing up the daisies a long time ago. Of course, it all happened because of bad shooting. We were taking on Papeleto’s gang and even though we were short on guns, we were already getting the better of them when one of them who was supposed to be dead came to life and started shooting, and Johnfe was out of bullets; only Ferney had any left. Then Johnfe shouted at him, ‘Let ‘em have it!’ And Ferney began to shoot back, but instead of getting that guy, he hit another one who was behind some bushes, where we hadn’t seen him. We only saw him roll onto the ground with a Mini-Uzi in his hand. Just imagine! He could have mowed us all down with that.”

“What about the other one? The one who’d come to life?” I asked, intrigued.

“That one? He died again.”

The whole story interested me because that was how she got to know the top dogs, going along with her brother and her boyfriend at the time on the jobs the Cartel assigned them.

“Then how is it that you got to the top?” I asked again.

“It’s a long story, my friend,” she said, “Let’s just have another drink.”

When she did decide to talk, Rosario was like a medicine dropper. She would place on the thirsty person’s tongue enough drops to make him imagine the full flow. Her limited words were a delicious and addictive drug that made you want to know more. The funny thing was that at first I doubted whether Rosario would do any talking. In fact, on the first outings her greeting was limited to a smile. We never knew if she was happy or bored, if she liked the place we were going to, or if she wanted to eat something. If you wanted to know anything, you had to ask.

“Don’t you get bored with that woman, Emilio?” we would ask him. “Can’t you see that she never says anything? You’d think she was mute.”

“So what?” Emilio would answer. “Why would anybody want a woman who talks? It’s better this way.”

In time she released her first little drops, only after getting to know the terrain and trusting it a little more. Among new people she sought trustworthy eyes, a soul that could keep all her secrets, and she found me. Although it couldn’t have required much effort on her part because for a long time I’d wanted to know what was behind that silence.

“What do you think about, Rosario?”

“When?”

“When you don’t say anything.”

“I don’t know. What do you think about?”

If I’d told her that I was always thinking about her… Ever since the morning I woke up wanting her I’d spent my time building a thousand worlds for Rosario, worlds that were born of my desires, that lasted as long as a dream lasts and that collapsed with the sharp slam of the door of her room, with her moan traveling through the walls, with her unexpected disappearances, when she ran off to the tough guys.

“You never told me how you got to know them,” I said.

“I already told you.”
“No, you haven’t told me,” I insisted. The Cartel had given Ferney and Johnefe a complicated job. They paid them more money than they could have earned in a year of work. The objective was a politician who was complicating life for their bosses.

“You know,” Rosario said, “one of those bastards.”

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“You mean, what was it,” she said. “The mission was a complete success.”

Five others went along with her brother and Ferney, and although she never told me the details of the operation, maybe because she didn’t know them, she did tell me that they each had company on the trip.

“It’s that the boys get very nervous,” she explained to me, “and only us women can calm them down. This time they also bought tickets for Deisy and me and for some other snotty women I didn’t know. We all traveled separately and arrived on different days, but Johnefe and Deisy and Ferney and me met in the same hotel. We passed ourselves off as honeymooning couples, so we had to be lovey-dovey all the time, and you know how that crap bothers me. I don’t like it when people talk to me all dreamy-like. If men only knew how gay they look when they get all romantic. That’s why I like Emilio, because he’s as affectionate as a piece of coal. Where was I?”

I’d lost the thread of the conversation, too. In a matter of seconds I didn’t know what to do with all the words I was imagining for her. Words of love that I put together as I fell asleep, that I prepared so that I could say them to her someday under the moon, on a beach, in the gay, romantic tone that bothered her so much. What other way is there to talk of love?

“You were at the part about the hotel,” I reminded her. “The hotel, the hotel . . .” she said, searching for where she’d left off. “Just imagine, they wouldn’t let us go out, not even to eat. The boys would leave early and come back late. I’d go to Deisy’s room or she’d come to mine. The boredom was relentless. All we would do was watch movies on cable, smoke marijuana, and sit at the window to look at Bogotá. The boys would come back at night all worked up and a bit drunk, and they wouldn’t tell us anything about what they were doing. Each one headed to his room so that we could take care of them. Ferney would come on like crazy, as if he’d never been with me, but he was in such a rush that he couldn’t get it to work. Well, the day they finished their job he did get it up.”

A lot of times I was the victim of something I myself had started, because when I tried to get Rosario to tell me her stories I’d come across details I would have rather not known. I would have preferred that her intimate moments be left to my imagination.

“Deisy told me that the same thing was happening with Johnefe,” she went on, “and that he would also pace and smoke crack all through the night, that he didn’t sleep and stayed on edge. One night they told us to get everything ready because we would be picked up the next morning and be taken to a place in the country and that we’d meet them there.

“So, who’s going to pick us up?” Deisy got it in her head to ask. ‘That’s none of your business,’ Johnefe answered her. ‘You just limit yourself to doing what I tell you, OK?’

“Sticking my nose in like an idiot, I started defending Deisy and you wouldn’t believe what happened. Johnefe raised his hand and hit me, telling me, ‘You clap-cunted bitch, I don’t know why
we brought you women along. All you do is get in the way.' And, naturally, Ferney didn't like anyone laying their hands on me, so he took out his piece and put it in Johnene's mouth and told him, 'You respect your sister, you bastard. When you mess with her, you mess with me. Show some respect for your sister!' Then the wildest yelling and screaming broke out until there was a knock on the door. We were paralyzed. No one moved or said anything. Johnene reacted and signaled to us to go into the bathroom. Ferney got into the closet, and then we had to open the door because they said if we didn't open up they'd call the police.

"What's going on?" the hotel man asked.

"Going on? There's nothing going on here, Sir," Johnene answered.

"What about all the shouting?" the hotel man asked again.

"Shouting? It must have been the TV, Sir."

"We heard women crying."

"Women cry about everything, Sir," Johnene explained.

Whenever Rosario told me about something like this, she almost always paused to light a cigarette. She took the first few puffs in silence, her gaze fastened on some nonexistent point, held there by the memory that was making her smoke.

"We were so scared," she said after the pause, "that we spent the whole night talking in signs. We women didn't ask any more questions and went to bed. The boys stayed together having a few drinks. The next day they left very early, and neither Deisy nor I heard them go out. But what we did notice was that they hadn't slept. Around ten o'clock in the morning a guy in a souped-up SUV came by and took us to the country to a place near Medgar. You wouldn't have believed that place, my friend, a fucking mansion, with several pools, tennis courts, horses, waterfalls, waiters. It looked more like a country club than anything else. Deisy and I put on bikinis and lay down to sunbathe. At night, around twelve o'clock, the boys showed up. They were drunk, but you could see that they were happy. They laughed a lot, hugged each other, teased us, ordered more drinks, took out some coke, and went on a binge that lasted three days. Deisy and I decided not to ask any more questions, but I had a hunch, my friend, that they'd brought their job off."

Rosario lit one cigarette with the other. This time the silence was longer, the puffs slower, the eyes farther off. Sometimes, like this time, she'd suddenly change the subject, and from a bullet she'd go to a song, from a death to a comment on the hot weather in Medellin lately. It was best not to insist, you had to wait patiently for the next scene, until the leading lady decided to come back on stage.

"God, has it been hot in Medellin," she said after the silence. "It's becoming tropical," I said, repeating what everyone was saying.

It was true that the city had "heated up." The unrest was suffocating us. We were up to our necks in dead people by now. Every day bombs weighing hundreds of pounds would wake us, leaving an equal number of people burned by the fires and of buildings reduced to their skeletons. We tried to get used to it, but the sound of each explosion fulfilled its aim of making us afraid to go out. A lot of people left, as many from down here as from up there, some fleeing the terror and others retaliation for their deeds. For Rosario the war was ecstasy, the realization of a dream, the detonation of her instincts.

"It really makes it worth living here," she said. It was them against us, collecting an eye for an eye for all the
years it had been us against them. With Rosario in our group or us in hers, we didn't know what position to take, especially Emilio, because I couldn't decide anymore, I had to accept the group, the only possible one, the one the heart always chooses. Still, we never took sides, we limited ourselves to following Rosario in her free fall, as ignorant as she was of the reason for the bullets and the dead, enjoying like her the adrenaline and the vices inherent in her life, each one loving her in his own fashion. There were many of us, all looking for something different in the same woman: Ferney, Emilio, the tough guys, and me, the one who could have her the most and was the least able to have her.

"I haven't been able to figure out why," she told me once, "but you're different from everybody else."

Although it didn't do me any good, Rosario also learned to know me, not with the minuteness with which I knew her, but with her spontaneous conclusions. She talked about everybody and defined them, but I had the privilege of being the only one in whom she discovered new facets, the only one to whom she addressed questions from the soul, the only one she examined and in whom she found what they never gave her, but she was frightened by the discovery. The two of us were filled with fear that night, the only night, when we again closed what we'd opened, as if we'd never seen it.

"Let's not get things more tangled up than they already are, old friend," she told me that night.

I closed my eyes, the only things I was allowed to have open since then, and I thought about how stupid I'd been and about how it was already too late, because things couldn't be any more tangled.

The sickly purple announcing dawn has reached as far as the waiting room. The crèche is still lit but the mountains are no longer lost in night. The old man across from me is sleeping with his mouth open and a thread of drool runs down his shirt. I have the impression that I have also fallen asleep for a moment, just a few seconds perhaps, but long enough to leave my mouth dry and my head stuffy. No one was walking along the corridors. The nurse on duty is still asleep back there behind the counter. A chill has suddenly come over my body, and I've covered myself with my arms, thinking that it wasn't coming from outside but had escaped from inside me, at exactly the same moment that I realized that an eerie quiet had come over the hospital.

"Everybody's died," I thought.

But when I see that this "everybody" also includes Rosario, I make some noise with my feet, cough, move my chair to break the silence. The old man opened his eyes and cleaned up the saliva. He looks at me, but the weight of his eyelids is overpowering, won't let him come out of his sleep. The nurse's chair
also squeaked. We’re still alive, and Rosario must be too. I had the urge to call Emilio, but it soon passed.

“Are you afraid of death, Rosario?” I asked her.

“No, I’m not,” she answered, “but other people’s, yes. How about you?”

“I’m afraid of everything, Rosario.”

I didn’t know whether she was referring to the deaths she’d caused or those of the people she loved, because I think that her postcrime fatness is related more to fear than to sadness over the loss. When I emerged from the shock of finding out that Rosario killed in cold blood, I felt an inexplicable sense of trust and security. My fear of death was diminished, surely because I was walking alongside death itself.

“I imagine that it looks like a whore,” was the way she described death to me, “wearing a miniskirt, red heels, and tight sleeves.”

“And with dark eyes,” I told her.

“Kind of like me, right?”

It didn’t bother her to look like it or to embody it. There was a time when she made up her face with a white foundation and painted her lips and eyes black and put purple powder on her eyelids as if she had dark circles there. She dressed in black, with gloves that reached up to her elbows and an inverted cross hanging from her neck. It was around the time when she was into satanism.

“The devil’s the man,” she would say.

I asked her what had happened to the Virgin of Perpetual Help, the Christ Child, and Saint Jude Thaddeus. She told me that Johnefe had said that you had to look for help everywhere, from the good and from the bad, that there was room for all of them.

“But Johnefe says that the devil is the most generous of them all,” she explained.

She told me that it was nothing new and that she was going to take us to see what it was all about, that it was the best high, better than any drug.

“What? You’re going to take us to see the devil?” I said, unable to hide my fear.

“The hell you are!” Emilio said. “Count me out.”

“Me too,” I said.

“You’re a pair of fairies,” Rosario said to us. “I’ve had it up to here with you cowards.”

We never went. The story that you had to drink a glass of cat’s blood was enough to remove any possibility of going. Besides, you heard a lot of other weird tales.

“They sacrifice babies, too,” Emilio told me secretly. “They kidnap them, lay them out on an altar, cut their throats, and drink their blood. That’s why so many kids have disappeared lately.”

“And what about the virgins,” I added. “Do you think it’s true?”

“Well, that they kill them, yes, I think so, but I’m not so sure about the virgin part.”

Our chuckling annoyed Rosario.

“Go ahead, laugh, you idiots, laugh, but when you’re really screwed up don’t come asking for help.”

The satanic phase didn’t last long. Without our saying anything and almost without our realizing it, Rosario slowly gave up the paleness, the circles around her eyes, and the dark mouth to go back to her usual colors. She gave up her mysterious air and returned to her shameless comments. I couldn’t resist asking her what had happened to the devil.
“I didn’t like the music,” she said. “It’s nothing but noise. What I like is different, nice songs, love songs where you can understand what they’re saying and where they say cool things.”

That’s something I never understood about Rosario, the contradiction between the romantic songs she liked and her violent temperament and her unaffectionate way of loving.

“What do you like, Rosario?”

“You know. María Conchita, Juan Gabriel, Paloma, Perales, cool people who sing with their hand on their chest and with their eyes closed.”

What Rosario didn’t tell us was the other reason she tired of the Satanists. But we found out through Gallineto who, very high at a party, told us about it.

“The girl killed a guy from that sect. You didn’t know that? I thought everybody’d heard about that. We were playing at getting naked and getting it on with everybody. We’d already snorted like five grams, and we were very turned on. The girl didn’t like the idea of the guy taking her by force, he had her cornered and was pressing her with his knee, pushing hard, and then it happened. I saw the whole thing go down. All of a sudden, like she was letting him do it, she became all submissive, understand? Like she was beginning to like it, and she began to give the guy little kisses and to let him squeeze her when all of a sudden, bam!, we heard a shot. It was strange, it sounded very strange, and, naturally, the guy began to fall apart, all soaked with blood, and the girl got her underwear dirty, too, if you know what I mean. She finished him off, shoving him with her foot, and said something to him that I can’t remember, and, listen, all of us who’d been naked went soft, but her, she was cool as a cucumber, and she put the piece in her bag, got dressed, and left without saying goodbye, and we were all left wondering where she’d got the pistol, and I looked at Johnfie and told him, “The girl knows how to take care of herself.”

“What did that son of a bitch do to her,” Johnfie asked, “to get her to kill him?”

“Relax, man,” Gallineto told him. “The girl took care of everything, so why don’t we take advantage of the guy’s blood? I’m thirsty.”

“The blood of sons of bitches doesn’t agree with me,” Johnfie said.

Rosario told me later that they were all lies on the part of Gallineto, that the only thing that made her leave was the music, and that if we didn’t believe her, we should ask her brother, but when we’d heard the story Johnfie was already dead. Then she latched onto her second proof of innocence.

“Did I become fat afterward? Did I?”

We became more and more confused about Rosario. Stories about her began to circulate, and it was impossible to know which ones were true. The invented ones weren’t all that different from the true ones, and her mystery and her disappearances led us to believe that they were all possible. Rosario Tijeras had become an idol in the neighborhoods of Medellín. On walls you’d see “Rosario Tijeras, Sweet Mama,” “Castrate me with your kisses, Rosario T.” “Rosario Tijeras for President, Pablo Escobar for Vice President.” Girls wanted to be like her, and we heard of several who were baptized Maria del Rosario, Claudia Rosario, Leidy Rosario, and one day our Rosario told us about an Amparo Tijeras. Her story took on the same proportion of reality and fiction as that of her bosses. And even I, who knew every corner of her life, was starting to
get confused with the versions that came from outside.

"Emilio, have you heard everything they're saying?"

"Don't tell me anything, man," he would say. "I'm going out of my mind."

Among our circles, too, the unprovable stories about Rosario began to make the rounds, stories that had a kernel of reality to them while the rest was added as the stories were repeated, accommodating themselves to the needs of the teller. Some of the stories included us, but I heard so many that I was never able to put them together to tell her. She had great fun with what was being said.

"Tell me, my friend, what else are they saying about me?"

