

From the Darkness

II

She heard her mother calling with a suffocated, distant shout, appearing briefly at the window as usual to tell her that it was now late and she should come inside with her brothers to give a hand with the housework. She still had a few minutes more up there, she thought, perched in the tree that she considered her own and that she climbed to see, from on high, the roofs, the streets stretching out in the distance, and to imagine the soft, shining waves of the lake that seemed asleep under the midday sun.

She never acted on that first shout, waiting to hear the voice ordering her back again, this time stronger and more authoritarian: Mauricia, it's the second time I've had to call you, come here! Then she would begin her slow descent from the vantage point that allowed her to escape the small children, neighbours and relatives, and their boring games. She swung down from the branches as they became thicker until she was left hanging a metre from the ground, and jumped between the roots that spread out all around.

On that summer's day in 1921, like every Sunday, she had to interrupt the little ones' games, act like their mother and drop them off at their houses one by one until she was left alone, walking ahead, stopping every so often to wait for her little brothers who followed behind, laughing and protesting at having to go home.

At barely 12 years of age, Mauricia was already accustomed to domestic work. It had never seemed strange to her that she stayed

in the house while her brothers went to school. Later, they would go to the countryside with their father and work the land and she would stay home, learning the job of housewife and waiting to be married in order to have her own house and children. Her earliest memories were of being beside her mother, hauling water, sweeping, washing dishes in the barrel or carrying a basket of clothes towards the lake. And they were not unhappy memories, on the contrary, this was her way of feeling part of the family. She also recalled that whole year during which she had had to go every day at first light to serve Madam Lucía Guzmán, the wife of Mr Bartolo García, a friend of her father's – the first time she had been away from home, she remembered well, and the only opportunity she had ever had to do something to alleviate the poverty, limitations and humiliation in which they lived.

We would never have been able to pay my father's debt, she repeated to herself, recalling the times she had been left alone with the man of the house, if I had not been going there, day after day, without complaining, without telling my mother anything out of fear of Don Bartolo.

Luckily, just a year after she started, when she had just turned nine, she had stopped going. Doña Lucía became gravely ill and her house fell into chaos. Don Bartolo and his son Lencho spent what they had in an effort to cure her, and abandoned the house in the last few days of her long agony. Mauricia had listened to her parents' comments: the poor Garcías, left alone, poor Lencho because Bartolo had taken to drinking, the poor boy did what he could but they lived like animals, why didn't Bartolo find a mother to look after the house and finish raising his son.

On that Sunday lunchtime, Mauricia did not imagine that everything she thought she had left behind would sweep her up again. She noticed, on entering last, after the boys, that her mother Arcadia was nervous. The table had not been set and on the hearth the logs had only just begun to burn underneath the terracotta pots. Nevertheless, her father Jacinto was seated in his place at the head of the table, very serious, and had been watching her since she had come through the door. Come, he said, I want to speak to you.

Mauricia felt an emptiness in her stomach as she neared the table and pulled out a chair.

"Do you remember Bartolo García?" he said, the question being absurd.

Mauricia did not answer. She looked at him intently and, every few seconds, glanced at her mother wrapped in her shawl, standing silently behind him beside the adobe wall.

"It's just that one day this week he came to find me while I was sowing," Don Jacinto continued, looking worried. "He told me that little by little he had returned to a normal life, to working, to looking after his plot, and he had been able to save some money in the last two years. Let's say he brought me up to date with his life, because since Lucía died we haven't spoken at length due to everything that happened to him and his son Lencho. I knew all about this but anyway I let him speak because I realised he wanted to tell me something. He told me that his wife's sickness had left them in misery, that he had abandoned the planting when he turned to the drink, but that now he had regained his composure a bit and wanted to put his house in order. He asked about you, if you were working for a family or if you had gone to live with any man. I said no, that you still lived with us, but the time was coming, now you were a young woman and soon you would have to look for a husband and leave home. Then he smiled, he was happy, and he said he was in luck, and this was exactly what he had wanted to talk to me about. Mauricia, you will recall, has already worked in my house, he said, she knows us, even Lencho who is so shy showed her affection, and now that I am putting things in order I remembered her. Then he left me just looking at him in the face and went quiet for a moment. I'm not a man to beat about the bush, he continued, and what I want to ask you is whether you will give her to me so that she can live with me. I didn't know how to answer him, and I must have gone very serious because a little later he told me he knew he was very old for you, but he had savings and could leave you one of his properties, that we live nearby and have known each other for a long time, and we will always be able to see you and know how you are. I didn't answer him, I only told him to let me think about it.

