

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OU_156961

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OSMANIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Call No. 863.6 | t1825 Accession No. G. 12001

Author Hortelano, Juan Garcia

Title Summer storm. 1962.

This book should be returned on or before the date last marked below.

Summer Storm

by

Juan Garcia Hortelano

Translated from the Spanish by
Ilsa Barea

GROVE PRESS, INC.

NEW YORK

Copyright © 1962 by Juan Garcia Hortelano

English translation copyright © 1962 by George Weidenfeld
and Nicolson Ltd.

All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 62-13053

Second printing

Manufactured in the United States of America

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS :

Javier; *his wife*, Dora; *their children*, Enrique and Dorita;
their servants, Rufi, María, Leoncio and Rafael

Andrés; *his wife*, Elena; *their son*, Joaquín; *Andrés' niece*,
Ernestina

Emilio; *his wife*, Asunción, *known as Asun*; *their five*
children

Amadeo; *his wife*, Marta; *their children*

Santiago; *his wife*, Claudette

Don Antonio; *his wife*, Doña Pura

1

THE WORST of it was that the girl was not only found dead on the beach, but naked as well. Nobody worried much about the children, though it was they who had discovered the body, but during breakfast the next morning Enrique and Joaquín soon had Dora in tears.

‘Enrique,’ I had said, ‘go and call Rafael, he’s just gone down the street.’

Enrique jumped from his chair and ran across the garden.

‘Rafael’s already been to the village this morning.’ Dora pushed the chair back and bent over the magazines on the little table.

‘Yes, he brought me the papers. But he’ll have to go again.’

‘Of course there can’t be anything about yesterday’s affair in the Madrid papers yet,’ Dora crossed her legs. ‘Do you think we’ll get many reporters?’

‘The magistrate told Emilio they’d try and give the whole business as little publicity as possible. Bad for tourism, you know.’ I saw Rafael coming up the gravel path. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if the papers in Madrid and Barcelona publish nothing more than the four lines there are in today’s local paper.’

‘What a bore!’

Rafael came up the veranda steps.

‘Did you want something?’

‘Yes, Rafael. You’re off to the village, aren’t you? Find out what they’re saying.’

‘About the dead woman?’

‘Yes. Ask Raimundo when you go to the store for the fishing

HORTELANO

rod. He's bound to know something. And don't forget the hooks I ordered, if he's got them.'

'I won't.'

'Is there anything you want, Dora?'

Dora looked up from her copy of *Paris-Match* and refused the offer with a smile.

'I'll be off then, sir.'

'Goodbye, Rafael.'

He was crossing the lawn when Dora suddenly called.

'If you see the boy in the street, send him home.'

'I will.'

'Thank you.'

Dora looked for an ash tray among the breakfast things before picking up her magazine once more.

'It's going to rain.'

'Mm . . .'

Enrique came back with Joaquín, who kissed Dora and me.

'Finish your breakfast.'

'We're going to the beach,' said Joaquín.

'All right, but mind you don't get even your feet wet.'

'Is your mother home, Joaquín?' Dora asked.

'I don't know. Dad's asleep.'

While Enrique was finishing his coffee, Joaquín stood on an easy chair and, leaning over Dora's shoulder, looked at the pictures in the magazine. The sky over the pine wood had clouded over. Leoncio walked across the garden carrying a hoe. Gusts of a chilly breeze rustled the leaves of the trees. Dora's question to the children made me turn my head:

'What are you whispering about?'

Joaquín stood on his toes, one arm on the table and his face very close to Enrique's, who was wiping his mouth with a napkin.

'Nothing.'

'Nothing? It's very naughty for children to whisper,' Dora insisted.

'He was just asking,' Joaquín looked at me, 'why it is that women grow . . .'

'Joaquín!'

'Finish your question, Joaquín.'

'Why do they . . . Well . . .' and with his left thumb he pointed to his chest.

'Enrique's the one who wanted to know.'

It was at that moment that Dora burst into tears. I sent the boys out into the garden, promised to meet them later on the beach, and tried to calm Dora.

'It's only natural that they should ask. For the first time in their lives they've seen a naked woman. There's really no need to make a fuss. The sensible thing is to try and answer their questions as well as we can.'

'I'm not making a fuss. But do you really think it's right that our children . . . ?'

'It wasn't only our children. And anyway, Dorita was out of it. It can't be helped. At their age . . .'

'All right!' she cried, between sobs. 'But my son was one of them.'

'You mustn't make a mountain out of a molehill. Try to think of something else. Call Marta or Asunción, or go shopping in the village. It's too hot to spend the day in the open. You could have a meal somewhere, go to the cinema and come back late in the evening.'

She looked at me, her eyes full of tears, rose suddenly from her chair and threw the magazine on the floor.

'Leave me alone!'

I settled in an easy chair with the newspapers on my knees, and lit a cigarette. The shrill songs of the birds seemed to extend the leaden sky still further, beyond the trees and Emilio's roof, beyond the column of smoke that rose from the orange grove near the village. Once more I read the brief lines that reported the finding of the body. Luckily it was a clumsy piece, without exact information about time or place. No mention of the children. The authorities, naturally, had begun to investigate the mystery. I sat with the open newspaper, but read no further, until Leoncio came to distract my attention.