"That you've killed two hundred people, that you've got molars made of gold, that you charge a million pesos for sex, that you also like women, that you pee standing up, that you had your tits and your ass done, that you're the girlfriend of you know who, that you're a man, that you had a child with the devil, that you're the boss of all the assassins of Medellin, that you're rolling in money, that if you don't like some girl you have her cut up, that you go to bed with Emilio and me at the same time . . . Do you think all that's something to laugh at? What if it were all true?"

"Not all of it," she said. "Half of it, yes."

She would have liked it if it were all true and so would I. Because my part was in the excluded half along with the stories that never happened, like the child by the devil, a lie, because Rosario could never have any; along with the artificial ass and tits, lies, because I touched them once, one night only, and never before or after have I touched anything more real, more of the flesh, more beautiful; along with the Rosario that was a man,

a lie, because no one ever existed that was more of a woman than she was.

"What else are they saying, my friend, tell me more."

"Pure trash. Just imagine, they say I'm crazy in love with you."

"Ha! What'll they think of next?" she said, and she killed me.

"Who knows," I said, in agony.

Love destroys, love intimidates, diminishes, and drags you down, it brutalizes you! Once, after a conversation like the one I've just recalled, I locked myself in the bathroom of a club and kept slapping myself until my face was all red. Take that, you idiot! Take that, you faggot and take that, you coward! The more I hit myself the angrier I was with myself, and I felt like even more of an imbecile when I had to wait for the redness to leave my cheeks so I could go out. I also spent about two weeks with my mouth half-open because of my aching jawbone. I swore I'd get my courage up and tell her what I felt for her, and then I locked myself up many times in the same bathroom where I'd slapped myself to rehearse the words I'd use to confess my love.

"I'm in love with you, Rosario."

"I've been waiting a long time to tell you something, Rosario."

"Guess who's in love with you, Rosario."

I never told her any of these nor any of the thousand other words I'd prepared. In frustration I'd go back to give myself a beating in front of the mirror, the only one who'd heard me.

"Are you doing coke?" Emilio asked me.

"No, why?"

"That strange attraction you've got for the john."
“I have to piss a lot.”
“What about the red cheeks?” he added.

I never understood how she or anybody else didn’t notice. Emilio’s suspicions never went beyond a couple of stupid questions, and if she’d known something, she wouldn’t have kept up the closeness nor the trust she always had. I was sure they all knew because love is noticeable. That’s why I always managed to keep hope alive, because I never saw Rosario look at Emilio, at Ferney, at anyone the way I looked at her. I never saw her come back from the tough guys with her eyes betraying love.

And when I was overwhelmed with doubt, I’d ask her again, searching in her past for some ember of her capacity for love.

“Have you ever fallen in love, Rosario?”

Emilio had told me he was going to introduce me to the woman of his life: Rosario. Since he always said the same thing I didn’t believe him that time either. Those days, romance gone bad and some midterm exams had taken me away from the partying we always did together. It wasn’t strange that I had to shut myself up for those reasons. Love and studies always gave me a hard time. But when I managed to get my classes and my heart under control, I’d return to the nightly searches in clubs, where I’d decipher the looks of new and possible candidates, emboldened by the music and the alcohol. After a while I’d generally have my heart broken again, and I’d shut myself up once more to pull up my failing grades and to recover from the heartaches of love. It was always like that until Rosario came into the picture.

“You already know her,” Emilio told me. “She’s one of the ones who always sit on the upper level.”

“What did you say her name was?” I asked.

“Rosario. You’ve already seen her.”

“Rosario what?” I asked again.
“Rosario . . . I can’t remember.”

I was searching my memory for someone from our side, that’s why I thought it was strange that I couldn’t remember her, besides, the same people always ended up going to those places. After a short time, when I finally met her, I understood why I couldn’t place her. Emilio pointed her out to me. She was dancing all by herself on the upper level, where they always sat, because now that they had more money than us, they were entitled to the best spot in the club, and maybe because they were still used to seeing the other side of the city from above. Out of the smoke and the flashing lights, out of the streams of artificial smoke, out of the tangle of arms following the rhythm of the music, Rosario emerged like a futuristic Venus, with her knee-high black platform boots that raised her even higher than her dancer’s pedestal, and her silvery mini-skirt and neon green midriff top with tight sleeves. She had cinnamon skin, dark hair, white teeth, full lips, and as her eyes were closed, I imagined that it was her way of not being distracted from the music, that she kept them shut so that no one would pull her out of her dream, or maybe it was so she wouldn’t see the dozen hoodlums who thought she was theirs, keeping her enclosed in a circle. I don’t know how Emilio got through it.

“That’s only the half of it,” Emilio told me. “Every time she goes to the bathroom a guy goes along.”

“So how did you get to meet her?”

“At first we exchanged looks, we just kept looking at each other. When I’d look at her she was already looking at me, and when she turned to look at me she’d catch me doing the same thing. Then we began to laugh, and soon we were looking at each other and laughing. Then she went to the bathroom, and I followed her, but the first one I ran into was the thug who wouldn’t leave her unprotected.”

“So what then?”

“Nothing,” he went on. “We couldn’t do anything, just look at each other and smile, but I think the guy caught on, because you wouldn’t believe the mess that took place afterward. There was grabbing and shouting and one of them got hold of her arm, but she resisted and even kicked the guy, and she would look at me every now and then, and the one who went to the bathroom with her pointed me out a couple of times, and she kept on arguing and everybody got involved in the mess.”

“So what then?” I asked again.

“Nothing. They took her out by force. But you can’t imagine the look she gave me when she left. You can’t imagine.”

Instead of intriguing me, the story scared me. We already knew about some people from our crowd who’d gotten involved with their women and had gotten themselves shot or had to start going to another club. I was sure Emilio wasn’t going to be the exception. Still, when he told me this story, she already had the situation under control and was Emilio’s new girlfriend.

“The next night she came back alone. Just imagine, man, alone, without the gang, all by herself with a friend. We’ll introduce you to her, she’s not bad.”

“Don’t screw up my life, Emilio, just keep telling me what happened.”

“Well, she came alone, but I was with Silvana.”

“With Silvana?” I asked. “No way. So what happened?”

“Well, Rosario was devouring me with her eyes, and Silvana
was in the way, I used the old ploy of not feeling well, asked for the check, and as I was leaving I signaled to Rosario that I'd be right back."

"Why are you driving so fast, Emilio? What's the rush?" Silvana asked him.

"It's just that I feel bad, honey," he answered her. "Very bad."

"You really are a shit, Emilio," I told him.

"What do you mean, shit?" he said. "With that sweet thing waiting for me?"

"And did she wait for you?"

"Of course she did, idiot. They all wait for me. And you can't imagine how sweet it was. We were shy at first, but later . . ."

"What's your name?" Emilio asked her.

"Rosario," she answered. "And yours?"

"Me? Emilio."

Emilio definitely had good luck, so much so that he turned out to be the exception. We didn't know what was going on with Rosario, because even though her friends still came, they never approached or bothered Emilio, much less after the incident with Patico. The only one who, when he came, didn't take his eyes off them, didn't dance so he could keep looking at them, who didn't take his hand off the butt of his pistol, who, when they were dancing close together, got tears in his eyes, was Ferney. He would enthrone himself in his upper booth, order a bottle of whiskey, and settle down in such a way that he'd always have them before his eyes, so he could look at them with rage, and the drunker he got the more rage and pain could be seen in his eyes. But he never got up from his chair, not even to pee.

At first I couldn't help feeling sympathy for him, a kind of solidarity with someone who was undoubtedly like me. Ferney belonged to the club of those of us who keep quiet, those of us with lumps in our throats, the shihtheads who don't say what we feel, who keep our love hidden inside like cowards, the ones who love in silence and drag ourselves down. While he was looking at us I was also looking at him out of the corner of my eye, and I couldn't understand why he was so obsessed until I began to get to know her, until she began to work her way into my heart, until I saw that I was lost, with Rosario inside me, destroying my heart. Then I understood him. I wanted to bring a chair over next to his and get drunk with him, and look at her with the same pain and the same rage, and cry inside when he kissed her, when they danced together, when he made secret proposals to her that they would later consummate.

"That Ferney is a real strange guy," Rosario said. "Look at him. Do you understand him?"

"He's probably still in love," I said, justifying him.

"That's what's dumb about it," she said. "Suffering because of love."

"What are you made of, Rosario Tijeras?" I would ask myself whenever I heard her say things like that. "What are you made of?" every time I saw her go off with the tough guys, every time I saw her leave thin and come back fat, every time I remembered our night.

"I've got her right here," Emilio said, showing me the palm of his hand. "I think that tonight I'm going to get a taste of it."

I didn't place any importance on the first time they went to bed together. In fact, I can't even remember when it was. Rosario still hadn't done any damage to me. When Emilio told me about it, all I could think was that he was playing with fire and was going to get himself killed. Besides, even if Ferney didn't
come near them, it was because at that time he was making his threats through intermediaries. I was afraid that he'd follow through on them. At that time I liked Emilio more, and I was worried about what might happen to him. I even ventured to tell Rosario about my fears.

"Relax," she answered me. "My brother gave orders that we're not to be touched."

It wasn't that the guy wanted to protect Emilio. They didn't know each other. It was for her, because his sister's every wish was his command. The "terror of the neighborhoods," the underling who kept Medellín in a panic, was brought to his heels by his little sister's whims.

"Let the girl decide," Johnefe would say.

But when he was killed my fears returned. With Johnefe out of the picture, Ferney became head of the gang, and the death of his friend had made him more violent and more possessive of Rosario. He tried to take her brother's place and to recoup his position as her boyfriend, but Rosario wouldn't have it.

"You'd just better relax, Ferney," she told him. "I can take care of myself now, and besides, I'm not interested in having a boyfriend."

"What about that idiot Emilio?" Ferney asked.

"Emilio is Emilio," she answered.

"What do you mean? What about me?"

"You're Ferney."

It wasn't strange to hear her make such evasive remarks to settle what she had trouble explaining. As for Ferney, who was as slow in the head as he was with his bullets, there was nothing left to do but scratch that head and send a couple of new curses Emilio's way.

"In any case," I told Rosario, "I still don't trust that Arley."

"Ferney."

"That's right," I went on. "When you least expect it, he'll lose it and do something crazy."

"I don't think so, he's changed a lot," she said. "If you'd known him before, then you really would have been scared. Once, when we were together, we went to the movies to see one of Schwarzenegger's films. We never missed them. This guy sat down behind us and from the moment he arrived, he kept eating potato chips, and the noise of the bag was driving Ferney crazy. He told me he couldn't concentrate, and it was true because he kept looking behind him until he couldn't take it anymore.

"Excuse me, pal, but the noise of the bag is bothering us."

"The guy didn't pay any attention, he didn't even look at him, and kept right on eating. In fact, when he finished, he opened another bag. And Ferney insisted."

"Excuse me, pal, but I don't think you heard me. The noise the bag is making is bothering us. Couldn't you leave the chips for later?"

"The guy didn't even get annoyed," Rosario continued, "but the one who completely lost it was Ferney. He turned around until he was facing the guy, took out his gun, stuck it in his belly, and fired. The man barely moved, he let go of the bag, looked at his belly, and that was it, he sat there with a scared expression on his face as if it had been a horror movie."

"What about the people around you, what did they do?" I asked her.

"Nothing. No one noticed what happened because Ferney's shot was lost in all the crazy shooting on the screen."

"And did you finish watching the picture?"
"No, my friend. Ferney said, 'Let's leave, I'm bored.'"

That was Emilio's enemy, and Rosario telling me not to worry. I was thinking that if all that had been over a bag of potato chips, wouldn't he do it if his heart were broken? If even I, who wouldn't hurt a fly...

"Look," Rosario said. "He knows that if he hurts Emilio he's hurting me, and one thing I'm sure of is that Ferney would never dare hurt me."

Rosario knew how to play her cards. She knew her people and what she could expect from them. And if somebody failed her, she knew that he'd get a kiss in return and be punished with a bullet, at point-blank range, the way Ferney had taught her.

She always did what she wanted. She herself admitted that she'd always been willful, ever since she was little. That's why she left her mother and went to live with her brother, and maybe that's why she never entrusted her heart to anyone. Nothing was tying Rosario down, not even the tough guys, with whom she always showed herself to be accommodating.

"But the day they don't keep their promises, I'm gone," she told me.

"Promises of what?"

"It's business, my friend, a business based on keeping your word, and if I keep mine, they've got to keep theirs."

I would hear that same line of reasoning about the same time every year, more or less, when she would make her new demands, reminding them of the conditions of the contract. In that way she got them to get her a new apartment or car, or to fatten up her bank account.

"If they want to see me again, they'd better trade in my little Mazda," she said. "It's high time."

I'm sure that underneath it all Ferney liked her staying on with them: it pleased him to see Emilio humiliated, even if he himself had lost her forever. The difference was that as far as she was concerned, her relationship with Emilio hadn't changed at all. For Rosario, that business with the tough guys was a kind of exchange where everyone played the best card he had.

"And Emilio is Emilio," she would insist.

But Emilio didn't see it the same way. For him it was whoring and nothing else. What pained him most was the fact that everybody knew about it and above all that he was the last to know. In spite of our closeness to her, Emilio and I were the last to know where Rosario was going with her mouth shut. There were rumors, but since they almost always came from envious tongues, we didn't pay much attention to them. Afterward it would be Ferney himself who would come to us with the story. We doubted him, too, because we knew that Ferney had been hurt and was willing to take advantage of any circumstance to break off the relationship. We had no choice but to ask Rosario herself.

"You ask her," Emilio told me. "She trusts you more."

"Why me?" I reproached him. "You're her boyfriend."

We were scared to death. We thought that she'd tell us to go to hell and that because of a piece of gossip we'd never see her again. Then one day, after she'd disappeared for a whole weekend, she arrived in a good mood, and we decided that this was the moment.

"People are talking a lot," I began. "They don't know what else to talk about."

"Gossiping bastards," Emilio went on. "You can't imagine what they're saying."
“It’s not all gossip,” she said.

“What do you mean?” we both asked at once.

“As always,” Rosario said, “half is true and half is a lie.”

“So which is the true half?” Emilio asked.

“I’m sure it’s the half that hurts you,” she answered.

It was true. She’d been involved with them since before she met us. While Emilio went crazy, throwing chairs, kicking doors, and breaking furniture, I was being eaten up inside. There was always someone new who would take her further away from me, Emilio, society, Ferney, and now them. Rosario remained silent while Emilio wrecked her apartment. She didn’t say a single word while he wept, waved his hands, and raged. I remained silent, too, waiting, as she was, for Emilio to finish but also waiting for her to look at me, to tell me something, to involve me in her confession. I still don’t know whether she ignored me on purpose or if she wasn’t capable of looking at me. A betrayal of friendship is surely worse than one of love.

I think about Emilio again and the upset that Rosario’s entanglements brought him. I suddenly feel I should call him once more.

“I’ve been waiting for your call for a while, man. What happened?”

“I talked to the doctor,” I told him. “He says she’s riddled with bullets.”

“Last night’s bullets or the bullets from before?”

“Some were at point-blank range.”

“While she was being kissed,” Emilio added.

“How did you know?” I asked him.

“They’re paying her back in her own coin.”

I remember them dropping dead after taking a bullet fired at close range, right against their body, and their clutching her as though they were trying to carry her off in their fatal kiss.

I remember Emilio’s words after he’d kissed her for the first time. He always bragged about his first successes in his conquests, the first handclasp, the first kiss, the first time in bed. But this time his comment hadn’t been boastful, rather, it was disconcerting.