Then he went and I've not seen him since."

Mauricia listened without knowing what to think. She knew her father never consulted anyone or discussed anything but only gave orders. So it could only be one of two things, either he had decided to say no to Bartolo, in which case there would be no sense telling her all this or, more likely, he had thought yes, it was good for her to join that old man in order to safeguard her future, and he was just informing her.

"But I've been thinking since then," he continued, "day and night, not only about you, but about everybody, about our situation, above all about the brothers who've come after you, and every day it's more difficult to feed them. So last night I made my decision. Tomorrow you will go and live with him. It's what's best for everyone, you more than anyone because Bartolo is a mature man, established; moreover, we know him and we know he is a good person. I'm sure that right at this moment he's not thinking of marriage but with time he will, and he's not so old that you can't have children with him."

Mauricia looked at Doña Arcadia, her mother, who had not raised her eyes from the ground and was listening to her husband's every word. It was too late. There was no longer time to speak out, to tell them the things that Mr Bartolo had said when he was left alone with her, the way he had touched her legs and opened her blouse and run his thick, rough fingers over her tender chest, tense with fear. It was useless to tell them that this man frightened her, this old man who had said things to her that she could not understand, and had always ended up looking her in the eyes and pointing with his finger while saying: Remember, this is a secret, Jacinto and Arcadia must not find out because they would be very angry with you.

"Your father's right," her mother said suddenly, and Mauricio noticed she was crying, "he told me this morning and I also think this is the best thing for you. Sooner or later you're going to have to do this and it's better with a grown man we know, who's going to look after you and is not to going to take you to live who knows where."

Mauricia wondered why she had not told her parents about Mr Bartolo at the time, what had stopped her. And now... now that I have to be his woman, now that he's waiting for me, what's all this about having a husband and, moreover, a stepson who is nearly my age? At home with her parents, although just for a few moments, she had time to play, to go out and run with her little brothers and climb the tree, but in that house where, she remembered, they put her to work all day, she would not be able to and would spend the whole time shut indoors, like her mother who only went out to the market and the tortilla grinder once a week.

"In the afternoon," her father said without waiting for a reply, "after lunch, I'm going to look for him at his house to tell him what I've decided and, if he's in agreement, tomorrow when I've returned from work we're going to take you."

Mauricia would never forget that Monday afternoon which she spent arranging her clothes and preparing for a journey she knew had no return. Doña Arcadia helped her without saying a word, in silence, as if she knew that even in his absence the father would be listening to what she said and watching her every movement. They finished before they had to, and sat down to wait. Their silence that afternoon was their way of waiting. Mauricio knew all the sounds of the house, she knew the hours that the neighbours kept, those who passed by and knocked on the door and, above all, she knew by heart when and how her father would arrive home, from his careful footsteps to the soft way he removed the bar of the door and walked across the patio before appearing in the doorway of the room where they ate.

That afternoon, Don Jacinto did not change his Monday routine at all and appeared in the doorway at the usual time, not to eat but to take her by the hand and give her over to the man with whom she would spend the rest of her life. They walked through the same old streets, she and her father in front and her mother a few steps behind, but no matter how hard she tried, Mauricio could not remember this journey years later when she was telling the story to her daughter Rogelia in an effort to show her what men are really like, even resorting at times to explaining about them from books.

Yes, she remembered vividly the wait at the dining room table and, of course, the moment when her father knocked at the Garcías' door that she knew so well. But she had erased the journey itself from her memory. It was as if one moment she was still in the house helping her mother and the next she had found herself in the room of a stranger, rigid with fear, quietly awaiting his pleasure.

Bartolo received them happily, invited them to enter, but her father did not wish to go through the door. Instantly, he handed her over. Mauricia crossed the threshold and saw her parents from inside while she heard, as if in a dream, the recommendations of her father, who did not dare look her in the eyes or even say goodbye. Nor was her mother, poor thing with her white skirt and laced blouse, capable of raising her eyes to look at her for the last time from the other side of the doorway.