'Do whatever you think best. Get the masons in if you think it is necessary.'

HORTELANO

'I'm only telling you what I've seen. But you'd see it yourself if you'd just take a look at the swimming pool.'

'All right. Get the workmen. But empty the pool first.'

I decided to do some work for a while, only to find that Rufi had the office windows wide open, the chairs upturned and the desk cleared of papers. I stopped on the stairs, hearing Dora on the telephone. It wasn't till I was in the street that I remembered I had intended to have a look at what was wrong with the drains of the pool.

The houses were closed and the gardens deserted. A dog that didn't belong to any of the villas trotted back and forth across the road, sniffing at each cork oak tree. The wind was stronger here. In the distance I saw the children grouped in a circle, like a blurred stain on the uniform desolation of the beach.

'We haven't got our feet wet,' said Joaquín.

'That's good. Are you alone?'

'Yes,' Leles said, 'Claudette's coming later.'

Enrique was supervising the building of a sand castle; he made the girls keep quiet or carry water in the plastic pails. Joaquín, his hands caked with mud, sat down next to me. Out to sea, spray simmered over the small endless ripples.

'Are all women the same?'

'Yes.'

I rested my arms on my knees and looked at a distance where the clouds had ripped apart to reveal a patch of pale blue sky. Enrique called, but Joaquín took no notice.

'Are girls women?'

'Yes.'

'Leles, Asun, Martita and Dorita, too?'

'They're all women.'

'And Maria Francisca?'

'She too.'

'But they're different.'

'Because they're small. When they're older, they'll be the same.'

The girls gathered behind Enrique and sat down silently.

Joaquín plunged his hands in the sand and moved so close that he bumped against me.

'You haven't finished the castle.' Nobody answered, nobody moved. 'I think it's time to go. It's cold.'

'Claudette was coming,' said Martita.

'We'll stop by her house. Or we may meet her on the way.'

'Uncle Javier says you will be the same.'

'I wanted to ask you a couple of things myself,' said José.

'Just a minute, one at a time. And don't interrupt each other.'

'I wasn't there,' said Leles.

'Neither was I.'

'Well, then Dorita and Leles must go away,' Joaquín proposed.

'I don't want to go away. You go.'

'This is a talk between men,' said José. 'Besides, it's only for those who found her, isn't that right, Uncle Javier?'

'Martita and I found her too,' said Asun.

'But it's only between men.'

'Daddy, I want to stay!'

'Wait a minute, don't all talk at once. You can stay because there's no secret.'

'José said it's wicked.'

'No, it's not wicked. Is it wicked to find sea-shells? It's just the same. You came down to the beach and you saw that poor girl. That's not wicked.'

'Can we confess?'

'You'll be told it was no sin. Listen, how about going back? It's getting chilly.'

'No.'

'I've got a sweater on.'

'I tell you it'll be cold.'

'Look, there's Don Antonio.' Asun pointed towards the dwarf pines that skirted the beach.

'Listen,' Joaquín pulled the sleeve of my windbreaker, 'is Doña Pura the same?'

'Yes, of course. Good morning!' Don Antonio waved back in answer. 'We should go and say hello to him.'

HORTELANO

'He's a bore.'

'Dorita, don't say such things.'

'Everybody says he's a bore. You say it,' snapped Asun, 'and mummy says Doña Pura puts her to sleep. Imagine! As if she were a little girl!'

'Do all women have hair on their bodies?'

'Now, just hold on a moment . . .'

'The boys say I'll have hair one day. Is that true?'

'Ask whatever you want now,' I passed my hand over my face, 'and I'll answer you, but after this not another word. Not even among yourselves.'

'Is that a deal?' asked Leles.

'Yes, it's a deal. Agreed?'

They all crossed their hearts and loudly swore to die. Don Antonio, who was half way up the path, turned his head.

'Not another word about what?' asked Dorita.

'Never mind,' said Joaquín sharply. 'I'll bet Asun will have hair, a lot of hair, just like that woman yesterday!'

Asun peered at me anxiously. I stroked her check and turned to look back at the footpath.

'What time was Aunt Claudette coming?'

'Daddy, you said you'd answer.'

'That was the deal.'

'But I won't have as much hair, will I?'

'Asun, I don't know. Until you're older it's impossible to tell. But I don't really think it matters at all and you may be just as beautiful as that girl yesterday. What does matter is to study hard, to tell the truth always and not to be afraid. How much hair you'll have depends on nature and nature doesn't ask us what we want.'

'You've got hair on your hands.'

'So has my father.'

'What is nature?'

'Shut up!' said José.

'You're born one way or another. I mean, with a long nose or a short one, with light hair, or dark, or brown,' the wind blew out my match. 'Or as a redhead, like Martita.' The girls laughed.

'That's what we look like. What nature does to us. Now, what we are is a different matter altogether,' I relit my cigarette. 'And it's the most important thing. To be good, that's what counts.'

'But why do their chests swell when they get older?'

'To rear their children.'

'Like the cows?'