“Her kisses have an odd taste.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It’s a very odd taste,” he said. “Like a dead person.”
Ever since grade school Emilio and I had built a friendship that was immune to attack. It was an oath without words, without blood pacts or drunken promises. It was simply the mutual sowing of affection from which we would harvest a lifelong friendship. In him I’d found the bravery I didn’t have. I didn’t have in me the guy who didn’t think twice before diving into uncertainty and that was precisely who Emilio was. I think he found in me the coward that didn’t exist in him but who he needed to make him think twice before taking a risk. During those years, in addition to liking him, I admired him. Emilio got women, money, drinks, life’s emotions. I watched him move about freely without moral hang-ups, without guilt, savoring every day as a gift. I, on the other hand, would anxiously try to face up to the way of life demanded of young people. Secretly, however, and very privately, I embarked on existentialist readings and thinking that collided with my street world, with Emilio’s plans, and, later on, in a very strong way, with the norms of society. It was then that I found in Emilio, in addition to a friend,
a bastion for my irreverence. And, needless to say, that’s when I found her, our greatest escapade, Rosario Tijeras.

I no longer admire Emilio today, but I still like him. Although not much time has passed since then, circumstances brought out what we truly were from within us, what slowly emerges with the passing of the years and lets some people get further than others. Still, I don’t think my fondness for him would have survived if it hadn’t been for all the memories of our introduction to life. The years in school; getting back at the priests; our first time in an adult movie house; the first pornographic magazine; masturbating; the first girlfriends; the first time; the secrets between friends; the first drunken binge; the afternoons on the terrace where we did nothing but talk about music, soccer, and things like that; the first high, dying with laughter and eating fritters; the little country place we rented in Santa Elena where we could smoke and drink in peace, where we could bring women and spend the night with them, that same little house where Emilio spent his first night with Rosario and where I also spent a night with her, the only one.

She was the one who released us from the adolescence we resisted abandoning as young men. She was the one who brought us out into the world, the one who divided our road in two, the one who showed us that life was different from the landscape they’d painted for us. It was Rosario Tijeras who made me feel the maximum emotion of which a heart is capable and made me see my previous heartaches as nothing but the simple jokes of old ladies, showing me the suicidal side of love, the extreme situation where you can see only though the eyes of the other person, where your daily bread is a pile of shit, where reason is lost and you’re abandoned to the mercy of the person you’ve fallen in love with.

Every time I get caught up in my memories and with those that have to do with Rosario I think that everything would have been easier if I hadn’t kept silent. Emilio never knew that I was afraid when we would put empty bottles on the school steps so that the priests would kick them in the dark. He never knew I was scared when we went to El Dorado to see a porno movie, he didn’t know I was ashamed when he proposed that we masturbate with the first copy of Playboy we got our hands on, he never knew what my first kiss was like, or about the sudden orgasm of my first time. And, needless to say, he never knew about my feelings for her, because my silence was the same size as the love I suffered from. I aroused a lot of suspicions, a lot of doubt, but my mouth never had the courage to say I love you, I’m dying for you, I’ve been dying for you for a long time.

“What’s the matter with you, my friend?” Rosario asked me.

“I’m dying,” I answered.

“Are you sick?”

“Yes.”

“Where does it hurt?”

“All over.”

“Why don’t you go see a doctor?”

“Because there’s no cure for it.”

I never dared go any further. I hoped that a miracle from heaven would make Rosario fall in love with me, that she’d be the one to talk about love, or that only a kiss was needed to unmask what our intertwined tongues didn’t dare say.

“When did you meet Emilio?” This time, she did the asking.

“When we were kids,” I told her. “Ever since school.”

“And have you always been such good friends?”

“Always.”
I sensed suspicion in Rosario’s questions; it was more than just curiosity. She would take a lot of time to ask such simple questions. I later confirmed my suspicions when I saw where her interrogation was headed.

“You’ve never fought?”
“Never.”
“Not even over a woman?” Rosario insisted.
“Not even that.”
“Can you imagine, my friend,” she concluded, “if I cheated on Emilio with you . . .”

I usually respond to that kind of situation with a stupid little laugh. It’s a gesture, a cowardly one really, with which I avoid taking a position; it’s the complete opposite of the smile Rosario used on this occasion to end her questioning. Hers was more decisive, the product of some machination, and it seemed inconclusive to me because her lips closed suddenly as if not wanting to go ahead with what she’d planned. Then they opened again, the same way they’d opened that night when, panting and sweaty underneath my body, Rosario smiled again.

I thought about Rosario’s intentions for a long time. I wondered why in hell she wanted to be unfaithful to Emilio with me when she was already unfaithful to him with the tough guys, knowing, besides, that Emilio’s reaction wouldn’t go beyond some ranting and raving that could be taken care of with a couple rolls in the hay. An infidelity with his best friend would obviously wound him mortally, but why did she want to hurt Emilio more? Why did she want to create enmity between us? After so many conjectures I arrived at the worst: the place of false illusions.

“Rosario is hinting to me,” I thought.

“Rosario wants to get involved with me,” I thought again. “Rosario finds me attractive,” the final lie.

Nothing had happened, and yet I felt that I’d already betrayed my best friend. I was no longer capable of looking at him as before, no longer capable of talking about her as we normally did. I avoided mentioning her name, so that a lover’s accent wouldn’t slip into my voice and give me away, and if I had to talk about her, I would look away so he wouldn’t see the sparkle in my eyes.

I’m sure now that my love was well hidden and that no one ever noticed anything. I would have wanted her to have suspected something, that some gesture would have said everything that my cowardice prevented me from saying, maybe she would have taken some sort of initiative or broached the subject with me, I don’t know. Maybe when she comes out of surgery and gets better I’ll tell her everything, especially now that so much time has passed, I could tell her about it like something from the past, and we might even have a good laugh, and maybe she’d even reproach me for not having told her before, maybe she’d admit that she had also loved me, but that she, too, had been afraid to confess it. Maybe they’ll let me in later on, maybe I’ll take her hand and tell her everything, so it’ll be the first thing she hears when she wakes up.

“Is she your girlfriend or your sister?” asked the old man across from me who’d woken.”

“Neither of the two,” I answered. “My friend.”
“It’s obvious that you love her very much.”
“Now it’s obvious, when it’s too late,” I thought. “Like everything else with me.” Or maybe everybody knew and nobody said anything to me so that everything would go on the way it
was, so that no one would be hurt, so that no one would lose anybody, so that the chain that joined us wouldn't be broken. I've always thought that there are no couples in love nor any love triangles, only an Indian file where you love the person in front of you and that person in turn loves the one in front of him, and so on, and where the one behind me loves me and that one is loved by the one behind him and so on, but always loving the one whose back is turned to us. And the last one in line isn't loved by anyone.

“My son's inside,” the old man interrupted me. “I brought him in half-dead, they almost killed him.”

I thought that his son might be one of Rosario's friends, he could be Ferney if I didn't know for certain that he was dead, he could be one of the many people I met at her parties, and although I'm not sure Rosario would recognize him I can be sure that he'd know who she was.

“When your son wakes up,” I told the old man, “tell him that Rosario Tijeras is lying next to him.”

“Rosario is in there?” he asked, surprised.

“Do you know her?” I asked, even more surprised.

“For the love of God!” he said in response to what was obvious.

“What happened to her? What did they do to her?”

“The same as to your son,” I said.

“Not the same. Seeing bullets in the body of a woman is very different. It hurts more,” he said. “Poor thing. We hadn't seen her for a long time. They even told us she'd already been killed.”

I don't know why I shuddered at what he said since Rosario and death were two ideas that couldn't be separated. I don't know which incarnated which, but they were one and the same. We knew that Rosario got up in the morning, but we were never sure that she'd come back at night. When she'd disappear for several days we expected the worst, the call at dawn from a hospital, from the morgue, from the street, asking us if we knew someone who looked like this and like that, who had our phone numbers in her bag. Luckily, she always made the calls, with a warm greeting, an “I'm back,” or “I just got in,” happy to hear our voices again. My soul would return to my body, I could breathe easy again. I didn't care at what hour she'd call me, she almost always woke me up, but that didn't matter, the main thing was knowing that she was all right, that she'd come back, even if she only called me to test the waters with Emilio, I didn't care. I was the only one who received her well because I know that Emilio, and probably Ferney, didn't show their happiness. They couldn't.

“All men should be like you, my friend,” Rosario said to me. “You can't imagine how they all screw me up, Emilio, Johnefe, Ferney, all of them. You're the only one who doesn't.”

When she told me that it was the only time I was glad that my feelings weren't reciprocated. I felt like the most important person in her life. The feeling of satisfaction lasted only a couple of minutes, enough for me to feel like Rosario's man, the one of her dreams, the one she would have if the others didn't exist, and right there, with that idea, the two minutes in heaven were up, and I fell to Earth on my ass, alongside the others, the ones who in some way did have Rosario.

“What about the tough guys?” I asked her. “Don't they screw you up?”

“Who? The boys?”

“As far as I know, they're not boys,” I said.

“That's what we girls call them,” she explained.
I don't know whom she was referring to with that "we girls," but I supposed, even though I hate to suppose, that she was referring to other Rosarios, companions in her adventures, just as daring and just as beautiful as she was.

"They all fuck people up, my friend, all of them," she told me. "And when you get yourself a girlfriend you'll probably fuck her up, too."

"Girlfriend?" I thought. I couldn't even imagine her as one. It was strange, I loved her with everything in me, but I didn't know how to imagine her with me. Never had the word girlfriend, nor any word like it, been in my thoughts about her. More than a word, Rosario was an idea that I'd made mine, without any deeds or rights of ownership, something as simple, but at the same time as complex, as saying "Rosario and me."

"What I don't understand is this thing women have for complaining and at the same time letting themselves be screwed," I reproached her.

She shrugged her shoulders: a response without hope, the attitude taken when facing something you don't want to change. But her words devastated me. She was talking about the girlfriend I was going to have, who of course wasn't her, and, besides, she sentenced me to screwing her up. She didn't realize that by excluding herself the one who got screwed up was me. She knew that I was different because that's what she'd told me, but still she excluded herself, leaving us both screwed.

"It's not a thing, my friend," she said. "Since they all screw people up, there's no way of changing."

"And what about me, Rosario?" my thoughts shouted, "What about me? You just said I was different." I shouted inside, not daring to open my mouth to ask, to complain about the exception she'd made, about the place I deserved, and I tightened my lips to shout louder, to scold her, "What about me, Rosario?" I don't know if what happened then was some loathsome coincidence or that she'd managed to catch an echo in my silence, because without my asking her anything, she told me:

"You, my friend, you're the man," and she stretched out her arm in front of me for a high-five.
ten

Medellín is wrapped in the arms of two mountain ranges. A topographical embrace that encloses all of us in the same space. You always dream about what lies beyond the mountains, even though it would be hard to uproot ourselves from this hollow. It's a love-hate relationship, with feelings more like those for a woman than for a city. Medellín is like those matronly ladies of old, the mother of many children, prayerful, pious, and possessive, but it's also a mother who's a seductress, a whore, a flamboyant and flashy woman. Anyone who leaves returns, anyone who denies it retracts, anyone who insults it apologizes, and anyone who attacks it pays. Something very strange happens to us concerning it, because in spite of the fear it instills in us, in spite of the urge to get away that we've all had one time or another, in spite of having killed it many times, Medellín always comes out on top.

"We should get away from here, my friend," Rosario told me one day, crying. "You, Emilio, and me."

"And go where?" I asked her.

"Anywhere," she said. "Any shitty place."
She was crying because the situation called for it. The three of us had been shut up in the little country place for a long time, doing every drug that could be done, that could be had. Emilior was sleeping off the effects, and Rosario and I were crying as we watched the day dawn.

“This city is going to kill us,” she said.

“Don’t put the blame on it,” I said. “We’re the ones who are killing it.”

“Then it’s taking its revenge, my friend,” she said.

Rosario had returned irritated from a weekend with the tough guys and she asked us to get out of the city for a few days. She didn’t tell us what had happened—not even later, not even to me—but since her wishes left us no other option we obliged her and went to the country place. During the trip I was thinking that Rosario’s irritability was nothing new, that she’d been like that for a long time, and even though she was an occasional user—a “social” user, as some people say—of drugs, I associated her state with an increase in her habit. I’d withdrawn a little, as I sometimes did, because at that time her relationship with Emilior seemed to be at a high point, with a lot of partying and a lot of sex. That’s why I preferred to withdraw a little. But it was precisely that euphoria that was sucking them into angry, stormy states that drove us even further apart, to the point that a couple of months went by, and I hadn’t heard anything from them. Until one night when Emilior called me and asked me to keep him company in Rosario’s apartment.

“She’s with them,” was the first thing he told me, but he didn’t seem to care. He was off somewhere else. When he spoke you could see that he was thinking about other things—if he was able to think at all, that is.

“You can’t imagine what we’ve been through,” he said, but he didn’t tell me about it. I felt that Rosario had rubbed off on him in many ways, her mystery, her presumption of danger, her need for me.

“Don’t leave me alone, man,” he begged me. “Stay with me until she gets back.”

I wasn’t very keen on staying. Emilior was unbearable, the smallest detail exasperated him, and he couldn’t carry on a conversation. He asked me to lend him money to buy drugs, and I had to go with him, he couldn’t be alone for a second. I had to be with him even in the shower.

“You’ve become a piece of shit, Emilior,” I couldn’t resist telling him. “Wouldn’t it be better if we went to your place? You’ll be more comfortable there.”

He answered me with a couple of kicks, but then he hung himself from my neck in an embrace, crying, begging, asking forgiveness, pleading with me to please stay with him until she got back. I wasn’t capable of leaving him, it pained me to see him like that. Besides, I was also afraid, I had a presentiment, and I wasn’t mistaken, that sooner or later I’d end up like him.

After about three days Rosario arrived, asking that we leave the city. She was irate, but she ordered us not to ask her any questions. We got into her car and off we went. Since Emilior was very nervous he preferred sitting in the back; I sat up front with Rosario. Despite my asking her to let me drive she insisted on driving herself, and if she was a madwoman at the wheel in her right mind, that time she’d lost all notion of speed, control, and consideration. Emilior was bold enough to complain.

“Are you trying to kill us or what?” he said. “Slow down, I’ve been very edgy lately.”
I hunched down in the seat, grabbed hold of its sides, and stretched out my legs as if I could brake. But there was no need to because Rosario hit the brakes and hit them hard, so hard that Emilio ended up on the front seat between us. So hard that the car behind us hit us, but Rosario didn’t seem to be concerned with the sound of broken glass and crumpled metal. What concerned her was Emilio, poor Emilio.

“So you’re edgy, are you, you faggot!” she shouted into his face. “Why don’t you go the rest of the way on foot and see if that relaxes you?”

“Walking?” Emilio said, “Don’t be that way.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not that way, you’re the one who makes me be that way! Get out right now, you son of a bitch!”

“It’s not such a big deal, Rosario,” I said, getting involved.

“Don’t you stick your nose in or you can get out, too!” she threatened.

In the middle of all this the driver of the car behind us appeared, tapping on Rosario’s window, and while she was lowering it I signaled to the man to go away. The man didn’t know who he’d bumped into.

“Let’s see how we’re going to straighten this out, miss,” he said politely, “because it seems to me that you hit the brakes somewhat unexpectedly, didn’t you?”

“Unexpectedly?” Rosario said. “Look, mister, I braked the way I felt like braking, or is there some rule about braking?”

“The one who hits from behind pays,” Emilio said, still jammed in between the two of us, while I kept signaling to the man to go away.

“Don’t you butt in, Emilio, it’s my car!” she said. “Let’s see what this stupidity of yours is all about, mister!” she said to the man and got out of the car with her bag but not without first checking to see that her gun was in it.

“Rosario!” the two of us shouted at her to no avail.

We couldn’t see what went on behind us because the glass, although still in place, was shattered. We could just barely make out Rosario up close against the guy. Then we heard a shot that left us wondering, imagining the worst. She got in quickly and slammed the door shut.

“Get in the back seat, idiot!” she told Emilio, who was still up front.

She took off at high speed, screeching the tires and driving faster than before.

“What happened, baby, what did you do?” Emilio asked, but she didn’t answer.

“Did you settle things?” I asked.

“Settle? Of course I settled,” she finally answered.

“How?” Emilio asked again, fearfully.

“Unexpectedly,” she said, more to herself than to us, and she didn’t say another word until we arrived.