From that moment on, I remember everything, she said assuredly to Rogelia, who listened almost without breathing, from the moment the light from the street was extinguished as Bartolo shut the door and we were left alone and Lencho looked at us without saying anything. It was time to eat, I remember as if reliving it, Mauricia recalled as if she had stayed there frozen in time and someone else had carried on living in her place. Bartolo told me to go to the room, he said I already knew which one, and to leave my things there and come and heat up the food. I did so, only this time when I went in I felt something strange, as if at any moment I would hear the voice of the dead Lucía, I felt her watching me everywhere as if she had been incorporated in the unmade bed with her long tangled black hair all over her face. I left my bag of clothes and ran out. Bartolo and Lencho were at the table waiting for me with empty bowls. So then I went to the hearth, which had been lit, and I heated beans, tortillas, and made them coffee. For the first time I sat with them and they spoke about work as if I wasn't there. From time to time they looked at me to ask me for something and I got up without saying anything and returned with what they wanted, until Bartolo put his coffee cup on the table with a thud and told me to clear everything up and then come and sleep with him.

That was my first day in the house, she told Rogelia. Some

months later you were born and then your brother and even Manuela sneaked her way out, and 20 years have gone by just like that. Rogelia had heard the story countless times and Mauricia always asked at the end: we're almost sisters, don't you think? And she laughed with a kind of complicity that frightened her daughter.

What Mauricia did not recount, and what Rogelia did not dare to ask about, is what had happened the moment she entered the bedroom and encountered Bartolo, naked from the waist up, waiting for her. He told her not to stand there as if made of wood, not to be frightened and to come close, that he would not harm her. And she walked over with slow, small steps, around the bed, until reaching his outstretched arms that he had extended to take her by the waist and bring her closer until she was between his open legs. Then those rough hands, that her little girl's body already knew, lowered themselves down to her unformed hips and her trembling legs, went beneath her skirt and began to rise slowly while Bartolo closed his eyes, making Mauricia think that men must shut their eyes when they are touching because, in fact, they are holding their eyes in their hands.

Rogelia would never find out from Mauricia's lips that Bartolo had not wanted to listen to her weeping, her pleas for him not to do that, for her very life, because it scared her – that without responding, breathing in her ear, he had positioned himself in order to sit her on the bed yet be able to remove his trousers and underpants. How could she tell her daughter that it was in this moment that she saw that dark, menacing, blind monster that made her recall a smell she had already experienced once and, vainly, had tried to forget? And if, in any case, one day Rogelia dared to become curious, Mauricia, indignant, would tell her not to poke her nose in, to be respectful. But this was such a personal thing that even she did not want to revisit those images that assaulted her from time to time on summer nights, bringing with them the perverse smile of this unknown man who told her you are not going to call me 'Don' Bartolo now that I'm your husband and you my little woman, then put his knee on the ground in order to lower zippers, open buttons and slide off her garments, which

fell as if they were soft green leaves torn from the tree by light rain and the first wind.

No, it was not possible, her daughter had the right to another destiny and must never find out that, now naked and lying on the bed, her hands had not even been able to cover up her body as it bristled with fear, that her final defence had been to resist the force of this big man as he separated her legs to steer the blind monster into the depths of pain; that at first, even with all the force of a peasant, it had been hard for him; and that she saw no more because she had covered her face as she felt the pounding becoming deeper and not stopping until Bartolo, beaded with sweat, had fallen upon her, groaning as if someone was torturing him and calling her names she had never heard before.

Rogelia would stay on the straight and narrow, Mauricia thought, and thank God she had met Pedro, a docile and caring boy, not like that brute Bartolo. From the letters he had written about that famous debt, one could see that he was decent and respectful, and that he was mad about her daughter. This was what was most important and to keep it thus Mauricia was prepared to suppress her own memories, to paint for Rogelia a rose-tinted landscape of intimacy and, only for her, to subdue the demons that haunted her. Those from the past, of course, but also those of the future – the desire she felt at times, like a burning in the middle of her chest, to live alone, to be in charge of her own affairs and not to have to say yes just because Bartolo wanted her to, to be able to choose for once in her life and not be held accountable to anyone, but above all to live without fear, without anxiety, without the distress that she had felt ever since that Monday afternoon when she had seen her parents depart and leave her at the mercy of Bartolo and his son Lencho.

