I wait. Please sit down, “No thanks, I’m fine like this”. She tells me to go in.

“Go up the steps and you’ll see him at the end.”

“Many thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

The wooden steps, the pictures by God knows which artist I neither like nor know, should speak to me about what’s happening nowadays, not about other things I neither like nor interest me, I turn right on the landing, a map?, the click, click, click of my heels, the door open at the end and the light that enters filling everything, the trees that can be seen through the window.

“May I.”

“Come in, I’m expecting you.”

“Nice to meet you, doctor.”

“Call me Ernesto, it’s more comfortable. Shall we go to the small sitting room?”

“Lead the way, doctor.”

For sure I imagined him to be bigger, older, bearded, bespectacled, not like this, so simple, nothing strange about him. That Rebecca exaggerates, she told me that if I found him mysterious not to be frightened, “He’s really good, don’t worry”, what have I got to worry about when he seems even more shy than I am. Did I want something to drink?

“Yes, a glass of plain water that’s all, no, no I’m not on a diet, thanks, it’s just that I exercise.”

“Do you go to the gym?”

“Yes, I like to keep in shape.”

“In shape for what?”

He even makes fun, sure I understand they are jokes, no I’m not embarrassed, he didn’t offend me, it’s to break the ice, I know, I know.

(The only bottle that remained in her hand was Escape by Klein – that she had bought the first time her boyfriend... the first time one of those things happened. She gripped it intensely, looking towards the window, towards the morning light, towards nowhere. She imagined that the bottle she was holding tight was the body of Jorge Luis. She put it

against her chest. She rocked it, sobbing. She said sorry for angering it. She kissed it and told it she loved it... She stretched her arms and unscrewed the lid with a single sudden and violent jerk. She placed the index finger of her right hand on the neck of the decapitated bottle and inverted it. She spread the liquid oozing from the opening on to her neck. She did the same until she had put a drop behind each earlobe, on each wrist, on each bruise. She let the last drop fall as if it were a tear, on her Mount of Venus. She screwed the lid back on the bottle and put it back in its place.)

Yes, obviously, that's the nub of the question. I don't know how he dares ask me so bluntly: what is it that brings me here? If I could tell him, barefaced, there would be no problem, but how come he wants me to say what makes me cry and feel as if I was always tied up, with no future?

"I'm going to the university, where I've been studying for four years, I'm going to marketing classes, they haven't been so bad, I haven't failed, what you might say officially failed, any subject, sure I've dropped a couple, more like a whole bunch, but I've always done it in the first session, because it's not about paying for the pleasure of it. No, my parents don't pay for the U, they live on a sugar plantation we have in Jutiapa. Yes, I was born there, but we came to the capital so we could study with my brothers, we attended a small public primary school and at secondary each of us studied at the college we wanted, I studied secretarial skills for a year but didn't get anywhere, I got into high school and it was hard work to complete it but I managed, it's not that it was difficult, rather that I wasn't interested in what they were teaching me, the classes were boring and that was that. Currently, my job is selling advertising, here's my card, I've already won the sales prize twice out of the six times that I've been with the company, what I do is show willing, it's easy, I sell spaces for advertisements, words that promise the unattainable at a similarly unattainable price, it's going well for me, I've sold to Paiz, Cemaco, Klee, I can't complain. I've also been a model, I've strode the

catwalk and smiled without feeling the least wish to do so."

(She chose a long-sleeved green sweater, canvas slacks, green shoes. She dried her hair as she looked at the alarm clock thrown on the ground, its glass broken, concentrated on the second hand that had stopped...it was skipping forward a bit, moving ever further away from last night...it was stopping dead...it was skipping a little bit further... stopping, without saving her from Jorge's blows. She brushed her hair without looking in the mirror.)