At the country place things didn’t change much, or maybe they got worse. No sooner had we arrived than Rosario began to take out quantities of cocaine, crack, marijuana, and even pills—as much as you could ever put into your body. She spread them out on the bed and separated them into groups. Emilio and I thought that if what Rosario had done to the man with the car were true, she’d probably set about eating, getting fat as punishment for her crime, but at no time did she ask for food.

“A change of menu,” Emilio whispered in my ear.

“Or maybe she didn’t do anything to the man,” I said. “Just scared him.”
We never found out. During the days I was with them Rosario didn't talk much, she didn't eat or sleep much, either. Nor was there any sex between them as far as I could tell. What we did have in excess was drugs; even I went too far. We became like three suicidal people racing to reach death first, three frenzied zombies cutting ourselves with our razor-sharp rages, with our stabbing resentments, winding ourselves with the spear of silence, numbing our feelings with drugs, just looking at each other and taking hits. Later, I can't remember how much later, Rosario cried, Emilio cried, and when I couldn't stand it anymore I cried, too, without knowing precisely why or if there was a reason. You could say it was because of everything, because it's when everything overflows your soul that you cry. Later, again I can't remember exactly when, in a moment of clarity, I threw in the towel and went home.

I left them alone. For a month I didn't hear from them. I didn't know if they were still at the country place or what shape they were in. For my part I focused my recuperation. I found that my family had turned into a madhouse because of me, all the more so when they saw me arrive, when they saw me fall to my knees, asking for help, although they didn't understand me and thought that I wanted to save myself from the drug that contaminates the body and the veins and not the other drug, the one that enters through the eyes, the one that gets embedded in your heart and corrodes it, the damned drug that the most naive people call love, but which is as harmful and deadly as the one that you get on the street wrapped in small packets.

"How do you get rid of this?" I begged my parents, but they didn't understand me.

Very early one day Emilio and Rosario phoned me. They were still where I'd left them and in worse shape. They asked me to come up because they needed me urgently, a matter of life and death. Rosario was the one who spoke.

"If you don't come I'll die," she told me in a voice unlike her usual one, with an agonizing but above all ambiguous, "I'll die," and a beseeching and obligatory "if you don't come." She didn't say anything else, just that one sentence. She didn't need to say anything else for me to be with her, with them, right away. Although I knew it was her when I saw her, her name slipped out of me in the form of a question, as if I'd never seen her before.

"My friend," she said to me, pressing her face against mine.
"My friend, you've come at last."

Emilio greeted me like a mad man, hugging me, giving me a series of inexplicable pats on the back, even though there was no joy in his face at seeing me but rather horror, I didn't know whether it was because of me or because of what they were going through. Fear had disfigured him, as well, making him unrecognizable. At that instant I understood my family when they'd seen me arrive, and, just as I'd done with Rosario, they had called me with my name in the form of a question, as if they hadn't recognized their son. This was the time that Emilio told me that he'd killed a guy, when she said that he hadn't done it, she had. In the end, he said that it had been both of them.

"I did it," Rosario insisted. "I'm the one who kills."

I couldn't tell if it was true, whether the crime might not have been the product of their delirium, of their excessive drug use, of their confinement. I also wondered whether they were referring to the man who'd crashed us in the car. Maybe she really had killed him, or maybe someone new. I don't know. There was such confusion and disorder in their ideas that I never
knew what had happened in my absence. Even later, when they
were once again in their right minds, I asked them about the
incident, but neither of them remembered anything. With dif-
ficulty, they were able to recall a vague sense of the hell they’d
gone through in the country place.

The reason they had called me made me regret having come
to meet them. They told me that they needed money, and I
generously offered them the little I had left. But that wasn’t what
they were looking for.

“No, my friend,” Rosario told me, “what we need is a *lot* of
money.”

“But like how much?” I insisted.

“Like a lot, man, a lot,” Emilio said.

But the serious part turned out to be not how much but where
it was coming from, the place where I, the one unanimously
chosen by them, was to ask for that money and the way in which
I was to do it.

“Just tell them that you’ve come on my behalf,” Rosario said.

“But why me?” I asked in anguish. “Why don’t you guys go?”

“Because right now they don’t want to see me,” Rosario
explained.

“So then why would they give you money?”

“Because I’m going to ask them for it,” she said. “Keep this in
mind: you’ve got to tell them that I’m making the request the
easy way, remember, easy way.”

“What did you mean?” I asked again, even more concerned.

“What do you mean the easy way?”

“They’ll understand, my friend, you just limit yourself to
doing what I tell you.”

“Why don’t you go?” I asked Emilio.

“Me?” the coward answered. “Don’t you see that I’m her
boyfriend?”

“Look, my friend,” Rosario said, trying to be patient. “If you
love me at all, do me this favor.”

“If you love me at all…” I thought. “Love brandishing one
of its worse weapons.” Of course I loved her, but how much did
she love me to get me mixed up in this? How far would I have
to lower myself in order to justify for her, or for me, her “if
you love me at all”? What validity does blackmail have in love,
where anything goes? Is it that someone loves cowards? The
one at the end of the line?

“But why so much money?” I decided to take another
approach.

“Don’t ask foolish questions,” Emilio said. “Are you going or
aren’t you?”

“Of course he’s going,” she said and took my hand lovingly.

“Of course you’re going to go.”

Her dirty trick made me discover the furthest limit of love
for someone, the critical point where it no longer mattered to
me to die for Rosario. I looked at her with my hand in hers, at
the tender—albeit false—expression in her eyes, at her tongue
uselessly wetting her dry lips, and I couldn’t, I didn’t want, to
say no to her. I didn’t care about her brazeness in using me nor
did I care about the false love of those hands, those eyes, and
that tongue. Since I was already lost I wouldn’t lose anything
in losing myself.

“So what do I have to do?”

“Nothing,” she said, as if it were true. “Just ask for him.”

“And what do I call him?” I asked. “Mister, doctor, sir…”

“Whatever you want,” she said sweetly.
“And what if they kill me?” I asked, stupefied by her sweetness.
“We’ll bury you,” Emilio answered, dying with laughter.
She squeezed my hand harder, and looked at me, her deception more loving than before. Her murderous tongue came out again, this time moister.
“If they kill you, I’ll kill them and then I’ll kill myself.”

I never got to meet “him.” Luckily for me the mission was a fiasco, an attempt that didn’t get beyond the gatehouse of the building where they were supposedly hiding out, now that they were being hunted down. All I managed to get was to have five armed monsters drag me into a garage and submit me to an hour-long interrogation, intimidating me with their weapons, their insults, and their fearsome little laughs. But the worst part was that it had all been in vain. When I got back to Rosario and Emilio, still unable to stand steadily because of the shaking in my legs, I found them more out of it and stranger than ever.
“What money?” Emilio asked me.
“Where is it you’re coming from?” Rosario asked me.
“You smoked it green, man,” he said.
“You’re all fucked up,” she said, and they dropped the subject.
Rosario was right. It could have occurred to no one but me to pay attention to that pair of degenerates who didn’t even know where on Earth they were. “If you love me at all . . .” I thought.
“They could have killed me, and nobody could have gotten those two down from their cloud,” I thought with rage. “I’m all fucked up,” I thought with rage and sadness.

Here, in the hospital, waiting for her, remembering her, and even making plans and preparing what to say when she revives, I have the sensation that everything is the same. That these years without her haven’t passed and that time has brought me to the last moment I was with Rosario Tijeras. That last moment, when, unlike the others, I didn’t say goodbye. Several times I’d said to her “Goodbye, Rosario,” overcome by the weariness of not having her, but those goodbyes were always followed by a lot of “I’m backs” and inside me the everlasting “I can’t.” And sitting here I realize that that final goodbye wasn’t the last one either; that again I’ve come back, again, I’m at her feet, awaiting her wishes, again thinking how many more times will there be before I reach the definitive and final last time. I’d like to go, to leave her, as on so many other occasions. I’ve already done enough, I’ve done my duty, she’s in good hands—the only ones that can do anything for her. There’s no longer any reason for my staying here, revisiting the past. It’s Emilio who should be with her, he’s more involved, but me, what the devil am I doing here?

My feet won’t respond to the will of my intentions. I get up with great effort only to see that everything is going along just the same: the nurse, the hallway, the dawn, the poor old man dozing, the clock on the wall and its four-thirty in the morning. Through the window I see an early morning mist that leaves us without mountains, that erases the crèche and Rosario’s neighborhoods in the heights. It will probably also leave us without sun today and might even bring on a shower or two, the kind that drags down mud and stones and leaves you with the feeling that it’s rained shit.

“I don’t like it when it rains,” Rosario told me once.

“Me either.” And I didn’t say it just to please her.

“It seems as if dead people were crying up there, don’t you think?” she said.

They’d given her back to me halfway after that time in the country with all the drugs. Emilio had left her in her apartment and called to let me know. He wasn’t in any better shape than she was, but at least he had a place he could go to and not feel alone.

“You take care of her, man,” he told me. “I can’t anymore.”

I flew to her. She’d left the door open, and when I went in I found her looking at the rain, naked from the waist up, barefoot in her blue jeans. When she heard me she turned around and her breasts looked at me, the dark nipples electrified by the cold. She was maybe similar to how I imagined her in the sex I had when I was alone, but I didn’t know her like that, so close and so naked...

“God, Rosario, you’re going to get sick,” I told her.

“My friend,” she said to me and fell on me in an embrace, as she always did when she found herself unforgivably lost.

I covered her, carried her to her bed, wrapped her in blankets, and looked for some trace of fever on her cheeks with my hand. Caressing her hair, I smoothed it back and spoke sweetly to her in that faggoty tone she hated so much but that I couldn’t help when I saw her like that, beaten down, collapsed, exhausted, but above all, so alone and so close to me.

“I’m sucked dry, my friend, sucked dry of everything.” She could barely speak.

“I’m going to take care of you, Rosario.”

“I’m going to leave everything, everything. I’m going to quit this business that’s killing me, I’m going to quit this crazy life, I’m going to leave them, I’m going to stop being bad, my friend.”

“You’re not bad, Rosario,” I said convincingly.

“Yes I am, very bad, you know I am.”

I asked her not to talk anymore, to rest, to try to get some sleep. Then she closed her eyes, obeying me, and she looked so pale, so drawn, so lifeless that I couldn’t help imagining her dead. It terrified me and made me squeeze her hands and then lean over to give her a kiss on the forehead without inhibition.

“I’m going to take care of you, Rosario.”

She threw off part of her weariness with a sigh. I felt that she breathed in new air, the good air of which she dreamed, the air of her new plans. She let go of my hand, and I felt that she was resting. I covered her up to her chin, drew the drapes, and tiptoed over to the door, but I wasn’t capable of leaving her alone. I sat down beside her, to look at her.

“I love you, Rosario.” I said it aloud, but as she was sleeping deeply, I was certain that she didn’t hear me.

I stayed at her place for the next few days to take care of her and be with her in her condition. They were very difficult days.
Rosario would suddenly sink into a depression and drag me into it along the way. She tried to get off drugs without success. At night, pressured by her desperation, I’d go out to get her something in the darkest dives. But the next morning she’d cry over the sin of her relapse, cursing the life she lived, and swearing anew her good intentions.

“Do not know which would be better, to die or to keep on this way.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Rosario.”

“I’m serious, my friend, it’s a very hard decision.”

“Then stay the way you are.”

One thing I was sure about was that her anguish wasn’t due entirely to drugs. What had sunk Rosario down to the depths were the circumstances that brought her to them. Drugs were the last resort in an attempt to ease the damage life had already done to her, the false barrier that you build along the edge of the abyss.

“There’s got to be a way out,” I told her. “The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“I don’t understand, Rosario.”

“That proverbial light doesn’t light up anything new, anything different from what there was going into the tunnel.”

If you think about it, it’s true. There isn’t a big difference between the view at the entrance and the one at the exit. All that’s left, then, as the only motivation for living, is a lie.

“If the tunnel is long, like yours, you can go in when it’s raining and come out in the sun. That’s possible.”

“And who can guarantee that it’s not going to start raining again, my friend?”

It made me think of the headstrong whales that refuse to return to sea. The more I tried to drag her to the light, the more she, aided by my weight, would try to sink down deeper, as if it were some kind of scheme. I finally accepted the fact that I couldn’t do anything for her, that my only alternative was to be at her side and hope that at least she’d bounce when she hit bottom.

“If you don’t lie to yourself and don’t give yourself hopes and dreams, you’re never going to make it, Rosario,” was the last thing I told her before resigning myself.

I opted for that formula for myself. I dreamed of a recovered Rosario, full of life, and—the most extreme form of a lie—full of love for me. An illusion that lasted as long as it takes to ask a question.

“What have you heard about Emilio?”

I answered truthfully: nothing. But I didn’t tell her why I hadn’t heard anything about him. I should have spoken to her about my withdrawal and my dedication to her, of the nights I spent watching her sleep, of the alternatives I sought to get her out of her hole, of the pleasure it gave me to know that I was alone with her, even if she were in pain. For those reasons, and for many more—I didn’t mention my jealousy to her—I didn’t know anything about Emilio or the outside world, not even the month, the day, or the hour, not even my own name, because the only thing I heard was her “friend, my friend” sounding like a plea, like a lament.

After a time we opened the windows. It was a good sign that we were getting better. The apartment filled with a light that at the time seemed stronger to us than usual. We’d already become habituated to darkness, day and night, to the seclusion of the
terminally ill, to having neither time nor a place in this world. But suddenly I heard a curtain being drawn, then another, and then the rest. She was the one opening them with one strong tug. I squinted in the sunlight or maybe because hope was shining through those windows again.

"I can't believe how much dust there is in this apartment," she said. "It needs a thorough cleaning. Like Doña Rubi says: poverty shouldn't be confused with sloppiness."

"Excuse me, Rosario," I said, "but what poverty are you talking about?"

"This is all on loan, my friend," she said. "When I least expect it, they'll get it in their heads to take it away from me."

She went into the kitchen, and I saw her come back with the vacuum cleaner, some rags, brooms, and a bucket. She gathered up her hair, threw a rag over her shoulder, and went about plugging in the vacuum, but then she caught sight of my surprise.

"Why are you just standing there?" she asked.

"What are you going to do, Rosario?"

"You mean what are we going to do," she said. "We're going to clean, my friend, and don't play dumb, come over here and take this."

"Why don't you call your cleaning woman?"

"Cleaning woman? We don't need a cleaning woman!" she said. "I'll take the living room and the kitchen and you take the bedrooms. What are you waiting for, tomorrow?"

She handed me the utensils and connected the vacuum, but it seemed to me that she was the machine receiving the energy of the electric current. "Rosario cleaning?" I thought when I went to the areas she'd assigned me. "I don't know whether I should be worried or die laughing." What did worry me was when I saw myself carrying the things Rosario had handed me; I had only a slight suspicion as to their use. "If Emilio could only see me," I thought, and then I couldn't avoid thinking seriously about him.

Later, he would tell me about everything he had gone through. Or, in his words: everything that they had gone through, because his family moved him from doctors, to psychologists, to therapists, looking for someone who would prescribe a treatment for him outside the country or, in keeping with the intentions of his family, outside Rosario. He, however, in spite of his apparent weakened state, always came up with enough strength to pronounce a definitive "I won't go, I won't go," which led his family to move their proposal to the other side, that is, to get rid of Rosario. The consequences, as was to be imagined, couldn't have been worse. When I saw her come out of her room I thought she'd relapsed. I didn't know that she'd answered a call from Emilio's family. She came out incensed.

"That bunch of bastards!"

"What happened, Rosario?"

"I'm going to kill them! I'm going to bring them all down, God damn it!"

"What's going on? Who was it? Was it 'them'?"

"Them? Which 'them'? These sons of bitches are worse than they are."