But it was becoming increasingly difficult to pretend nothing was going on because children are curious and youths even more so. They are always asking questions, inquiring, conjecturing, and it is better to tell them the truth because they can smell lies. Rogelia, for example, when she had turned into a young woman of the same age as Mauricia had been when she had gone to live with Bartolo, began

to ask questions, and Mauricia had told her that she was still too young. But at my age you... , the girl replied, and Mauricia had not let her finish. Yes, she said, but you can't use my life as an example, I don't want you to go through the same, you have to look after yourself and give things time, find yourself a good man and get married. Imagine, she would continue, that at your age I was expecting you and, during those first few months, which were eternal, at times lonely, waiting for your father to come back in the early hours I turned in the bed and felt you growing here inside and I cried, I cried every night for my parents, for a home that now seemed in another world. I wanted to see my mother and hug her and hear her tell me it wasn't really happening, it was all only a bad dream and I should go back to sleep. Life is hard, my girl, it's difficult to get used to dreams from which one never wakes. But time erases everything, life goes on and there is no way out – it has to be confronted.

The first ten years were the most difficult, she had told her children a thousand times, and above all Félix who listened to everything without saying a word. I had you, and while I was expecting one I had to bring up the other and, moreover, look after the house and put up with your father and Lencho. Yes, Uncle Lencho, as you called him, but who was really your half brother.

She was talking about Florencio García Guzmán, the legitimate son of Bartolo and his wife Lucía, who was nearly the same age as Mauricia and who had died years ago and was now remembered by nobody. Poor boy, Mauricia said with an air of false nostalgia, he died before his time.

At this point of the story, Rogelia always asked to hear what it had been like, because they were little then and now could not remember. Mauricia lowered her voice and recounted how everything had begun very early on the 3rd of May 1929, the very day of the Amatlán festival. You father was not going to work that day and had been on a binge since the night before. Lencho, by contrast, was getting up early because he liked to go to the church to see the preparations for the festival of Infant Jesus. When he got up, I served him a plate of beans and he went into the street. You have seen what this is like, it's a pilgrimage to the church, no-one stays

at home. Lencho left with everybody else but came back soon after. He was pale, sweating, and couldn't stop spitting out yellow bile because by now he had nothing in his stomach. So I laid him down and went to tell Bartolo to look at him. The kid was all curled up in bed, wailing and saying he was dying. Your father sent me to the hospital and I went running, but on the way I asked myself what was I going to say to him if I couldn't find anyone? Sure enough, I arrived and there wasn't a soul there, it was deserted, and I just spoke with a nurse who told me she couldn't budge because of the patients she was looking after and either I followed the procession to see if I could find the doctor, or better still brought the sick child to the hospital and waited to see what time people returned from the festival.

At this point Mauricia paused to explain that while she was speaking to the nurse she could hear in the distance the hullabaloo of the procession, the bangers and rockets set off on street corners when the icon of the little boy passed by with his expression of compassion, seated on his throne, blessing the people with his plump little hand. Then I returned, she continued, and Bartolo was desperate, he had gone to knock at the neighbours' to seek help, but no-one had opened the door. They were all out. When he saw me, he ran over and grabbed me by the shoulders and I had to tell him I hadn't found anyone, and that if we took him it would be pointless because we'd only be sitting waiting, and perhaps it was better to look after him in the house and not move him because, the poor thing, you should've seen him, now had no strength, like a chick lying there with the chamber pot at his side. He was no longer screaming, just quiet, as if he was going and this was his farewell. I did everything, I gave him hot water, cornflour drink, to see if he could keep something down. But it was impossible, he threw everything up as soon as he had been given it. After that, he had no strength left even to swallow, and fell asleep. In that moment, kneeling as I was at the edge of the bed, I turned to look at Bartolo, and told him we should let him rest, and perhaps now that he had calmed down he needed to sleep, regain his strength, and when he woke up we could try to see if he wanted anything. We stayed there,

keeping watch over him, without speaking and listening to his breathing, that was at times agitated. And down below, when night was already falling, the rockets and bangers began exploding in the sky again. It was the Infant Jesus returning to the church. Bartolo had not moved from Lencho's side for one moment. He didn't want to eat or rest the whole day, which he spent talking to Lencho between tears as he held his feeble hand. Then I had to go to my parents' house to pick up you and Félix, it was by now night-time, and when I came back I asked him how Lencho was. And in a broken voice, without turning to look at me, he told me he'd gone, his son was dead and nothing could be done. I think it's the only time I've ever seen Bartolo cry, Mauricia finished by saying. And the children moaned about not having been there to witness something they could only imagine through their mother's story.