"I don't know how to begin because in truth I can't exactly figure out what my problem is. I can't find it, doctor and that's perhaps what hurts me most, it's never been easy for us. For me, the one who practically pushed me forward was my mum, she's a teacher, she taught me to read, to have a clear mind to think with. I remember my dad, for part of my life, with much affection; but later my impression of him went down because he was always drunk when I saw him. What did it matter to me that he drank, at the end of the day everyone does, it's like that Juan Fernando who even ended up dead on the Vista Hermosa footbridge he was so out of it and I had already told him something was going to happen; but the stubborn...What can one do despite being a good friend? But it's also that there's a limit you have to respect, by now in the town everyone was trespassing on the plantation, taking the mangoes without even asking permission, waving sticks as if they were hitting a *piñata*, throwing stones, layabouts, instead of clambering up the trees, it's just not how it should be done – it's really good fun climbing the trees and lovingly picking fruit that, tasty as it is, is grown for export. By now they were not respecting our plot, even the cows were grazing there and they set about catching the fishes that my sister and I had nurtured in the pond. My dad, meanwhile, drinking in the *cantina*, thank you very much, until they even said he's going with another woman, and all the while my mother alone, buckling up, pistol on her hip, so they don't abuse, they respect, the Rojas family plantation."

(As she left the room, the murmur of the water from the garden fountain filled the silence of the corridor. She stopped to look at the three trees on the patio that her mother had planted when each one of her children had reached eighteen years of age.

"I'm going to plant a tree in the house in your honour, whatever you choose, so that when you leave I'll have the flower, the fruit and the shade of that tree so as to have you always near me," her mother had said.

A robust avocado tree that yields beautiful fruit for Janeth, her big sister, who has just given birth to the first grandchild. A slender peach tree that has recently flowered for Oscar, her brother, who will soon be married. An apple tree that simply does not grow despite being constantly watered, in a spot where it gets the ideal quantity of sun and shade. She does not want to believe that this short apple tree had been planted in her honour.)

"You're right doctor, I've been crying, I don't know how you noticed because when one has been a model, sorry Ernesto, one learns how to fake it. Yes, I'm very hurt, but it's hard to begin talking about what has happened, you must know that there are things we would all like to forget and cannot, although we want to. No, there are very few things I've done that I regret, only once, some mischief, when I was in secondary school, I went into the college directorate with a friend to change the records, nothing serious, but they realised and it was, more than anything, an embarrassment to my mum, the poor thing really had believed me when I had told her I'd passed typing with a ninety when for the whole year I had in fact been so dreadful. But there are other things that hurt me that I can't say and don't think I was responsible for, you know?"

(She dried her tears and with her bag on her shoulder went out into the street.)

"They are things that are so intimate, mine, so personal that I tell them to nobody, nobody, not even my sister who has listened to my problems since we both shared a small, damp room in the house in Zone Two where we came to live

when we left Jutiapa. She doesn't know, nor could I tell her, much less my mum who loves me so much, I can't even imagine how she would react, at times she's so irrational and her being a retired teacher and all."

(When she arrived at the office, as always, a bouquet of red roses was waiting on her desk. Reluctantly, she made her way towards them. They were fresh, with large petals. She chose one, the most beautiful. She brought it to her nose, she thought its smell was that of blood. Suddenly it became difficult to keep her tears in.)

"Excuse me... it's so hard for me to say this. I know I need help, doctor, but I don't know where to start. What's happening is to do with this piece of paper, read it."

(She shut the office door so that Doralicia, the secretary, would not see her cry. The card was between the thorns. She took it. She recognised her boyfriend's violent penstrokes.

"Forgive me my love, you know how these things are. I beg you to forgive me, it will never happen again, I promise. I love you, Jorge."

Tania crumples the paper – as she had done two weeks, one, three, four, five months before, and as she will in a couple of days. She throws it hatefully into the waste basket. She breaks down crying on her desk, on the sofa, while mumbling between tears and tears that, as always, I forgive you Jorge, Jorge Luis Camacho Obregón...)

"I can't tell you, doctor, I can't tell you. Sorry, I'll be seeing you."

Crying. The slam of a door and the noise that the heels of a woman make as they descend the stairs.