In the midst of her diatribe I was able to decipher what and who it was all about. She was like a madwoman. Time passed, and she didn't calm down, on the contrary, she seemed to get worse. I was afraid for her health, for her condition, for her recovery. I thought all the work we'd done with so much difficulty would go to waste. I tried without success to calm her
down, but I knew her, I knew it was a matter of waiting, but she didn’t stop.

“Lowborn bastards!”

“Don’t pay any attention to them, Rosario.”

“Attention? Do you know what I told them? What I told those sick bastards? That they can take their money, their good intentions, their ‘we only want to help you,’ their ‘it’s for the good of everyone,’ their ‘we’re good people,’ their family names, their reputation—they can take all that and roll it up and stick it up their ass, hah!, and I also told them that if there was any room left they can stick Emilio up their ass too.”

“You told them all that?”

“All that and a lot more!”

I let out such a loud guffaw that Rosario couldn’t help laughing along with me and when I saw her laugh I calmed down. The fire was starting to go out, even though I was sure (and I wasn’t mistaken about this) that Emilio’s home was catching fire, but I kept laughing as I imagined their faces and the turmoil Rosario’s irreverent tongue must be causing, or maybe, and this I thought about later with a touch of guilt, maybe my pleasure probably had more to do with Emilio being in the belly of the beast, that is, his family, than with the insult of my Rosario.

Nevertheless, the incident had repercussions on her behavior. Since the day she’d decided to open the windows until the call from Emilio’s family, Rosario’s state of mind had been flourishing and, therefore, mine was, too. We dedicated ourselves exclusively to ourselves, still isolated from the world but coming up to the surface from the darkness. Never before or afterward had we taken so much pleasure in each other’s company, not even during those hours of our night together, that damn night that would come later and that made me believe that by having Rosario naked beneath my body I was happy. Now that I look back I don’t have the slightest doubt that my best moments with her were when together we looked together for the light in that tunnel that Rosario didn’t believe in. We never reached it, but the distance we managed to cover was luminous enough to leave me glowing for life. Little by little Rosario had passed from anxiety to tenderness. She surprised me with new sides of herself that I had sensed but that I never thought I would get to know, much less enjoy. If someone had met her during those days, they would never have imagined her aggressiveness, her violence, her fight with life. Even I began to dream of the idea of Rosario cured of her past. She would speak with a sweeter tone of voice, one that matched the expression in her eyes. She would use calm words to tell me about her plans, what her new life would be, what she would leave completely behind, what she would erase from her history to start all over again.

“That’ll be my last crime, my friend,” she would tell me. “I’m going to kill everything from before.”

She’d recovered her sharp beauty, and paleness again gave way to her mestizo color. She’d gone back to her sexy ways, her tight jeans, her midriff tops, her bare shoulders, her smile with all her teeth. She’d gone back to what she was before, but different, more exquisite, more eager for life, more of a pleasure to love, but that was precisely the only aspect in which she hadn’t changed. How could I not love her if every day I loved her more, if with her new attitude she seemed more like what I dreamed, what I’d always hoped for from her. How could I love her and not lose myself, how to stop being her “friend” and become exclusive and indispensable, become a part, a motive, a neces-
sity, nourishment for Rosario. How to let her know that my embraces wanted to hold her forever, that my kisses on her cheek wanted to slip across to her mouth, that my words remained only half-spoken, how to explain to her that I’d already had her many nights and that I’d taken her on a stroll throughout my existence, imagining her in my past and counting on her for the rest of my life. Nevertheless, even seeing her renewed, with plans and dreams, even knowing that Emilio was on his ass, that Ferney was further and further away from her thoughts, and that the tough guys were in hiding from the government, even then the dilemma continued, and in that way everything had changed while for me everything remained the same, like the first day in which I woke up scared, supposedly in love with Rosario Tijeras.

What had been a stormy imprisonment in the beginning changed into a vacation you wished would last forever. Without leaving the apartment I felt I was going out for a walk, holding Rosario by the hand. When I heard her voice with its new tone I felt I was in the middle of a green meadow with a cool breeze, standing with open arms like a kite waiting for the wind. I wanted life to go on like that, without intruders, without the inopportune inhabitants that lived in Rosario. I went so far as to forgive myself for wishing my best friend lost, for ignoring my family, for having abandoned everything for a woman. I thought that my surrender was worth it, rather than a traitor and an ingrate I felt I was a redeemer who, because I was working in the name of love, would have all his offenses forgiven. Later I found out that forgiveness had come through commiseration, because those I’d failed understood my mistake, which I didn’t see because I was part of it. But it didn’t take me long to see it, because after so many nights listening open-mouthed to Rosario enjoying herself with her own stories, with her own plans and dreams, after many hugs to involve me in her good intentions, after I believed she’d recovered from what ailed her, later, one night the phone woke us up and I answered. I myself answered, so there’d be no doubt of my mistake, I answered and went to her room to wake her up.

“It’s a woman,” I said, still hopeful that it was a mistake. “She didn’t say who she was.”

Rosario turned on her lamp and remained thoughtful. I thought she was giving herself time to wake up, but her torpor had to do exclusively with the call.

“I’ll take it,” she finally said, and then, what was worse, “Close the door.”

I hung up my extension without wanting to. I wanted to corroborate the reasons for my anxiety, but I didn’t permit myself anything so direct. I decided on something less daring and stood beside her door to listen but I couldn’t catch much of it, only “yes...yes...yes.” While I listened, I slid down to the floor where I ended up together with my spirits after so many yeses and then a forceful “Tell them I’m on my way.” I heard her turning on the lights, opening drawers and doors, and even heard the faucet in the bathroom. I don’t remember how much time went by until she rushed out with her travel bag, with her car keys in her hand, so distracted and hurried that she didn’t see me lying by her door like a dog. She didn’t say goodbye or leave me a note. In any case I didn’t need those niceties, I didn’t need any explanation. Life was back on track.

“Again,” I said to myself, unable to stand up.
With my tail between my legs, feeling like an animal, I went back home. I didn’t have to say anything, it could all be read on my face. The reading must have been a pathetic one because instead of reproaches I received numb smiles and little pats on the back, although none of it alleviated the anxiety I felt. It was the feeling of having crashed into a wall at great speed, leaving me so bewildered that I couldn’t define my feelings nor could I understand the situation that had led me to experience that frightful collision. I would try to order my thoughts so that I could diagnose my illness, but it was somebody in my family, not me, that got it right when they decided to lay the matter out on the table.

“You’re not addicted to drugs, you’re addicted to shit,” that somebody said.

He who is silent assents, and I had to be silent. It pained me to recognize it, but it was true. I didn’t have the courage to ask them how you cured yourself of that habit, what the treatment was, where, who could help me, and I thought that if a place didn’t exist that offered some kind of therapy, humanity had
been negligent of humanity not establishing one because one thing I was sure of was that I wasn’t the only one. There are millions of us shiteaters who have to cure ourselves in silence or, has happened so many times, we die of a fecal overdose.

“So much shit must be good for something,” I consoled myself, nevertheless. “It’s used as fertilizer for a reason.”

Now, as I review my most important moments with Rosario, I think that I haven’t recovered from my addiction. Here I am again, just like on all the occasions when she needed me. I wasn’t as dragged along as before, but I’m always attentive to her fate, as if it were my own—if by any chance it isn’t, that is.

“You and I are like twin souls, my friend,” she told me one day when she was pensive.

“But we’re very different, Rosario.”

“Yes, but it’s just so weird, look at Emilio, for example.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, he’s different too, but with him everything is different, do you see what I’m saying?” she tried to explain.

“I don’t get it at all, Rosario.”

“In other words, it’s like you and me were the two faces of a coin.”

“Aha.”

“What do you mean, ‘aha’?” she said, firing up. “Did you understand me or not?”

Of course I’d understood her, but I didn’t agree with her explanation. But, as always, I didn’t dare tell her it wasn’t a matter of similarities but of affection, and if she thought Emilio was different it was probably because her feelings were also different, because you end up becoming like the person you love. I had the urge to tell her something along those lines, but my “aha” had already upset her and she left me alone, but not before rubbing in what I was.

“You’re becoming an idiot,” she said. “There’s no more talking to you.”

She would leave me like that many times, on the verge of saying something stupid to cover up what I really wanted to say. With the usual silly smile I used to excuse a positon and, at the same time, establish that she was right.

“I’m not becoming anything,” I thought. “You made me this way, Rosario Tijeras.”

After having gone back to them, a few days passed and she returned, as always. A phone call at dawn, the evasive words of guilt, the conciliatory tone, “my friend, my friend,” a greeting without any questions or answers. Why bother, if everything was known and nothing was going to change? Rosario would once again arrange the abandoned dominoes on the playing table she had tipped over when she left.

“What about Emilio?” she would always finally ask again.

I already knew what would follow. I’d give her two or three bits of news about him, rather coldly. “He’s around, I haven’t spoken to him in a while.” Enough information so as to be neither accommodating nor impolite, simply the words she required to ask me to tell Emilio to call her.

“Tell Emilio to call me,” she said before hanging up, as though it were something spontaneous, as though I didn’t know that that was her only reason for calling.

Although we lapsed again, this time Rosario had to have more patience to bring it off. I really had been mortally wounded, not by her weapons, but, as always, by my own illusions. Never before had I imagined myself so close to her. That’s why I fell hard out
of my clouds. I wanted to recover from the beating, and her presence, instead of helping to cure me, injured me. I was aloof with her many times, but not as much as my wound required, only enough to delay my submission, to make her understand that something was happening—the useless attention-getting tantrums of someone in love.

“What’s going on with you, my friend? You were never like this.”

Her concern didn’t go beyond that comment, but what more could I expect since I never answered her truthfully, since my imbecility went to the extreme of waiting for the miracle that would make her guess. I felt tired of everything, more of myself than everything, but the problem of love is just that, the addiction, the ball and chain, the weariness brought on by the slavery of swimming against the current.

Winning Emilio back didn’t turn out that easy for her either. His family had him under siege, under medical and psychiatric treatment. They were trying to get Rosario out of his mind, by whatever means necessary.

“Do you know what my father says?” he told me around that time. “He says that if he sees me with that woman again he’ll pack me off to study in Prague.”

“Prague, Czechoslovakia?”

“Just imagine.”

Well, he didn’t go anywhere, not Prague and not anywhere else. Rosario won again, first me and then him, as usual. Threats and therapies were useless and, worse still, so were the experiences we’d been through with Rosario, which left us hanging by a loose thread. I refused to take her calls. I wouldn’t answer so as not to compromise myself. When someone in the family answered she’d hang up, of course, and wait for the maid, her only accomplice, to answer, but I held my position: “Tell her I’m not here,” “She says to tell you she knows you’re here,” “Then tell her I’m sick,” “She says to tell you that she knows you’re not sick,” “Then tell her I died,” “She says to tell you not to die because she doesn’t know how to live without you.” It was like that every day, softening me up little by little, with more patience than I had, enduring it all because that was the first thing life had taught her. Until my resistance gave way: “Tell her that I’m not here,” “Tell him that I’ll wait for him in the cemetery,” “In the cemetery? What’s that all about? Let me have the phone.”

“Hello! Rosario! What are you going to do?”

“My friend,” she said. “At last.”

“What’s going on, Rosario? What do you want?”

“I need for you to go to the cemetery with me.”

“What for? Who died?”

“My brother,” she said in a sad voice.

“What do you mean? Your brother died a long time ago.”

“Yes,” she explained. “But I have to go and change the CD for him.”

She’d beseeched me to go with her, that it was the anniversary of his death and she wasn’t capable of going alone.

Cemeteries produce in me a sensation similar to that of being on a roller coaster, a delightful vertigo. I’m scared of a place with so many dead people, but it calms me down knowing that they’re well buried. I don’t know what their enchantment is based on, maybe on the relief of knowing that we’re not with them yet, or maybe just the opposite, the eagerness to know what it feels like being there. San Pedro cemetery is particularly beautiful, all white and with lots of marble, a traditional cemetery where
the dead sleep one on top of the other, unlike modern ones that seem more like a field sown with tasteless flower pots. There are also mausoleums where a few famous people, grouped by family, rest, watched over by enormous statues of guardian angels and angels of silence. Rosario led me toward one that had no statues but that was watched over by two boys.

“It’s here,” she said with solemnity.

The two boys came to attention when they saw her, like two honor guards.

“Who are those guys?” I asked.

“The ones who look after him,” she told me.

“What do you mean?”

“Even though we’ve done a lot of cleaning up there’s still a lot to be done,” she explained to me. “Besides, the satanists loved him so much that they once tried to steal his body. Poor things. What’s up, guys? How’s it going?”

“What’s up, Rosario?” they answered at the same time. “How are you?”

I was so absorbed in what I was seeing that I thought the music that was playing was coming from outside, but when she opened her purse and handed them the CDs I realized that it was coming from the tomb itself, a horrible strident noise played by a sound system protected by some grating and camouflaged among the flowers. Rosario exchanged a few words with them, and then they drew away a little, just enough to give her the privacy needed to pray. I went closer, too. I didn’t kneel, but I was able to read what the stone said: “Here lies the man,” and next to the epitaph was a photo of Johnefe, rather smudged and yellowed. I went closer, in spite of the volume of the sound system.

“It’s his last picture,” Rosario told me.

“He looks dead,” I said.

“He was dead,” she told me as she lowered the volume of the system a bit. “It was when we took him out. After they’d killed him, we partyed with him. We took him to his favorite places, we played the music he liked, we got drunk, we got high, we did everything he liked.”

I understood the photograph now. From the blur I was able to make out a few faces I recognized: Ferney, another whose name I couldn’t recall, and Rosario herself. I didn’t see Deisy. Their faces looked more dead than the dead man himself; they were carrying bottles of aguardiente, a huge tape recorder on their shoulders, and Johnefe in the middle, who they held up by his arms.

“Poor thing,” Rosario said and then she crossed herself.

She straightened out a little the strange mixture of roses and carnations that decorated the tomb, raised the volume again, and with a sad gesture threw him a long kiss with so much love that I would have liked to have been the one lying there.

“I’ll see you later, guys. Take good care of him for me, OK?”

When the guardian angels raised their arms to wave goodbye I could see a pair of pistols beneath their navels and cartridge clips in their jeans. I took Rosario by the hand and walked rapidly. I wanted to get out of there. I was so perturbed that I didn’t think when I innocently asked Rosario:

“Do you think your brother can rest in peace with such loud music?”

I saw her angry look through her sunglasses. It was too late to explain to her that it was a joke. Still, her reaction wasn’t as violent as I’d expected; she couldn’t give herself that luxury after having sought me out so much. That made me feel good.
“You really do talk a lot of crap, my friend,” she said, letting go of my hand, souring the sip of triumph I’d just tasted.

That visit was the pretext to return, to be together for the last time, because what began at that point was one long goodbye, the breaking of a link that I’d come to think I’d live with always. In any case, there was the threefold couple once more.

“Now we’re going to do things the healthy way,” Emilio told us. “Very sensibly.”

“That’s fine with me,” I said.

“Me too,” said Rosario, although not very convincingly.

They were promises that helped justify our return, the good intentions with which a person who relapses always deceives himself.

Emilio had turned up a few days later. I didn’t hear what the reunion was like, but I suppose it was the same as previous ones. He wanted to know how mine had been, and I told him about the cemetery.

“Did you see the last name?” he asked, grabbing me by the shoulders.

“What last name?” I asked, completely lost.

“Johnne’s and Rosario’s.”

“I didn’t notice any last name.”

“You really are an idiot,” he said, now clutching his head. “That was a chance to find out Rosario’s last name.”

“What do you want to know her last name for?” I asked. “You’re just like your mother.”

“It’s not that,” he explained. “It’s just that not knowing your girlfriend’s last name is kind of strange, don’t you think?”

“Rosario Tijeras.”

“Oh, brother!” he said, defeated. “Why don’t you go back there with me, and I’ll take a look.”

“Because I’m not going back there,” I said seriously. “Anyone who comes close is toast.”

I suggested to Emilio that he search Rosario’s purse if he insisted on knowing what her last name was, that he look at her identification card or some other document.