Rogelia and Félix had heard this tale many times without knowing for sure whether their mother added or removed bits or whether her imagination was changing the facts to suit the form and convenience of her fantasies. Then, as soon as they had put her in a good mood, they went back to demanding she tell them how everything had begun. Ever since her fiancé had come along it had puzzled Rogelia, the eldest, that her father had never recognised her as a daughter. On several occasions Mauricia had had to weather the storm of these doubts. But on the 15th of February, a month before her father's death, after doing her morning chores and errands and filled with courage, perhaps egged on by Pedro, Rogelia sat down in the kitchen to wait for Mauricia to have a bit of time so she could put her on the spot and ask her, pleading with all her life, to explain what exactly had happened, because you know I can't talk to him. Mauricia, agitated without knowing whether from happiness or an attack of anguish, had noted upon entering that, whatever it was her daughter wanted to bring into the open, now there was no way out. She listened attentively and calmed down when she had verified that her daughter did not know she was going out, least of all where. Then, possessed of a whiff of courage, she said that's fine, you're a big girl now, and if I tell you it's so you don't have to go through the same thing. You were born just nine months after your

father and I began to live together and, as you will have to learn in life, my poor little girl, an old man, no matter how good he is, never, and listen carefully to what I am telling you, never will confide in a youngster. It makes them fear they are not real men. And then, even with the bill of sale in their hands, they keep seeing things that are not there. And that bastard of a father of yours was the same. I was still there washed out on the bed the day after you were born when he appeared with a long face and told me that he had already been to the registry office and had registered you under my name only. What was he thinking? That my Uncle Chinto had given me the child? I don't know. In life you judge others by your own actions. And you?, Mauricia asked after a pause, why all these thoughts? I don't know, replied Rogelia, everything is so mixed up. Sometimes I can't sleep or I wake up and think things. Don't think nonsense, said Mauricia categorically, better still, run an errand for me: I want you to go and buy some bread, but not here in the neighbourhood at Don Luis's. At the shop in the park.

Reprimanding her daughter had given her peace of mind. Mauricia watched Rogelia go out through the door and felt the relief of being alone for a while. She had to get her thoughts in order and erase any trace of suspicion from the way she was behaving. She still had a few minutes in which to take a bath before leaving for the appointment that had made her so nervous. Hurriedly, she entered her room and set herself to tidying up the mess so that when Rogelia returned everything would seem normal. She did it without thinking, as she did every day. When she was ready, she went to the wardrobe to look for the clothes she was going to wear and, seeing herself in the mirror, stopped for a moment. She looked at her eyes carefully. Was it obvious? Was she the same Mauricia who had left in the morning? From now on, things would never be the same, she thought. Then she crossed her arms behind her back, slowly, feeling for the buttons of her blouse. She undid them one by one, nonchalantly, without caring about what she was doing, until she had removed the garment completely, revealing a slim torso and a white brassiere. She lowered her head and undid the sash that kept up her long, wide skirt and with the same lack of interest she let it fall

to the floor then, without removing her shoes, stepped out of it. She bent down to pick it up and walked a few steps to the wardrobe, put her clothes away and took off her underwear there, in front of the stained mirror on the wardrobe door. It reflected tender breasts with dark nipples, a slender waist and round, firm hips, appropriate for her young age. For a moment, Mauricia looked at her body. Then she lifted her hands and put them beneath her breasts, lifting them a little. She began to lower her hands slowly across the bristling surface of her skin. She encircled her belly and, in a slow movement, finally, her hands stopped there, pressing tenderly. She thought about Hilario, in the dark house where he had taken her the first time they had been together and where, surely, they would always return when they were ready to be alone in the bed with no headboard in a corner beside a chair. She could feel again how he had taken her hand and together they had crossed through the darkness, and how, once on the bed, he had sat her on his legs. Mauricia could not avoid remembering her feet hanging like those of an inert, defenceless, ventriloquist's dummy at the mercy of his caprices as he takes all its weight and moves it at his pleasure.

Soon she regained her composure and, thinking she must be wasting time, became anxious. She did not want Rogelia to come back and find her still there, delayed, running about as ever doing daily chores. Yet while she finished choosing clothes she congratulated herself for having sent Rogelia out to the park, not only giving her time to do what she needed and to leave without anyone seeing her or asking where she was going or even how long she would be, but also because that way she had kept herself away from the watchful eyes of her neighbours.