'Don't interrupt, Enrique. Yes, like the cows and other animals. So that the children can become strong and grow up like you. We were all reared by our mothers.'

'María Francisca is already eating food,' said Asun.

'She's eating baby foods and mashed potatoes.'

'Good for her.'

'Uncle Javier, tell the girls to keep quiet.'

'Yes, keep quiet. Now, what else do you want to know?'

They looked at each other. Dorita plunged her feet in the sand, tried to run and let herself fall. Enrique buried my still smoking cigarette butt.

'I want to know who she was,' said Asun.

'I can't tell you, my dear, but I suppose we'll find out in time.'

'The police always find out everything, don't they?'

'Yes, Joaquín.'

'Uncle Javier,' Martita spoke, 'can one go to Heaven if one dies naked?'

'Of course. Whatever way you die you go to heaven, if you've been good.'

'I'm good.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

'I don't think she was beautiful,' said José.

'Yes, she was. Now, any more questions?' They all shook their heads. 'Well, off we go then. It'll soon be lunch time.'

'Aunt Claudette said she'd come down.'

One moment they ran in front of me, the next they fell behind; they fought among themselves or threw stones at the tree trunks. From the top of the path I searched for blue patches in the sky, but saw only a mass of cloud towering on the horizon. Leles took my hand until we got to the first street. Enrique and

HORTELANO

Dorita went off to have lunch with Joaquín. When we walked into the house, Rufi was setting the table.

‘No, the children aren’t coming. They’re staying to lunch with Señor Andrés.’

‘The Señora isn’t lunching either. She went to the village with Señorita Marta.’

‘Has Rafael come back?’

‘No,’ Rufi answered. ‘But I’ve heard that the police will be here this afternoon.’

Before the dessert it started to rain. The light faded until Rufi, who was busy at the sideboard, was no more than a dark shadow outlined against the mirror.

I sat on the veranda with a glass of brandy in my hands. I could scarcely see through the rain. I breathed in the smell of the earth and the plants. Perhaps it was a migraine that had prevented Elena from calling. Or maybe Andrés had embarked on one of his rambling tales and couldn’t stop. In any case, since the police were about to arrive, I’d do better to recall, bit by bit, the events of the previous evening.

2

I WAS going home by way of the pine wood when I suddenly caught sight of Joaquín running full tilt. When he got to the road he took me by the hand. It must have been about eight, or eight-thirty, and because the sky was so cloudy the night fell swiftly, without the slow dusk of other days. We walked a few yards in silence before I asked him what he was doing there alone.

‘Has it rained up there?’ he asked in turn.

‘No, but there were carloads of mushrooms and toadstools about. Earlier this evening I came past your house, but Manolito told me you were on the beach.’

‘I was on the beach.’

‘So I was told.’

‘I suppose it’ll rain tomorrow.’

‘Were you looking for me?’

‘She’s dead, you know.’

‘Who’s dead?’

‘I went to look for you because nobody thinks of you.’

We’d reached the first row of villas. The scent of begonias, pines and orange blossom hung in the air.

‘I’m glad you remembered me.’

He pulled my hand so that I’d see his smile.

‘We were the first to see her.’

‘Who’s we?’

‘Well, José, Enrique and me. Martita and Asun were there too but they got scared. We didn’t.’

HORTELANO

'I don't understand a word.'

'I'm telling you we saw her first! We were just going to climb into the boat because the treasure wasn't there and we saw the dead body. Then we went to tell someone and we met Leoncio on his way back from the orchard. After that they all ran away. I told them you didn't know about it but they didn't listen.'

I picked him up by the waist and stood him on the wall that surrounds the empty villa of the Hofsens. His face on a level with mine, I waited a few seconds.

'Who is dead?'

'She is.'

'Do you know her?'

'She's got a funny face.'

I put him back on the pavement and began walking quickly. It was then I became aware of the emptiness of the streets, the silence around us and unusual stillness of the evening in the gardens. Behind me I heard the anxious breathing of Joaquín.

'On the beach,' he gasped.

I picked him up in my arms. We passed Don Antonio's villa and ran into María.

'A young woman has been found dead, sir.'

'On the beach?'

'Yes, I think so. Everybody's gone there.'

I ran down the path with Joaquín clinging round my neck. In no time we were approaching the scene: the dirty fringe of seaweed and a couple of civil guards standing by the jeep. It was as if they were about to set up stalls for a fair, flagpoles and a platform for the band and perhaps even spotlights to pick out midnight bathers. It seemed almost logical that those two guards should be there with their dull black rifles, since one of the village lads was bound to end up getting drunk, or some husband provoked beyond endurance. Joaquín frowned.

'Are you afraid?'

He shook his head as he slid down from my arms; but he immediately took my hand.

A long stretch of trampled sand led to the body covered by the white sheet. I felt a hand on my shoulder; it was Emilio.

'Hello.'

'The children should be kept away from here.'

'I've only just come,' I said, 'but on the other hand I suppose the children have already seen whatever there is to see.'

'I don't like this. Dora was looking for you a moment ago.'

Dora and Elena stood by the edge of the pine wood. Elena was wearing a black blouse under her light grey coat.

'Thank you.'