“Don’t you think I’ve thought of that?” he said. Haven’t you noticed that she doesn’t let go of her bag, not even to take a bath?”

“It must be because of the gun,” I said.

“Who knows what else she’s got in there. Maybe when she’s asleep . . .”

“You’ve got even less of a chance that way. She wakes up so easily—”

“How do you know she wakes up easily?” Emilio asked me, changing his tone.

“Because I never took my eyes off her while she slept,” I thought, “and I saw that her eyes would move even when closed. Because barely passing my hand over her naked skin, she suddenly opened them to remind me that she didn’t want any more, that what had happened to us was just for one night, a game between friends, a drunken slip.”

“Well, being as suspicious as she is . . .” I said, getting away from the memory, coming back to Emilio.

I remember now that a few days later we’d had an opportunity. She’d gone downstairs to pick something up from the doorman and had left her purse within our reach. While Emilio investigated I stood watch by the door, listening for the elevator.
"How's it going?" I asked from my spot. "What's in there?"
"Nothing but junk," Emilio answered. "The gun, lipstick, a compact mirror . . ."
"In the wallet, dummy, look in her wallet."
"There's nothing there either," he said. "A religious picture of the Virgin of Perpetual Help, another of the Christ Child, a picture of John the, son of a bitch!"
"What's wrong?"
"A picture of Ferney, idiot!"
"So what's wrong with that?"
"What do you mean what's wrong?" he answered. "She's got a picture of him and doesn't have one of me. Now she's really going to hear it from me."
I closed the apartment door and abandoned my post. I took the wallet away from Emilio and asked him to look me in the face.
"Look, Emilio, if you open your mouth, if you say something to her, we're both dead, understand?"
"But why does she still have a picture of that guy?"
"Do you understand me?" I asked him again emphatically.
That was as far as it went. Emilio had to reserve his rage and his machinations. Rosario clearly knew how to keep up the mystery that surrounded her. It was impossible to know more than what she herself told you. And now that I think of it, it hadn't occurred to me to think of where her bag might be, who could have been left with it in all that confusion in the club. They probably kept it for her there, or the ones who were with her probably took it . . . but if they all ran away, it was probably stolen. Was she still carrying the gun? They probably took it to disarm her. What happened will have to be figured out later.

There was more movement in the corridor now. I looked to see if I could find a familiar face, maybe the doctor who was operating on her, maybe Emilio, but only the duty nurse, who'd finally woken up, was familiar to me. The old man was still dozing and the clock continued at four-thirty. I looked through the window, and the sun was out. Maybe it wouldn't rain today, but one of these days I'd definitely have to go buy myself a watch.
A couple of weeks before Ferney was killed we saw him hanging around Rosario's building, not daring to enter. He would park his motorcycle a couple of blocks away and would then camouflage himself in some bushes closer to the building. But in spite of all that we saw him. At first we thought that as soon as he saw Emilio leave he'd go in, but that's not what happened. During the following days he stationed himself in the same spot, and Rosario told us that he'd stayed there until late at night.

"Why don't you go down and find out what he wants?" we suggested.

"What for?" she said. "If he needs me, let him come up."

"This is very strange," Emilio said.

Then he decided to leave the bushes and sat on the curb across the street. We didn't know if he showed himself when he saw that he had been discovered or if it was part of some strategy. The fact is, he would arrive very early in the morning, before Rosario woke up—which, in any case, wasn't very early—and would remain there until she turned out the light in her bedroom. He would spend the whole day looking at her window, the same
as he'd done in the club, watching Emilio and Rosario dance when he'd already lost her for good.

"What's up with that guy?" Emilio asked, uneasy. "Has he fallen in love again or what?"

"You're fooling yourself, Emilio," I thought. As if you could get Rosario out of your heart and then put her back again. Once you started loving her you loved her forever, if not, why else would I be here in this hospital? What I was sure of was that Ferney was doing what he was doing out of love, because there was no other reason for him to stay there in the sun and the rain under a window.

"I don't like it. I don't like what that guy is doing," Emilio kept saying.

"But he's not doing anything," I said in his defense, moved by an understandable complicity.

"Exactly," Emilio said. "That's what I don't like."

The one who couldn't stand it was Rosario. She got tired of being watched and felt guilty about Ferney's situation. Intrigued, she couldn't understand why he didn't come up since she'd invited him many times with her hand from the window. Why did he reject the meal she'd sent him with the doorman? Why, since once when she was alone she'd shouted him from above, "Come on up, Ferney, don't be an idiot!" But he remained unmoved, as if he were deaf and blind and hunger didn't tempt him.

"I'm going down," she finally said.

Emilio had a fit. He began to gesture his arms before he could get any words out, and when they came it would have been better if he hadn't said anything.

"For him, of course, but when I was all fucked up because of you you didn't call me or come to see me or ask about me, but him, sure!"

"Look, Emilio," she said to him with a key so close to his face that I thought she planned to cut him. "Look Emilio, nobody fucked you up. You were born that way, and if you're going to throw your little tantrums you can get out."

"Fine!" he said. "If what you want is to stay with that lowlife, fine, I'm leaving. But as for me, you'll never see me again, not even in your dreams."

Before Emilio had finished his threats the elevator doors had closed with Rosario inside. He opted for the stairs, and I ran to the window so as not to miss the outcome. She came out first, and I saw her cross the street, slowing her pace as she got closer to Ferney. Then Emilio came out, got in his car, slammed the door, and took off in a fury. I opened the window to listen, but it seemed to me that they didn't talk, or if they said something to each other, it was in whispers, or with their eyes, the way people who are in love talk to each other. I saw her sit down beside him, shoulder to shoulder. I saw him rest his head on her lap, as if he were weeping, and I saw her cover him with her body, as if protecting a small animal from stormy weather. I saw them remain that way for a long time, and then I thought of how difficult life was and the Indian file of lovers and about the last one in that line, the one nobody loves, and I wondered if it would be Ferney or me. Then I saw her take him by the hand, help him up, and, without letting go, lead him to the building. I lost sight of them until I saw them come into the apartment and go into the kitchen. I heard the sound of plates and silverware and an uncomfortable silence that made me remember that three's a crowd.
"The ironies of life, my friend," I also remembered what Rosario had told me once. "The day Ferney brought off his best job, that was the day he lost me."

"It was for them, right?"

"Yup," she said. "I met them that day."

"You still haven’t told me how you met them," I complained.

"Of course I told you."

It was when Johnefe and Ferney had traveled to Bogotá together to do a job for the Cartel. They’d taken the women to a country place while the boys carried out their assignment, and they arranged to meet there afterward. The place belonged to them.

"They showed up around midnight," Rosario told me. "Johnefe and Ferney were already there. We were having a ball, and it looked like they wanted to celebrate, too. They’d arrived all happy, with music, coke, drugs, more women, well, you know. Very buzzed and very nice, especially to me."

I could picture them. I could see them circling like vultures over their dead victim, and it wasn’t that Rosario was anything like that, but it enraged me to know that they looked at her with desire, with the lewdness reflected by their enormous bellies and their evil little chuckles, and I wasn’t mistaken because she herself told me what she managed to hear.

"That girl’s so pretty, who is she?" the toughest of them all had asked. "Bring me that sweet thing."

And since the "sweet thing" knew who was involved, she let herself be led away, not too quick and not too slow, and she must have changed her walk as when she wants to show herself off, and she must have looked at him as when she wants something, and she must have smiled at him the way she smiled at me that night when she wanted something.

"What about Erley?" I asked her. "What was the expression on his face?"

"Ferney," she corrected. "I didn’t see his face."

"You weren’t capable of looking at him, Rosario Tijeras." I didn’t tell her that, but I know that was how it was, because she didn’t look at us either when she went with them and because she couldn’t look at me when she found herself naked with me beside her, with not even a sheet covering us.

"What about Johnefe?" I asked again.

"Let the girl decide," Rosario told me she’d heard him say.

I still didn’t know her, but I know that on that day we’d all lost her. And even she herself lost what she’d been before, and it all became merely the summary of her consciousness. From that moment on her life took the turn that brought her out of her privations and tossed her over to us, to this side of the world, which, apart from the money, wasn’t much different from the one she was leaving behind.

"My life changed from that moment on, my friend."

"For better or for worse?" I asked her, still angry.

"I got out of being poor," she said. "And that’s saying a lot."

After Rosario brought Ferney up to her apartment he stayed there for at least another week. I withdrew a little, but not as much as Emilio, who completely disappeared, but at least I kept up our daily contact by phone and visited now and then. I didn’t ask her anything, not even what was happening with Ferney or why he’d stayed with her. I didn’t want to know anything, I didn’t even want to imagine what was going on between them, whether they were sleeping together, whether
she'd decided to go back to him, nothing, nor did I complain. With what right? One night together didn't give me the right to anything. What did turn out to be true was the presentiment I had that Ferney was taking his last shots in life. I also confirmed that nothing is guaranteed, and I say that because on one of my visits to Rosario during those days, I saved her from a tragedy or a scare, because most of the time one second is all that's needed for fate to decide whether it's going to be one or the other. The fact is that Rosario had the custom, learned from her friends, of boiling bullets in holy water before putting them to premeditated use. This time she'd forgotten to take them off the stove and the water, of course, had evaporated. I found them dancing inside a pot, and I don't know how or with what courage I rushed to take them off the stove and put them under a stream of cold water. All I needed was a couple of seconds to think about everything, about Rosario's going into the kitchen and the bullets catching her in a mad explosion, about myself with the pot boiling and suddenly a bang! before getting to the water, about Rosario and me shot at from a stove, lying lifeless on the kitchen floor. I came to her with my hands blistered and pale, as if the explosion had really taken place.

"Rosario, look!" I said in a tight voice.
"What happened to you?"
"The bullets."
"What bullets?" she asked, but immediately the projectiles came back to her memory. "Son of a bitch! The bullets!" and she ran into the kitchen without asking me what had happened to them. She must have calmed down, when she saw them submerged in water that reached the edge of the pot. When she came back she found me stretched out on her bed with my hands open and held up in the air as if waiting for someone to throw me a ball from the sky.

"I don't know where I've got my head," she said, not paying any attention to my hands.
"What are you mixed up in, Rosario?" I asked.
"Nothing, my friend. Those bullets aren't for me," she said. "I promised you I was going to change."

There was a silence, and we looked directly into each other's eyes. I searched for the truth in them, and she showed it to me. Nevertheless, in spite of her open gaze, I still couldn't understand what those bullets were doing in her kitchen. Finally Rosario couldn't bear the weight of my eyes.

"They're for Ferney."

She changed her expression. I thought she was going to cry. She felt with her hand for a place to sit down until she found the corner of the bed. I heard her take a deep breath. She clutched one hand with the other as if grabbing for the hand of someone else, only to say to me what she never said.

"I'm scared, my friend."

I leaned on my elbows to get up. My hands still felt like hot coals, still stretched out, but not enough to get Rosario out of her fear.

"What's going on, Rosario?"

I saw her fingers play with the scapular around her wrist. I saw her look away to give herself time to talk, gathering strength so that her voice wouldn't break, waiting for her heartbeat to slow down.

"I'm afraid Ferney's going to be killed, my friend. They set him up, and they want to kill him on me."
I couldn’t say anything to her. I was silent, looking for some quick phrase to ease her fright. I couldn’t find any words to challenge what was imminent, nothing to feed her hope, not even a lie.

“Ferney’s all I have left.”

“Maybe the only thing that’s left of your past, Rosario,” I thought. “Because if you wanted, I’d stay with you forever and you wouldn’t need anything else,” I said to myself in silence, pained at her exclusion of me. But I have to admit that I tried to comfort myself with my selfishness and my jealousy because it was impossible for me to avoid feeling some relief at imagining her alone, unprotected, with none of the people who had tried to make her theirs. Alone, only with me as an island.

“Why are you like that?” she asked me suddenly, changing the subject.

“What do you mean ‘like that?’”

“With your hands like this,” she explained, imitating me. “As if someone were going to toss you a ball.”

“I burned my hands. On the pot.”

A loud laugh erased her tragedy, restoring her beauty and brilliance to her eyes.

“Let me have a look,” she said and came over. She took my hands with a softness that didn’t seem hers. She brought them close to her mouth and blew on them, cooling them with cold air, which made me think it was true that Rosario had ice inside, ice that neither her passion nor her voltage melted and which kept her blood frozen, so that her will for doing what she did would never falter.

“You really are an idiot, my friend,” she said and gave me a kiss on the back of my hands. “That’s why I love you.”

“Because I’m an idiot.” I didn’t know whether to start laughing or crying. “Damn you,” I insulted her in my thoughts, but she, on the other hand, remained with my hands between hers, blowing on them without looking at me, amusing herself with a mocking little laugh that made me feel like even more of an idiot. But afterward, when she closed her eyes and put my fingers to her cheek and began to caress herself with them, indulging herself with that softness that still seemed to me to belong to someone else, I thought that it was worth it to keep feeling like one.
In any case, they killed him. I don't know when he left Rosario's apartment or what he was mixed up in. We hadn't talked about him again. Our lives seemed to have taken up their normal course once more and we spent a couple of rather calm weeks. Emilio had returned to ask for it, and he got it. Without asking, I was served my daily little piece of shit and I ate it. Rosario we saw in a pensive mood while things were going good for Emilio and bad for me. One morning, after we'd spent the night at her apartment, the newspaper arrived with Ferney's picture in the section on police news. I saw it first. Rosario and Emilio hadn't gotten up yet. I read the piece that accompanied the picture. It referred to him as a very dangerous criminal who'd been brought down in a police operation. I looked at the picture again to confirm what I'd read. It was him all right, there were his first and last names and a number across his chest so there wouldn't be any doubt that he was dangerous and had a record. I ran toward their room, but my good sense stopped me. I had to think of Rosario, how I should break the news to her and
what her reaction might be. First I’d have to talk to Emilio and plan something between the two of us, but he was still sleeping. I put my ear to the door to see if I could hear any indication that they were awake, but there was nothing. Time passed and still nothing, they still hadn’t woken up. When I couldn’t stand it anymore I went and knocked on the door. Emilio mumbled an answer.

“Emilio,” I said from the other side, “you’re wanted on the phone.”

I had barely finished speaking when I dashed back to the living room and picked up the extension in time so that Emilio wouldn’t hang up because nobody was on the line. I caught him on his last “hello.”

“Emilio!” I said, muffling my voice. “Come out. We’ve got to talk.”

“Where are you?” he asked, half asleep.

“Here, you idiot!” The dial tone made it hard for me to speak.

“But don’t say it’s me.”

“Why don’t you come in?” he asked again.

“I can’t, you faggot. Come out, I’ve got to talk to you.

“Let me sleep.”

“Emilio!” The dial tone gave way to a busy signal that I found maddening in my desperation. “Emilio! Ferney’s been killed.”

In a couple of seconds, as if the conversation hadn’t been interrupted, Emilio appeared in the living room, his hair a mess and his eyes wide open despite their puffiness.

“What?”

“Look.”

Emilio took the paper before I could point out the picture. He sat down in slow motion as he read. He rubbed his eyes to get rid of the blurriness of sleep, and when he finished he looked at me, stupefied.

“Go get dressed. This is serious,” I told him.

“Who’s going to tell her?”

I’d already asked myself that question. For us, the serious part wasn’t Ferney’s death but Rosario’s reaction to it. We knew her well. We knew that a death like that would unleash many more and that it wouldn’t be strange if they now included the two of us.

“You, of course,” I told him. “You’re her boyfriend.”

“Me? She’s capable of cutting my balls off. Can’t you see? I didn’t like the guy. You tell her. She trusts you more.”

The same story all over again. “She trusts you more,” as if that trust had ever done me any good. Quite the contrary. It was in my way. It put me on the level of her girlfriends. Besides, this imbecile would give her to me and take her away when it suited him. To hell with it!

“Sure!” I told him in a rage. “You trust her enough to screw her but to stand up to her, no!”