When Rogelia had asked why she had to shop so far away if Don Luis's bakery was local, Mauricia had told her she didn't like his bread and it didn't cost anything to go further, and the girl had lowered her eyes and gone ahead without protesting. But the truth was that since Mauricia had gone to live with Bartolo she had preferred, perhaps instinctively, to keep her distance from the neighbours. Yes, from all those old crocks who had been friends of the late Lucía, her boss and Bartolo's first wife, who looked down on her as if she

were a servant recently arrived from the Calderas hamlet and who, at the end of the day, had been left with the house and the husband of the lady who had given her work and, above all, taken her into her confidence. Poor Lucía, they told Mauricia that it was being rumoured, she had endured so many sacrifices and limitations all her life to get her own little house and now this so and so is left with everything. No-one knows whom she really works for. But when they recounted these rumours, they never said who had started them and that was why she had no faith in any of them, without exception. In Luis Lezana, the baker, and his wife; in Federico de León, who lived next door and whom she imagined was always pressing his ear up against the wall to hear what was happening on the other side; in Candelaria Pérez, the old spinster who was not even from Amatlán and was given to snooping and judging everyone else's business; in Julián Calderón, Bartolo's friend who, like him, worked the land and had been his confidant since before she had known him; and in Rosalía Diéguez, the widow who had been a close friend of the late Lucía. Above all, the person she had least confidence in was Alberto Aquino Morán, Bartolo's first cousin, a farmer like him, who had envied him all his life and who, at least while her husband was out, never hid how much he desired her for being young and pretty, and took the liberty of saying that she couldn't fool him, he knew exactly who she was and if he had more money than Bartolo she would come to live with him. He always finished by saying that one day, sooner or later, she was going to be his and to remember his words because when she least expected it, at any careless moment, he was going to take the opportunity to have his way with her. Mauricia despised him deeply, but tried not to show it, especially in front of Bartolo. She did not want to create problems where she would be the main loser. She did not trust Bartolo. She had never felt secure with him. She was convinced that for many reasons – age, family, gender – when the time came and when dealing with a relative and, moreover, a man, Bartolo would not take her side. He had never been committed to her and, truth be told, nor her to him. She had thought a thousand times that if one day Alberto Aquino took a liberty, she would keep quiet, she would

have to, there would be no other way. So it was a simple matter, she could only defend herself by keeping her distance, by not becoming close to him or his family.

But over the years this attitude had generated resentment in everyone around her – the rancour of the deaf, of those who only muttered sullenly from between clenched teeth. Mauricia knew this and it did not bother her, on the contrary, she was prepared to pay a price like that to isolate herself and her children. Over time, she dreamed, she would be repaid. She did not know how, but she clung to the hope that a time would come when she would be accountable to no-one and could do as she pleased with the house, the money and her time.

Mauricia had finished bathing and now she was making herself up in front of the mirror. Suddenly she felt anxious that she might forget and leave out, for Bartolo or any of the children to see, the letter she had received that week and now had to carry around with her at all times. She ran to the chest of drawers to fetch it and keep it safe, close to her bosom. As she did so, she looked up and smiled. It was a smirk of complicity with herself, and she looked towards the street and remembered the moment when Hilario had pulled out from his bag the letter that was now between her breasts and told her that he had never been good at talking, that sometimes it was better to write down one's feelings so the recipient could read what the heart dictated, calmly and as many times as she wished. She had certainly read it many times and could remember phrases, entire paragraphs, without effort, almost mechanically, as if it were a voice coming from within.

The letter was simple, explanatory, it bore all the hallmarks of a tired man long alone who confused custom with resignation and who, suddenly, perhaps too late, is filled with illusions and then pauses along the way to try to understand, to ask himself if what's happening is real or just one more mirage in the desert of old age. He had written it in solitude, struggling with himself, sensing that he was leaving all the gravity of his well and truly lived 55 years of age exposed. But also, as he had proceeded, he had become convinced that he could not stop, as if with this he would

be paying off a personal debt after a whole life of denial and renunciation.