Joaquín let go of my hand and ran off. Emilio was saying something when one of the guards greeted me. He obviously knew me. We walked towards the bundled sheet which, in spite of the wind, was kept firmly in place by the weight of the body it enveloped. The guard squatted beside it and, loosening one of the corners, motioned us over. I stepped round the body and when I reached his side the guard opened his arms and lifted the sheet. Beneath it was the girl.

The hands that clutched the sheet were trembling. Before he had a chance to move, I propped an elbow on my knee and took the sheet from the guard.

'Allow me,' I said.

I would have gone on looking had not the voices of the others suddenly come to my attention. I shifted my position to indicate to the guard that I'd had enough; he took his gaze off the sea. Skilfully manoeuvring his rifle, he stooped and carefully tucked the sheet back under the body. I offered him a cigarette but he reminded me that he was on duty and would continue to be until the arrival of the magistrate.

Elena and Dora ran after the children, who were laughing and shouting.

'What do you make of her?'

'Well . . .' I shrugged my shoulders, 'she's obviously a city girl.'

'You didn't expect to find a fisherman's wife or a peasant girl, did you?'

'I don't know what I expected. Does anybody know her?'

'Not a soul.'

Elena and Dora had steered the children back on the path

HORTELANO

and were now chatting to Andrés and Amadeo. I went towards them. I promised Dora I would be up soon and assured her I didn't feel cold. Joaquín was trying to make Rufi carry him in her arms.

I felt better once I'd lit a cigarette. It was difficult to recognize faces more than six yards away. The children, Dora and Elena and the maids were walking up the path. Andrés and Emilio, with Rafael in their wake, came past me on their way to the guards. Near the waterline Marta was shaking sand off her shoes. My steps led me northwards where the darkness offered a safe shelter.

To the left, above the pine trees, a purple haze blurred the outline of the hills. I listened to the lapping water; the sea was a little choppy. When I had finished my cigarette I stopped, put the stub on my right thumb and flicked it off with my ring finger, an arching spray of sparks. This was the way Joaquín had of flicking off small things. Not till I walked back did I realize how far I'd gone. I was afraid that the magistrate had already come, or that there would be no one left on the beach. Suddenly I saw the light of the two oil lamps. But before joining the others I rinsed my hands, letting them lie flat on the water of the last wave that crept up the shore.

'Javier,' Marta called me.

They were in the shadows, out of reach of the blanching light of the lamps. The wind had dropped. Sitting on the sand near Marta were Amadeo, Emilio and Andrés.

'I went for a walk,' I said and slipped my handkerchief back into my pocket.

'The magistrate hasn't come yet. The others went back home.'

'Have you seen the girl?'

'Yes, Marta.'

'Are you cold?' Amadeo asked.

'No, darling,' said Marta. 'I just want a cigarette. Nothing so exciting happened the other five summers. Now this place will have a story to tell.' Andrés cupped the flame of the lighter in his hands and offered it to her. 'Thank you. Nothing ever happened here, and suddenly this afternoon . . . We were playing

canasta when the maid came in to tell us. Here of all places where nothing ever happens! They must have brought her from the village.'

'Or the camping site,' said Emilio.

'The camping site? I hadn't thought of that.'

The shadows were thrown by the lamps, some still, some shifting. It crossed my mind that more people had clustered round the body.

'She looks like a foreign girl,' Emilio continued. 'She may be from the camping site or from some other place on the coast. She may have been washed up here by the currents and the wind could have dried her body.'

'She didn't die of drowning,' said Andrés.

'I didn't say she had.'

'I've seen people drowned and she didn't die of drowning in the sea.'

'All right,' Amadeo chipped in, 'but he isn't saying she did drown.'

'Don't argue. Until the police take over it's stupid to speculate.' Marta stretched herself on the sand. 'Treat it like one of the whodunits you read at night.'

As she put her arms behind her neck the body inside the slacks and the suède jacket tautened. I edged a little nearer.

'Who are those people?'

Before answering Marta looked round.

'Just people from the village. And the guards, of course. Don Antonio was here till a moment ago.'

'How ghastly!'

'Why?'

'Oh, nothing,' Amadeo said. 'If you like I'll go and find him and bring him back to have a chat with you.'

'No, no, darling. Not on your life.'

'If only we had something to drink,' said Andrés.

The girl must have been in the darkness somewhere beyond the light of the second lamp, as still as she had been earlier that evening, covered with sand and sea-shells.

Amadeo and Emilio got up.

HORTELANO

'Darling,' said Marta.

'What is it?' Amadeo answered.

'Are you going back?'

'No. Are you tired? Tell me if you are and we'll go.'

'All right.'

Emilio and Amadeo stepped into the circle of light. Like a storm warning, a sudden gust of wind brought with it the smell of rain.

'They said on the radio at noon that the weather would change all along the coast.'

'Hmm . . .' Marta conceded, the cigarette still dangling from the corner of her mouth.

Sitting at right angles to us, head bowed and forearms resting on his knees, Andrés picked up handfuls of sand. The sea was in darkness. I groped for a cigarette, lit it from Marta's and as I put hers back into her mouth she smiled at me.

'Emilio's upset because of the children.'