“Are you stupid or what?” He was starting to heat up. “She’s capable of thinking that I had him killed? Can’t you see that?”

“Oh, sure! I’d completely forgotten that I’m the idiot here. I’m the one who has to keep quiet, the one who swallows everything, the one who has to be content with watching, the only one who’s trusted, but only so that he’ll eat shit!”

“What do you mean?” Emilio asked. “What are you talking about?”

I didn’t know what to answer, hoping that if rage had got me into this, it would help me get out of it. But for better or for
worse—at that moment I didn’t know which—we had to remain silent and, confronted by the surprise, forget about shouting. “What’s going on, guys?” Rosario asked, looking at one and then the other. “Rosario!” we said in a chorus.

From heat we went to cold and from agitation to stiffness. We looked at each other, searching for an answer, a sign, a light, a miracle, anything that would get us out of the sudden bind we were caught in. But nothing happened, just an uncomfortable silence that Rosario again broke with her question. “What is it?”

With my eyes I signaled to Emilio to show her the newspaper. Since it had gotten very wrinkled during our argument, Emilio tried to smooth it out a little with his hands, and then, without saying anything, he handed it to her. She took it without understanding what it was all about, although I think she sensed something, because before looking at it she sat down, pushed her hair behind her ears, and cleared her throat. Emilio and I also sat down. It was better to be braced in order to take what would come. What came, however, wasn’t the explosion we were expecting, but rather the reaction that anyone might have on receiving such news. She lowered her face, covered it with her hands, and began to weep, softly at first, controlling her moans, but then hard, overcome by the news, with muffled sobs. Emilio and I kept looking at each other. We would have liked to have hugged her, to have offered her our shoulder, but we knew how sensitive Rosario was to any inopportune demonstration. “I knew it,” she said with broken words. “I knew it.”

No matter how much you know it, you can never get accustomed to it. We all know we’re going to die and yet... This truth was even more pronounced in Rosario’s case, where death has been her daily bread, her most persistent piece of news, and even her raison d’être. Several times we’d heard her say, “It doesn’t matter how long you live, but how you live,” and we knew that “how” meant gambling your life every day in exchange for a few pesos to get a TV set, a showy refrigerator, to add a second story to the house. But seeing her like that I understood how democratic death is when it distributes its pain.

Without lifting her head, Rosario reached out her hand, exactly between Emilio and me, no closer to him than to me, right in the middle. But it was Emilio who made use of his prerogative as boyfriend and took it. Still, she needed more than that. “You too, my friend,” she said to me, and I felt that I couldn’t love her more than I did.

She squeezed hard. Her hand was wet with tears, cold like her breath, and trembling in spite of the tight grip. With her other hand she was wiping her eyes, which didn’t stop crying, she pushed back the hair that fell over her face, she touched her heart, which wanted to leap out of her body. And with that hand she also picked up the newspaper that had fallen and lifted it to her mouth, giving Ferny’s picture a long kiss. Then the hidden person appeared, the one that the shock hadn’t let emerge, the true Rosario.

“I’m going to kill them,” she said. Emilio and I stopped squeezing. I was seized by an uneasiness that left me inert in my chair with a feeling of defeat. Emilio drew me out of it with his question. “Us?” he asked.

Rosario and I looked at him; yes, we really wanted to kill him now, but when I saw his dashing looks disfigured by fear,
I felt the urge to laugh instead. I didn’t, because the situation couldn’t have handled any more emotions, although Rosario didn’t refrain from saying what Emilio deserved to hear.

“Idiot,” she told him and then put her head in her hands again and began weeping once more, repeating: “I’m going to kill them,” and even though you couldn’t make out what she said because her voice was muffled as soon as it passed her lips, you could still understand that Rosario wanted to kill them.

She asked us to leave her alone, that she wanted to rest, that she needed to think, that she needed to sort through her feelings. The excuses you always make when the presence of other people disturbs you. It was understandable that she didn’t want us with her, but it was also dangerous. We knew what she’d done before under similar circumstances. But we left without saying anything to her. There was nothing that could be said when Rosario got something into her head. That night, before going to bed, I called her with the pretext of asking her how she was doing, but what I really wanted to find out was whether Rosario had begun to put her plan of vengeance into action. Just as I’d thought, she wasn’t home. Her machine answered, and I left a message asking her to call me urgently because I had something important to tell her, when the truth was that the only thing I had for her was fear, which was why it occurred to me to pique her interest with information that didn’t exist. She didn’t call me that night or the following morning, when I left her another message, or the next day, or the ones that followed. It was only when I went to her building to ask about her, hoping that she’d be there and that she simply wasn’t answering the phone, only at that moment, when the doorman informed me that Rosario had left that day, a short time after us, did I feel the shiver that verifies presentiments.

“She asked me to keep an eye on her apartment because she was going to be away for a while,” the doorman added.

I went straight to Emilio’s place. He was the only one with whom I could share my uneasiness, even if only halfway. But instead of finding support, I got myself a string of insults meant for Rosario, which he couldn’t wait to tell her and which he unloaded on me in her place.

“I can’t understand that fucking thing she’s got for going off without saying anything! Would it kill her to pick up a fucking phone and tell me that she’s going away?”

“I didn’t—” I tried to say.

“Sure! You’re always playing the pimp with her! I’ll bet that she called you and even said goodbye. I’ve never been able to understand that little business that goes on between you two!”

“I didn’t—” I tried again.

“No, it’s cool. When she calls you, tell her that she’s really going to find out who she’s dealing with now. And tell her too that I told you to say she can go to fucking hell.”

He didn’t give me a chance for anything, not even to shut his mouth with a fist, which was what he deserved. He left me standing at the door with all my anguish intact, not knowing what to do or where to go, completely lost, wanting to know at least what time it was.

“That’s funny,” the old man across from me said. “It’s daytime now and that clock still says four-thirty.”

His voice made me open my eyes and come to. He was right. It was daytime now, very much so. Something must have happened by now. A lot of time has passed and they must know something. The problem was that now there was nobody to ask.
The nurse had disappeared, and even though the hallways and the room were beginning to fill up with people, I couldn’t find anyone who could inform me about Rosario. It was strange. There was no one in uniform. Although I didn’t find it strange that the doctors in these hospitals would hide from people.

When I was about to stand up the old man got ahead of me and stopped me:

“Don’t worry. I’ll go ask about the kids.”

He probably knows how important this exercise of remembering is. I felt that he was asking me to close my eyes again and go back to where I’d left Rosario when he interrupted me. But I’ve already forgotten where I’d left off. Our comings and goings were so many that it’s hard to place the memories. All I want now is to see her again, to see myself again in those intense eyes that I’d stopped seeing three years ago. I want to squeeze her hand so she’ll know that I’m here and that I’ll always be here. If I were to close my eyes again it wouldn’t be to remember but to dream of the days that would come with Rosario at my side, to imagine her living this new opportunity that life was giving her, to imagine myself living it with her, both of us dedicated to fulfilling what there hadn’t been time to finish in a single night, that single night that deserves to be remembered always with closed eyes so that it can be recalled with the same intensity.

“You haven’t answered me, Rosario.” I think that’s how it all started.

She was sweet, tender. I didn’t know if it was because of the alcohol or because that was the way she was when she wanted to make love. Or because that’s how I saw her when I loved her more. We were close to each other, more than we’d ever been. I didn’t know whether it was also because of the alcohol or because

I thought she was loving me more or whether it was because I wanted to make love to her.

“Answer me, Rosario,” I insisted. “Have you ever fallen in love?”

Even though her smile was probably her most beautiful answer, I wanted to know more. Maybe I was seeking in her words the miracle that I’d so hoped for: my name chosen out of the many she had had and now had, but being chosen from among them all as a recognition of the greatest love that had ever been professed for her, or if, for obvious reasons, my name wasn’t there, at least knowing who could have awakened in her the feeling that was killing me but that didn’t seem to exist in her.

She didn’t answer me in the way I wanted that time either, not with my name nor with any other. Her reply was, on the contrary, a murderous question, like everything about her, which, if it didn’t kill me, left me gravely wounded, and not by the question itself but because I was drunk and I was sincere and I got up the courage to answer her, to look her in the eyes when she asked me:

“What about you, my friend, have you ever fallen in love?”
The last time she came back to us she took longer to return. For almost four months, we tired of calling her and checking up on her. That time was so long for me that I even went so far as to think that Rosario had gone away for good, that maybe they'd taken her off to another country and that we would definitely never see her again. During that time I rarely spoke with Emilio. He'd called me a few days after the insults he'd given me, not only to soften his treatment of me but also to see what I knew about her. I reached the point of looking for her picture in the newspaper every day on the same pages where Ferney's had appeared, but all I found were articles about the hundreds of boys found dead in Medellín every day.

Then I decided to take Rosario's absence as a good opportunity to get her finally out of my head. I made the decision with sadness, and, in spite of not forgetting her, I felt that life was beginning to take on a better flavor. There was no lack of memories, of course, the songs, the places that made me feel she was back once again to complicate my life. I also thought that breaking with Emilio
would help my plans, although judging from how he distanced himself, I suspected that he must have had the same ideas in his head. But as there’s a however in every story, mine was that my good intentions didn’t last me very long, only up to that night when, like all the others, Rosario called me at dawn.

With her habitual “my friend” she pulled me out of sleep and made me go cold inside. I asked her where she was, and she told me that she was back in her apartment, that she’d got in just a little while before and that the first thing she did was to call me.

“I’m sorry about the hour,” she said, and I turned on the light to look at the time on my alarm clock.

I asked her where she’d been all this time, and she told me “around.” The answer was always the same. “Around doing everyone in,” I thought during the long pause that followed.

“So what else is new?” she asked just to ask something, to dig up some subject and throw my little desire to talk some bait. I didn’t feel happy that she’d shown up or that she’d called me. To the contrary, I felt laziness, fatigue from wanting her again.

“It’s very late, Rosario,” I told her. “Why don’t we talk tomorrow.”

“I have some very important things to tell you, my friend. You and Emilio. Have you spoken with him again?”

Now she’d gotten to the reason for her call, which, in the end, was always to ask about Emilio. We were learning the story by heart, the routine that the three of us used to fool ourselves. Something like what everybody looks for in order to think that everything’s going to change because of the simple fact that today isn’t yesterday, to think that a fool will cease being one, that an ingrate is going to love us, that a tightwad will loosen up, or that we humans will relieve ourselves of stupidity simply because time passes and everything heals without leaving a scar.

“Are you listening, my friend?”

“No, I haven’t heard from him again,” I told her. “We hardly talk to each other anymore.”

“I need both of you to come over,” she insisted. “I’ve got something to tell you that will interest you.”

“Well, call him to see what’s going on,” I told her with an immense urge to hang up. “Tell me about it later.”

That’s how we left it. Although her intention was for me to smooth the way for her to approach Emilio, that time I let her take the insults, that is, if he was capable of letting her have it. I stayed awake that night, not because of the uneasiness her words left me, but because of the sick feeling you have when you realize that nothing changes.

A few days later Emilio and I were once again in her apartment. We were neither well disposed nor did we have any happy expressions on our faces, we were simply focused on the important thing Rosario had to tell us. You could feel how anxious she was to see us or, at least, to let out what she’d been keeping to herself. She looked tired, weary, and although she wasn’t fat you could tell that she had been, because she tried to fool us by putting into her usual clothes flesh that needed more ample attire.

“Thanks for coming, guys,” was how she began. “I know that you’re pissed at me, but if I asked you to come it’s because you two are all I’ve got left in the world.”

She began talking while standing, stringing her words together with difficulty, but after the first few phrases she had to sit down, the same as when she’d seen Ferney’s picture in the newspaper,
with the difference that now she was struggling to hold back her tears. Her voice broke, however, when she let her feelings be seen, when she referred to us as all—now true—she had left.

"I know that you don't agree with a lot of the things I do," she went on, "and that lots of times I've promised you that I'm going to change, but that I always go back to being the same. That's true, but I want you to understand that it's not my fault, how can I say it, it's like something very strong, stronger than I am, which makes me do things I don't want to do."

We still didn't understand what Rosario was getting at. I looked at Emilio out of the corner of my eye and saw that he was just as open-mouthed as I, seduced and bewitched by Rosario's eyes, which were moving in all directions, searching for the ideas that would justify her actions.

"What you guys don't know is how hard my life has been. Well, some of it you know about, but my story begins much further back. That's why I've now made my up mind that everything's going to change, because I've got to do something that will erase once and for all that whole past and everything about my life that was so hard. But if I want to forget all that, it means a lot of hard work on my part and looking for a final way out, do you understand?"

Emilio and I looked at each other again. We didn't understand a thing, but without our agreeing to it, we remained silent. We didn't want to talk, perhaps to hurt her, so as not to participate in her thoughts, leaving it up to her to unravel her proposal all by herself.

"Look, guys," she began to get agitated, "what I mean is that I'm not willing to go on living this way, but I've got to rely on you two to do it. I've got no one else, no one who's ready to go along with me in the plans I have. Besides, I think you want to change, too, because what I'm going to propose to you is so that we can get out of being poor once and for all."

Emilio and I were like a single person, as if her words had rooted us to our place, shocked by the impact of her last words. We saw her smile for the first time that afternoon, her eyes opened wide, waiting for our reaction. Now it was time to break the silence.

"I'm sorry, Rosario," I told her, "but as far as I know neither you nor we are poor."

"I've already told you, my friend," She stood up and began to walk back and forth. "I've already told you that all this is on loan and when I least expect it they'll take it away from me. And let's see, what have you got? What about you, Emilio? I'm sorry, but neither one of you has got jack. Everything comes from your parents: your car, your clothes. They give you everything. You don't even have a damn apartment to live in. Am I wrong?"

"So what is it you want?" Emilio asked in a challenging tone.

"If you stop talking to me like that, I'll explain," she answered in the same tone.

The meeting was getting tense. We were all standing and very agitated. Knowing the example she had had, it wasn't difficult to imagine Rosario's intentions. In any case, I've never liked arguments.

"It's very easy," she explained. "It's a money-making deal. I've already got all the connections, here and in Miami."

"Where?" Emilio interrupted.

"Oh, Emilio, don't be such an idiot!" Rosario said. "For this you've got to have contacts here and there. Or do you think you can get into this all by yourself?"
“Not by myself and not with anyone else!” he answered her.
“What are you thinking, Rosario?”

“Where do you think all the smack and all the coke you’ve been doing come from? Do you think it falls out of the sky or something?”

For a moment I thought they were going to come to blows. I couldn’t figure out how to diffuse the fight. Besides, I knew from experience how costly it could be to intervene.

“Look, Rosario,” Emilio said. “You’ve picked the wrong partners. We’re decent people, remember?”

“Decent? Ha!” she replied, furious. “What you are are idiots.”

“Let’s go,” Emilio told to me.

I looked at Rosario, but she didn’t notice. She was breathing hard, with her head down and her arms crossed, leaning against the wall. Emilio opened the door and went out. I wanted to say something but I didn’t know what. That’s why I decided to tell her, “Rosario, I don’t know what to say,” but she didn’t let me. Before I could open my mouth she told me:

“Go ahead, my friend. You get out too.”

I shrugged my shoulders in a stupid gesture and left, looking at the floor. Emilio was by the elevator, pushing the down button insistently, but before it opened Rosario stuck her head out and shouted to us from the door:

“Be like that! You think you come from fine families but when you take a good look you’re nothing but poor sons of bitches!”

She slammed the door when we got into the elevator. We were so worked up that we didn’t realize that we were going up instead of down.

I waited a few days before calling her, although I still didn’t know what to say. The idea was to clear the air a bit, at the same time, find out about Rosario’s plans, and if everything was as I supposed, try to dissuade her from doing something crazy. Her reactions were so unpredictable that it didn’t surprise me to find her in a good mood when what I’d expected was a situation similar to the last one we’d had. She told me she was cooking something delicious and invited me to share it with her.

“What a coincidence, my friend!” she told me. “I made it with you in mind.”