Although the words and the writing did not come easily to a man accustomed only to working the land, during the days that this process took Hilario felt as if the words were his own life, that they rose up from an unknown fountain and some of them called to the others until completing a timid, sincere confession that, in its final form, read:

Guatemala, January 1939

*Mrs Mauricia Hernández U.
For your attention.*

Esteemed Madam,

It is with great embarrassment and fear that I have dared to write these sincere words with the objective of making you aware of how much I have been thinking about our incipient relationship. So, after thinking about this a great deal, I am putting pen to paper to provide you with written proof of what I told you that first day I dared to express my feelings to you. And you were not to know and I shouldn't tell you this, but when a man gets close to a woman, please believe me, he must vanquish that nagging fear of rejection. It's true, although it may appear to be or is expressed as the contrary. And my situation, as you know, is more serious because of the number of years between us. However, that did not stop you entering my dreams from the moment Bartolo made you his, and little by little you turned into a young woman. For this reason, what has happened in the last few days is for me the realisation of a dream, of something impossible. Imagine, at my age, and given the distance from women that I have lived in for years, the fact that you would have smiled at me, with you being so famous for being unfriendly and for not speaking to anybody, was a real miracle. In that moment I told myself, Hilario, you're a slug if you don't take advantage of the opportunity that Mauricia who knows nothing

about your life is giving you. Thus it was that Sunday, on passing each other by, I told you how lucky it was for me to run into you and to be able to greet you. You only smiled as if my words had scared you. I swear, I had not thought of anything in advance, it came out spontaneously, as they say, because of the sheer pleasure of seeing you. And so it all began. Here inside, in my breast, suddenly grew a hope, a happiness which I don't need to tell you about, as if I was young again and now I was not thinking of anything else (work, the house, the journeys) but seeing you again and giving you news of my affections. At times I thought, hold on a moment, take care, remember that you are already old and you are only going to scare her off with this emotion, let her seek you out. But I could not, I abandoned myself to my feelings and waited with yearning for the moment that I would see you again to tell you everything, not only the pretty things but also my fears, my anguish about seeing you in the arms of another man. Yes don't think I'm not aware, that I'm deaf or blind to what I see or what is said around me, and that I don't realise how many want you to notice them. Perhaps I will never forgive myself for what I am going to confess to you, but I am jealous even of Pedro García, that youngster who is the betrothed of your daughter and who enters your house every day and can talk to you without anyone thinking anything about it. Love also brings sorrow and doubts and I, with you there far away and now reading this letter, am living both sides of this coin. But since our first encounter the other day I have been more at peace. Thank you, thank you very much for the proof you gave me by letting yourself be taken by the hand where I wanted to take you. I still have the sensation of your presence, of your docile silence whilst we were getting close to each other at my house and when I had still not told you anything about my intentions. I still feel your hand in mine as I was guiding you through the darkness to take you to the bed. You said nothing to me, as if expecting this in advance, you did not put up the slightest resistance and, you are not going to believe me, this doubled my yearning to consummate our love. For this reason when I had you in front of me ready for whatever was my will, I desisted. And I did

so to demonstrate to you that this wasn't all I was looking for with you. Or perhaps yes, I don't know, the thing is at that moment I changed my mind, on feeling the warmth of your skin on my hands while my eyes were adapting to the darkness and little by little you began to appear to me as if I was seeing you for the very first time. It was a revelation that has given me much to think about.

Perhaps this has no sense, and please do not think me mad but I have come to believe that our encounter made me realise I was living in the shadows, blind, that I have lived my entire life in such a way. But now with you at my side things are no longer the same, as if a tiny little light, twinkling there in the distance, had been lit in order to illuminate the dense shadows, the source of my fear.

God knows what you are thinking now because I didn't want to touch you. It was to guard this small flame and not let it go out.

I'm getting to the end and feel I haven't written what I wanted to. Well, would it have been sensible to expect anything else?

Now I have to say farewell, or rather to say see you soon, until the longed-for moment of our next encounter, here by my side, where there will be no dawn if you, dear Mauricia, do not show up. With the affection of a devoted admirer,

Hilario A.

Mauricia, now ready to leave, touched the letter to her breast and smiled. She could not leave it there, lying around. Moreover, she would ask Hilario to read her extracts and he was going to have to conquer his timidity, that fear of ridicule all old men have. She calculated the time that it would take for Rogelia to return from the park. When she realised she had time to spare to go through everything once more and leave nothing to chance, then depart without bumping into her by the house, she relaxed. She also thought that the neighbours would be eating and those accustomed to going home at lunch time would not yet have arrived from work. She looked at herself in the mirror for the last time and had a fleeting sensation that her reflection did not belong to her, as if another woman inside it was looking at her with her eyes. But without stop-

ping to think, she turned and walked to the door. As she shut it behind her, she felt the burning summer heat that immersed her entirely in its steamy humidity and claimed every centimetre of her skin.