Marta's sun-scorched skin was flaking round the eyes, on the forehead and on her flabby cheeks. On her mouth only the faintest trace of lipstick remained.

'What's wrong with the children?'

'They found the woman and kicked up the sand all round the body.'

'Let's hope they didn't touch anything. That's what Emilio's afraid of.'

'No,' said Andrés without moving, 'Emilio's afraid that they may have seen her naked. In fact, if you must know, Emilio's even afraid it may have been the children who murdered her.'

Marta gave a sudden hoarse laugh. I felt someone coming up behind us. Dora had sent Rufi with my oilskin jacket and a thermos of coffee.

'The Señora told me to ask you if you needed anything else.'

'Rufi, tell them at the house that what we want is a bottle of whisky.'

'Yes, Señorito Andrés.'

Rufi went off without a single glance at the patch of light. Still

sitting, Marta slipped on her high-heeled shoes and Andrés helped her to her feet.

‘I’m going to have a look round.’

The jeep driven by one of the guards moved towards the path, casting its light on the underbrush, the stunted pines and the slope. Andrés rubbed his hands together to get rid of the sand.

‘Let me know when the whisky arrives,’ cried Marta.

She tried to walk as though she were on an asphalt pavement.

‘What day is it today?’ Andrés asked.

‘Tuesday. Why, what’s on your mind?’

He was some time before giving me an answer. There was a constant nervous tension about him as if no drink had passed his lips in ten days, or as if he’d just had a bizarre row with Elena.

‘I hadn’t seen a dead body since the war. When my parents died I refused to go into the room to see them.’

‘I remember.’

‘It’s funny, but that girl reminds me suddenly of Teruel in 1937’—his tone changed and he smiled—‘when you rescued me from that hell, took me off to San Sebastian and dropped me at the hottest brothel in Europe with the fattest woman in the world.’

‘To whom I recommended you especially.’

‘So she told me the next morning. She said my cousin, the captain, had told her the night before that I was a virgin. Of course, in the morning she still didn’t believe it.’

We had a good laugh, until Rufi arrived with the bottle of whisky.

‘You shouldn’t have bothered to bring it down.’ Andrés drank a long draught straight from the bottle. ‘I’m going to let Marta have a sip.’

‘The children are having their dinner,’ said Rufi, adding quickly: ‘Does anyone know what the poor girl died of, sir?’

‘No, not yet.’

Rufi crossed herself.

‘Are you afraid to go back alone?’

‘Afraid? Heavens, no!’

HORTELANO

The magistrate arrived at about ten o'clock in a light grey sedan, preceded by the jeep. The wind was blowing hard again and the clouds were dropping lower over the sea. By then we were getting a little tired of walking back and forth ten yards from the shrouded body. We'd finished the coffee. The magistrate was accompanied by two more guards, the coroner and a secretary. We moved away, except for Emilio who knew His Worship, the magistrate. They took about half an hour. Emilio waved to us before getting into the car.

Marta took Amadeo's arm and mine while we climbed up the path. Andrés stopped twice to take a swig from the bottle. Santiago and Emilio were waiting for us under the first lamp-post.

'The magistrate wants me to put the body in the old watchman's hut.' Emilio sneezed into his handkerchief. 'He wanted to know where it could be kept until tomorrow when the wagon comes to take it away. I thought of the hut. They'll have a pair of guards keeping watch.'

'We must get the men some blankets and mattresses, even if they're old. And coffee and something to eat. That is if . . .'

'Don't worry, Marta, Rafael will look after everything,' said Santiago.

'As far as food is concerned they could have supper in any of the villas. But you see, Marta, they have to stay in the hut with the body.'

'I'm off,' I said.

'Rafael was on the beach.'

'Come along with me,' said Andrés.

'I want to see the children. Good night.'

'See you later, Javier.'

Everyone but Rufi had gone to bed.

'I'll just have a sandwich.'

After a cup of coffee I went out for a walk. A sense of loneliness, as though it were autumn, clashed with the green lawns and the flower beds in bloom. There were small sounds of water, of wind blowing through open rooms, of sand, of voices and of laughter. I stopped and lit a cigarette. In Santiago and Claud-

ette's living room there were people. From the street I heard Emilio's voice. I remembered the afternoon when Uncle Pablo wangled the order at HQ and I set out to rescue Andrés from the hell of ice, bugs and bullets, to take him to the sweaty bed of a prostitute who was fatter than Marta. Not Uncle Pablo, or Aunt Amelia, or my father. Since the last comrade who fell beside him or the last Red he saw fall on the other side, he had not met death till the girl on the beach.

Dora had left her bedside lamp on. As I got into my bed she half awoke.

'Come, have a good rest.'

I was trying to sleep when I heard the motor of the jeep. The window was ajar but I couldn't see down into the street. Yet, in an odd way, I seemed to see in my mind the girl's body stretched on the back seat. It was raining and I lay quite still. Behind me Dora's breathing sounded like a chronometer.

Her nightgown was crumpled and her feet were sticking out of bed, and as I covered her it struck me as funny that, although in recent years I hadn't slept once with Dora, her sleeping body should still have aroused me.