Although I didn’t put much stock in that coincidence, I was soon with her, eating something that, in addition to having no name, had no taste either. But I loved watching her enjoy her experiment. Afterward we sat by the window to look at the city by night, the flickering lights that Rosario liked so much. A cool breeze was coming in, and with the music and the wine, it was a moment you wanted to prolong. Suddenly her expression changed as if everything that made me love her had begun to hurt her. It seemed to me that her eyes had welled up, but it could have also been the lights of the city reflected in them.

“What’s the matter, Rosario?”

She sipped her wine, and to settle my doubts, she wiped her teary eyes.

“Everything, my friend.”

She looked at the city and threw her head back a little, perhaps so that the breeze would cool her throat.

“Everything’s the matter with me,” she said. “Loneliness, Ferney’s death, the trip . . .”

I heard a strong echo inside my head. The sharp blow of the word and then its repeating itself hard: “the trip, the trip,
the trip.” I wanted to make myself think that it had to do with something else, with a different trip, but I had nothing to gain by deceiving myself. I finally knew what she was referring to but didn’t want to talk about it.

“How did it go with Norbey?” I asked.

“Ferney,” she corrected listlessly. “It was horrible. You can’t imagine the shape they left him in. There wasn’t room for another bullet. I don’t know why they pumped so many into him, one would have been enough. They killed him in a rage.”

Another couple of tears escaped, which she tried to hide with a big sip of wine. As her nose was dripping, she wiped it with a napkin.

“Poor Ferney always had a hard time with his bad aim,” she went on. “That’s probably why they killed him. He naively tied three scapulars around his wrist so that his aim wouldn’t falter, and he was left without the one for the heart to protect yourself and without the one for the ankle to help you get away. He was such an idiot, Ferney.”

“But were you able to bury him?”

“Sure,” she said. “Right near Johnefe.”

The breeze pushed her hair over her face, and with that gesture I adored in her she smoothed it behind her ears, looked at me, and smiled for no reason, or at least I hadn’t given her any.

“When you feel lonely,” I told her, “don’t think twice about calling me.”

I think I had now given her a reason to smile, and she did again. She squeezed my thigh, as she would do when she wanted to show affection, and then she reached for my hand, not reacting when, as she looked for it, she brushed the bulge between my legs. Finally she found it, open, ready for her to take it.

“I’m going to miss you, my friend,” she told me. “I’m going to miss you a lot.”

That night I couldn’t sleep, thinking about an absence that seemed final. I was overtaken by an anguish that grew along with my insomnia as I imagined life without Rosario. I thought that it was practically impossible to go on without her, and, incited by memories, I clung to that idea. Hugging the pillow I felt the feelings she inspired come over me again, one by one, and with them the butterflies in my stomach returned, the coldness in my heart, the weakness in my legs, the nausea, the trembling of my hands, the emptiness, the desire to cry, to vomit, and all the symptoms that treacherously attack people in love. Every minute of that night was transformed into one more link in the chain that bound me to Rosario Tijeras, one step more on the stairway that was leading me down into the depths, minutes that instead of coinciding with the light of dawn, were submerging me in a dark tunnel, just like hers and from which I had asked her to emerge so many times. I was only able to get a little sleep when the sun was already beating down through the curtains, and the idea of following Rosario in her mad career had overcome me.

The days that followed were no different from that night. In fact, I would say they were worse, with permanent doubts and fears, with the certainty that I definitely couldn’t make it without her. I was fed by the hope of the last one in line who consoles himself with the little he’s given, with what’s left, with the remains that the others have left behind, or, in Rosario’s case, I was filled with dreams because now that she was alone she apparently had no one else but me. Maybe that was what most fed my idea of following her, the recompense I would receive as
a prize for my unconditional acceptance. The rest were parts of
the movie that I’d put together: Rosario alone, without Emilio
because I’d decided not to tell him anything about my plans,
without Ferney because he was dead, without the tough guys
because it was precisely from them that she wanted to break
away. Alone with me in another country and with the prior
history of a night together, what more could I ask for?

But since life rarely gives us what we ask for, it didn’t care to
make an exception this time either. I called Rosario, all set to
accept her proposal, although with certain variations: I would go
with her but wouldn’t take part in her business. I would simply
be her companion, I would live with her wherever she wanted,
but about the business, no, I couldn’t. My anxiety was given a
turn, however, because I called her many times and didn’t get
her. Her answering machine took the calls, and she didn’t return
them. I knew the reasons for her previous disappearances and
therefore my despair was greater this time because there was no
known reason for Rosario to have gone off like that. Suddenly
I remembered her “I’m going to miss you a lot, my friend,” and
I thought that maybe that had been her goodbye, discreet and
without a lot of noise. “I’m going to miss you a lot,” an obvious
goodbye, but one that I didn’t understand at the time. I spoke
with Emilio to see if he could put my mind at ease, but I knew
more about her than he did. Furthermore, paying him a visit
wasn’t a good idea.

“I’m going to ask you a favor,” he told me. “Don’t mention her
name to me again.”

“Relax,” I told him. “We won’t be able to anymore. Rosario’s
gone away for good.”

“If she’s gone, so much the better.”

I didn’t understand how he could be glad, surely because
he’d never loved her, at least not as much as I, who didn’t know
what to do, neither where to go nor how to follow her. I began
to wander around with no set destination, looking for possible
places where I might run into her. I remembered that building
where they’d sent me to ask for money, the steep streets of what
had once been her neighborhood, and another couple of places
that Rosario would mysteriously frequent with some regularity.
I decided to go to her own building. Maybe she’d said something
to the doorman. Doormen always know something.

“Sure, buddy,” the man told me. “The lady just got in. Go
right on up.”

I went up the stairs as fast as I could. I didn’t have the patience
to wait for the elevator. I rang the bell and knocked at the same
time, and after the “Who is it?” “It’s me,” she opened the door,
and I threw my arms around her, the way we’d embrace a dead
person if they could be brought back to life.

“I’m going with you!” I told her. “I’m coming along.”

Then she was the one who hugged me tight, although it seemed
to me that it wasn’t from joy. I felt her trembling. That’s why I
think it was really from fear. And later, when she took my hands
to thank me, they felt colder than usual and so sweaty that it
was hard to hold them.

“Where were you?” I asked her.

“Getting everything ready,” she told me. “You know.”

I didn’t know anything, and I didn’t want to know either. I
didn’t tell her the conditions under which I’d travel with her. I
didn’t dare. I decided to leave it for later. I couldn’t damage this
moment, which already seemed impossible to me. Of course,
when I saw a suitcase all packed and waiting by the door, of
course I knew that I couldn’t postpone the matter of my require-
ments for long.

“When are you going?” I asked. “When are we going,” she
corrected me. “I’ll let you know.”

The moments that followed were so confused and so strange
that it’s still hard for me to put them together. I don’t remember
exactly the order in which they occurred or the length of time
in which they developed. It was nighttime, that I remember. It
hadn’t been long since I’d arrived, and what followed, I think,
was the crash of the door being opened with a single blow. Then
the apartment was invaded by soldiers, armed and aiming at us,
with one of them shouting orders. They dragged me into one
room and Rosario into another. They threw me onto the floor,
put a foot on my back, and in front of my nose put some photo-
graphs on which were written large sums of money, announcing
a reward. They were pictures of them, the tough guys, Rosario’s
patrons. They showed me all of them, each picture accompanied
by an interrogation, where were they, what relationship did I
have with them, why was I hiding them, when did I see them last,
and each question was reinforced by the foot on my back. Men
came in and out. All you heard were footsteps and whispers. I
couldn’t hear Rosario. I asked about her and got no answer. Then
another man came in and showed something to the one who
talked the loudest. “Look what we found.” I looked up. It was a
pistol, Rosario’s. “She doesn’t have any papers,” the other one
spoke again. Then more silence until the one who spoke loudly
said, “Take them in,” and I thought I’d see her then, that they’d
take us together, but that’s not what happened. I don’t know if
they took her first. I didn’t see her when they took me out, nor
did I see her when my family took care of my problem, nor

when I went back to ask about her, and they told me that other
people had taken care of hers. I didn’t see any more of her, not
the next day and not when I went to look for her at her building,
and the doorman told me that she’d gone on a trip. I didn’t see
her again until tonight, when I picked her up and brought her
here, three years later, when I’d already accepted her disappear-
ance, when her memory had already been worn smooth, until
today, until this very moment when a doctor finally comes out.
I think he’s the one who received her. I see him talk with the
nurse. He points to me, aims his finger at me as though it were
the cold barrel of a pistol. He points to me, comes over, has his
mask under his chin, has the stubbly beard of someone who’s
been up all night, walks slowly with soft steps, looks at me as
he approaches, has red, weary eyes, has blood on his coat. He’s
the one, I’m sure now, he’s the one who received her, he’s no
longer pointing at me, now I’m sure, now I understand. I cover
my ears so I won’t hear what he’s going to tell me. I squeeze my
eyes shut so I won’t see the words I don’t want to hear sketched
out on his lips.
"Even death becomes you, Rosario Tijeras." I can't think of anything else, seeing her laid out forever. I wasn't capable of raising the sheet, someone else lifted it. And if they hadn't told me, I would have thought she was sleeping. She slept like that, with the peaceful look she didn't have when she was awake. "Even death becomes you." She was more beautiful than I remembered her. Time had begun to erase her for me. Perhaps at some point I will thank life for this moment. If I hadn't been here, her face would have disappeared from my memory. I would like to kiss her, to remember the taste of her kisses. "Your kisses taste like a dead person's, Rosario Tijeras." Emilio had already warned me, and I was able to prove it later. I told her that when I kissed her, when, I don't know why, we began to attack each other after loving each other, as if making each other pay for the sin, or because that was her way of loving, or because that's love. It would have been enough to have laid the blame on the drinks. It wasn't necessary to offend each other, neither of us was to
blame. Or if there was blame, it fell on both of us. That's how things are.

"What about you, my friend? Have you ever been in love?"

I remember that what little she asked, she asked in a childish tone, a strange mix of little girl and woman, utilizing that dreamy tone with which women seek to make themselves loved. I answered her. Quite close to her face, because during the questions we were already very close. That's why I didn't have to speak loudly to respond yes, that I still was, and she asked me softly, "And with whom?" And even though she knew the answer, I replied even more softly, "With you." There was a silence in which only the music could be heard and the senses were heightened so they could begin to feel what they'd so long awaited. When I opened my eyes I could no longer look at her because we were nose to nose with my forehead resting against hers, with my hands on her thighs, and she was also caressing mine. We felt the aquarendente on our breath, and our breath against our mouths, then the brushing of cheeks, pressing a little more against one another each time until our lips met, until they searched for and found each other, and once they were together they refused to separate but clung together with more force and opened and bit each other, searching each other with their tongues, exchanging their flavor of liquor and death.

"Your kisses taste like a dead person's," I remembered, but they also tasted of the urge to continue, the urge for what followed, what we followed with our hands and our bodies while our teeth scratched against each other. How can I forget if my hands became electrified when I put them under your blouse for the first time, and then they were rough, we were rough, because that's what desperate love is like, and we tore at our clothes.

With a single tug I took off her blouse and was pleasantly surprised to find that there was nothing else to take off, and she with a single tug took my shirt off, and without separating our mouths I unbuttoned her jeans, and she stopped scratching me to unbutton mine, and in one second, amid moans and bites and our hands that couldn't keep up with our caresses, we were the way we wanted to be.

"My friend," she said, clinging to my mouth.

"My girl..." I said. Then I couldn't say anything more.

What followed has been my most beautiful and painful secret, and now that she's dead it will forever be more secret and even more intimate and painful. I'm going to review it every day so that it will always come back fresh, as if it had just happened. That's why I'd like to kiss her now, to remember her mouth again, taking advantage of the fact that her kisses will always taste the same. To kiss her now with the certainty that she won't lay the weight of her sins on me.

"Emilio's is bigger than yours," she told me afterward, when the alcohol was beginning to wear off and you could no longer undo what had been done. There wasn't any music or light anymore, only what was coming in through the window. I was naked beside her and she was half-covered with a blanket. She remained silent, waiting for my reaction, but since I didn't understand that unexpected step from love to hate, I was slow to respond. The first thing I thought about before I was overcome by grief was the fondness women have for comparing everything. Later, shattered, I thought about how miserable my life would be with the memory of a single night, because at that moment I didn't have the slightest doubt that what happened between us was just that. You couldn't think otherwise, given Rosario's reaction.
Still, I didn’t know where I got the strength to shoot my dart at her and not remain the way she wanted to see me.

“Maybe it’s not a matter of size,” I told her, “but the fact that you get wetter with me.”

With a look, she finished me off. Covering herself up to her neck, she turned her back to me. Dawn was starting to break. I moved a little closer to her. We weren’t that far apart, and we were, after all, sharing the same bed. It hurt to resign myself to this being the only time. That’s why I risked showing her once more what a few moments before I had let her know. With my fingers I sought her shoulder and pulled on the sheet a little to find some skin, but she huddled up brusquely and, without looking at me, sent me back to my corner.

“Let’s just get some sleep, Antonio,” she told me.

I put the pillow over my face and cried. I squeezed it hard against me so that I could neither draw in air nor allow my sobs to escape, to die as I wanted to at that moment, beside her and after having touched the heavens, dying of love as no one dies anymore, certain of being unable to live with the disdain any longer. Later I let go of the pillow. I wanted her to know what she’d done, what she’d turned me into, and I wept freely on purpose. I didn’t have to fake my sobs because there they were, and I had them for a long time after. I didn’t care that she heard me crying. I had nothing to lose anymore. She didn’t look at me, she didn’t turn over or say anything. I know that she was awake, she wasn’t so brazen as to fall asleep. Something in her soul must have moved as well, besides she shuddered when loud and with measured words I said to her:

“A pair of scissors is what your pussy is, Rosario Tijeras.”

“That’s all there is, Rosario.” I continue talking to her silently, as always. “It’s all over for us.” I’m dying to kiss her. “I’ve already told you: I’m going to love you always.” I’m dying to die with her. “And I’m going to love you more in each thing I remember about you, in your music, in your neighborhood, in every dirty word I hear, and even in every bullet that explodes and kills.” I take her hand. It’s still warm. I squeeze it, hoping for a miracle, the marvel of her dark eyes looking at me or her “friend, my friend,” coming from her lips. But if there wasn’t one when I wanted her to love me, there’s even less of one now when nothing can remedy the irreparable. She still has her three scapulars. They were of no use to her. “You’ve spent your seven lives, Rosario Tijeras.”

You always ask yourself where God is when someone dies. I don’t know what I’m going to do with all the questions that will come up from now on, or what I’m going to do with this love that hasn’t been of any use to me. Nor do I know what I’m going to do with your body, Rosario.

“I’m sorry, but we need this room,” someone tells me coldly.

I have to leave her, look at her for one last time and leave her. The last time I’m with her, the last time I take her hand, the last time. That’s what hurts. I wouldn’t want to leave without kissing her for the last time, the last kiss from the last one in line. Now I can’t. It’s too late now, as always. They’re taking her away from her last world, rolling her away on the gurney, still so beautiful.

“That’s all there is, Rosario Tijeras.”
Born in 1962 in Medellín, Colombia, JORGE FRANCO studied film at the London International Film School and literature at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá. He began his career as a writer in 1991 and was awarded the Pedro Gómez Valderrama National Narrative prize for a collection of short stories entitled Maldito amor. He later debuted as a novelist with Mala Noche, which also received a literary prize in the Ciudad de Pereira National Novel Competition. Franco’s latest novel, Paraíso Travel, describes a young Colombian couple’s escape to New York and subsequent travails. Franco lives in Colombia.

GREGORY RABASSA is a distinguished professor of Romance languages and comparative literature at Queens College. He has translated more than forty works into the English, including the works of Jorge Amado, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Octavio Paz. He received the National Book Award for translation in 1967 for Cortázar’s Hopscotch. Rabassa lives in New York City.