3

THE POLICE did not come that afternoon.

When I awoke it was still raining. Someone had placed a blanket over my legs and Joaquín was standing next to me, a comic magazine in his hand.

‘Are you reading this?’ I asked stupidly.

‘Yes,’ he lied.

Under the blanket I felt wrapped in warmth and lethargy. A light drizzle bathed the garden in a kind of early morning light. Joaquín knelt on my easy chair.

‘Why aren’t you playing with the others?’

‘The girls are inside. Will you read me a story?’

I read more than half the magazine to him and then sent him to get me a handkerchief and a cup of tea. He returned with Leoncio. The cracked drain in the pool had got worse . . . it was the right time for pruning after all this rain. Or something like that, but I didn’t hear it very clearly because Leoncio was having one of his bad afternoons and stuttering at every word. Joaquín suggested we go for a walk. While I took a shower I heard him moving about the bedroom, turn over the things on Dora’s dressing table and try a double somersault on one of the beds. I thought I heard the telephone in the hall.

‘Rufi says it wasn’t ringing. Do you want her to come up?’

‘No. Try to keep still for five minutes.’

‘I’m thinking,’ he said as he went out.

I dressed, wondering if Elena really had a migraine. I was in the mood for a game of chess with Amadeo. But even if Amadeo

was free and someone managed to light a fire in the fire-place, I wouldn't be able to refrain from going out in the rain to the other villas, to hear something about the dead girl, or to hear Elena's explanation of her presumed migraine.

'Asun has come over. They're going to play doctor with dolls and they don't want me in the room. Dorita told me off because she says I'm always spying on them. And if I do spy it's only because Enrique and José asked me to; they know I'm always around . . . But they bore me with their silly games.'

'Hand me my shoes will you? The ones with rubber soles there on the right. And try not to cut yourself or to hurt anybody else with that penknife!'

'My father wanted to take it away from me. I brought it out during lunch and you can't imagine the fuss. That Martita's a meanie, she goes around . . .'

'Thank you. Listen, Joaquín.'

'Shall I tie your shoelaces?'

'All right.'

'I'll get a shoehorn if you like.'

'I don't need it. And now listen to me'—I kept him still, his arms clamped between my legs—'you know I don't mind your calling Martita a meanie or saying, "*that so-and-so*" when you speak of somebody, because I respect other people's ways of expression. But you know quite well your mother wouldn't approve of it.'

'Yes, I know.'

'On the other hand, I like your originality because that's how you give life a touch of variety, but I think it would be better if you played with the other children instead of always making a war of your own.'

'I don't make wars when I'm on my own. What does originality mean?'

'Come along. I'll explain on the way.'

But when we reached the porch he suddenly decided to join the girls; he ran off, the plastic raincoat billowing about his tiny body, charging along the front of the house in search of an open window by which to make his entry.

HORTELANO

In the street the fallen leaves had collected in little pools. One of the second floor windows was open in Claudette's villa and as I walked into the garden she called me from upstairs.

I lingered a moment on the concrete path that Santiago had built at the beginning of May. The rain had left it smooth; the water, channelled in the gutters, turned the soil black and made it bubble as though seething.

Claudette waited for me on the landing. Before going into the room where the others were, she showed me her last canvas, a seascape, like most of her work, in very light colours and delicate lines.

'I know you understand nothing about it, but tell me what you think of it.'

'I like it. I like it very much. Especially the yellow of the coastline.'

'So you do understand.'

Andrés, who was pouring me a whisky, had already drunk plenty. Amadeo was talking to Elena about the dead girl.

'Have you seen her?' Santiago asked me.

'Yes, last night, on the beach.'

'After dinner,' Claudette explained, 'we all met here.'

'We missed you.'

'No more soda, thank you, Andrés. I was very tired last night and went to bed.'

'Sit in this armchair . . . it's more comfortable. I wonder when it'll stop raining. Amadeo, do you know what your wife said today? She said she was ready to pack up and go back to Madrid!'

'God forbid!'

'Why?'

Andrés handed me a glass of whisky.

'I can only work in the summer,' said Amadeo. 'When Marta's in the house there's never an empty room. Ask Emilio and Asunción what it was like when they stayed with us in February. They found me writing a report in the bathroom. I usually end up working in the maid's bathroom, as a matter of fact.'

'How you exaggerate!'

'I swear it's true, Claudette.'

'With eleven rooms in the house I'd have thought . . .'

'What did you think of the girl?'

I turned my head and put my hand on Elena's, which lay on my shoulder.

'I don't know. She may be a foreigner.'

'Emilio says she's English.'

'I think,' said Santiago, 'that the girl was probably from some camping site and that her body was washed up. A few days ago Claudette and I passed a boat about ten miles out to sea, with three or four couples on board, all of them naked.'

'Or so we thought.'

'Asunción and Emilio were terribly indignant when we told them.'

'They *were* naked, darling.'

'We'll have to look into this,' said Elena. 'I shouldn't be surprised if Asunción wasn't pregnant again.'

'No!' cried Claudette. 'Really, that man's ruthless. Five kids and the baby girl less than a year old!'

'What was that?'

'According to your wife, Asun is expecting again. And I say that man's a monster. Little Maria Francisca isn't even . . .'

'Good for him! What the hell do you expect? He spends the whole day locked up in an office in Barcelonata, surrounded by papers, smoke, economic charts and tradition.'

'Look here, Andrés . . .' Elena began.

'I remember,' said Amadeo, 'the very first time I saw Asunción. It was five years ago, when our "Colony" here had just been inaugurated. I'd already met Emilio. I thought his wife looked like an ageing spinster, smiling too much and a bit stupid.'

'Really . . .' Claudette pleaded. 'Must you be so unkind? Asun is a lovely person.'

'I agree, I agree. I was talking of first impressions. Now . . .'

Amadeo laughed, 'he's the one I can't stand.'

'The truth is you've all ganged up on poor Emilio.'

'But, Elena, he gets worse every day. Now with that girl on

HORTELANO

the beach,' Santiago crossed his legs, 'he thinks the kids may go to hell because they've seen a naked woman.'

'It's more than likely he's never seen one himself,' I said.

'Will you all stop being so catty?' Claudette said, laughing.

'It's the truth,' I insisted. 'I wouldn't be surprised if he'd never seen Asunción herself naked.'

'When these two'—now Santiago was backing Amadeo—'told him about the motorboat full of naked people he turned absolutely crimson.'

'With lust.'

'I forbid you to talk like that!'

'Lust, or envy!'

'You're just a pack of old gossips. It's you who envy him!' said Elena.

'We! Envy him!'

'Why should we envy him?'

'Because . . .'

'I envy him. Damn it, he's the only one who has the guts to say what he thinks.'

'Andrés, how about easing up on the drink?'

'It's stopped raining,' Andrés said.

We suddenly noticed that the room was practically dark, and for a few seconds nobody spoke. Claudette lit the lamps; Amadeo shifted to another armchair.

'Marta and Dora were here this morning,' Claudette said.

'Yes. I suggested she should go shopping in the village to calm her nerves. The children had upset her. They were particularly exasperating this morning.'

'I heard you were with them on the beach. Whenever I imagine having a son of my own I feel he'd like you. I don't know how you do it.'

'Claudette, dear, Andrés is the one who really understands them. I'm just patient, that's all.'

'No, no, it isn't that. Santiago and I have talked about it many times.'

Across the room, partly concealed by a little table, I could see Elena's crossed leg swinging. I breathed in Claudette's

perfume. Her shoulders were bare and her halter dress hugged her waist. Of course she and Santiago had talked about the children and me because there was nothing they hadn't talked about. It suddenly occurred to me that her mouth was as square, as pale and symmetrical as that of the girl on the beach. Then I realized it was a trick of the electric light. Or of my imagination.

'I'll agree to educate your future son, if you'll agree to have him.'

'I'd be terrified of your criticisms.'

'No, seriously . . . Tell that stupid man of yours to give you a son or two. But no more.'

'I'll tell him. I love to hear you talk like this. I suppose it's the way you talk to the children.'

'Where do you get your perfumes?'

'Lately we've been mixing with younger people, single people. It makes us think we're just starting life together. Every now and then, though, I tell him we must call on Asunción or take a trip to Madrid, to make us realize how many years we've been together, Santiago and I.'

'You know what I've devoted myself to during the past twenty years?'

'To having two children and earning . . .'

'Wait a minute, Claudette. I've spent the last twenty years wangling tax relief. I realized it when I woke up from the siesta today.'

Claudette laughed. So did Elena, Amadeo and Santiago. Through the open window drifted the complex smell of a night when the wind is blowing. Santiago offered us another drink and put a plate of biscuits on the little table.

'Tax relief in every possible way,' I continued. 'On buildings, ships, land and manufactured goods. I even arranged some documents for Emilio in Madrid so that when the time comes his sons will have to pay less to enrol at the University. Tax relief even for the children. I only realized it this afternoon.'

'Why this afternoon, Javier?'

I was on the point of telling her the truth, but couldn't myself be sure just how much the unremitting image of the dead

HORTELAÑO

girl on the beach had influenced my mood. For a moment Elena and I looked at each other across the cigarette smoke, while Claudette poured me another whisky.

'The rain is going to get us all down,' I said. 'Marta'd be wise to pack and go back to Madrid.'

'We're crazy to stay here in weather like this . . . We should go further south . . . or at least . . .'

'But there are storms all along the coast . . .'

'Well, we could go to Barcelona in the evenings . . .'

'The first summer we spent here . . . do you remember? We used to go dancing quite often in the evenings. To Barcelona or the villages.'

Suddenly they stopped laughing. Elena rushed to the arm-chair where Andrés was sitting. The rest of us were also on our feet, and I said:

'It's all right, Elena. Let me do it.'

Once I'd managed to get Andrés on his feet, Elena stepped aside.

'Who?' Santiago asked.

'Never mind. I'll take him out.'

'It's nothing,' whispered Amadeo.

Claudette came with us as far as the hall. I was afraid Andrés wouldn't be able to hold out until we reached the garden. The fresh air had no effect on him. We walked round the villa. Suddenly he stopped me and leant against a tree, with the back of his right hand on his forehead. I held his left hand while he vomited. I heard Elena coming but didn't turn my head. When he had finished, Elena asked:

'Are you feeling better?'

Andrés shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of indifference. Holding on to Elena and to myself he threw the whole weight of his weak, ungainly, swaying body upon us. We walked out of Santiago's garden and into the deserted street. Before going up the veranda steps he held us back and mumbled something.

'Joaquín isn't at home,' Elena said.

I had to walk ahead to make sure that the boy was out, and only then did he come into the hall, trying to keep himself

upright. As we walked up the staircase Elena ran her fingers through the long, lank hair that was falling over his forehead. My arms ached by the time I laid him on the bed.

'Wait for me downstairs, will you?'

It took her about fifteen minutes to undress him and leave him asleep. I telephoned Claudette to reassure her. Elena had put on a thick garnet-red sweater.

'It's only nine o'clock. Shall we go for a walk?'

She finished tying a scarf round her head.

'It's not so much that I feel like it. But I need to.'

In the street she took my arm. Across the road, the pine trees on the hill were a dark green mass sodden with rain. We walked in step, silently, and every now and then our eyes met. I enjoyed walking like this, with my left hand in the pocket of her slacks clasping her right hand. Her touch never disappointed me and she had a way of pressing my fingers lightly for minutes on end.

'It's a long time since we saw each other.'

'That's the way, isn't it?' I said. 'It's always more difficult in the summer. This afternoon, I don't know why, I thought you might have a migraine. I was hoping you'd call.'

'I was asleep. Last night I thought I'd see you at Santiago's.'

'I had a restless night yesterday.'

'Is it over?'

'Yes.'

As we kissed suddenly, methodically and desperately, her back grew tense under my hands.

'It's been a long time. A very long time. I don't like'—I held her round the waist—'to be so many days without seeing you alone.'

We sat on the damp stones. It was completely dark and the silence had a faint whispering echo in it. With my arms around her and hers around me, I was almost happy in the peace that flows from familiar gestures and the certainty of habits. It allowed me to trace feelings and thoughts as if I were alone.

At about ten o'clock we walked back along the road, slowly, stopping every few minutes.

'Something's wrong, isn't it?'

HORTELANO

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘That dead girl. I thought a lot yesterday on the beach and later Andrés reminded me of the war. I don’t know. I feel very well, though. Better than ever! Perhaps that’s what’s wrong!’

‘I’m so glad,’ Elena smiled.

From the darkness came the voice of Santiago calling us. Dora and Marta had returned from the village. We chatted a while before going to Marta and Amadeo’s for dinner. As we walked by the old watchman’s hut Dora said:

‘According to one of the guards the makeshift beds are very comfortable.’

‘Poor boys. Do you think they have enough blankets?’

‘I believe an ambulance will be round tomorrow.’

I dropped behind. The darkness hid the signpost that hung from a mast over the hut. The invisible words were **WHITE SAILS GARDEN CITY**. I joined the others, who were chatting gaily.

We reached the first streets, and Amadeo spotted Joaquín dashing in and out of the garden hedges. He could run faster than any of us. Later, when we were having coffee, he turned up in Marta’s dining room, sat down on my lap and fell asleep in my arms before Elena had even finished chiding him.

4

‘GOOD MORNING. I hear the girl’s still there.’

‘Yes, Don Javier,’ said the guard. ‘Would you like to see her?’

‘If it isn’t too much trouble.’

The guard pushed the door open and let me go in before him. He opened the two windows of the bare, whitewashed room. The body lay on the concrete floor, covered with a sheet.

‘Only the face,’ I said.

He brought me a chair from the other room.

‘The priest will be here shortly.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘And later the wagon’s coming. They say something happened yesterday around Rosas.’

‘The sea is rough along the coast, isn’t it?’

The guard almost smiled: ‘I think it’s something to do with the bad weather.’

He sat on the doorstep and lit a cigarette.

‘Let’s hope it will improve today.’

‘Don’t hope for too much,’ and with his chin he pointed towards the mountain, visible to him from the threshold. ‘In half an hour it will be daylight, and these clouds aren’t going to lift in half an hour. It’s a real storm, you know. It covers the whole of Europe, that’s what they said on the radio.’

The girl’s nose seemed to have lengthened; it was like a long bone disfiguring her features. The mouth, however, was unaltered; the lips half parted, full and sharply drawn. At some stage of her life the girl must have used a pale, almost white

HORTELANO

lipstick. In spite of the clouds, the light was getting brighter and it made the girl's skin look more taut, more yellow.

I was mesmerized by the hard upward curve of the corners of her mouth, which seemed to bear no relation to cheeks or eyelids. They had brushed the sand from her hair and beneath the sheet rose the pyramid of her hands crossed on her breast.

'Do you remember seeing her anywhere?'

'No, I've never seen her.'

I turned my face away from the body and put the cigarette out on the sole of one of my shoes.

'What happened at Rosas?'

'A quarrel in a bar. The usual thing this time of year.'

'Was anyone hurt?'

'There must have been. They were hitting each other with bottles. These foreign girls always cause trouble—they upset the men.'

'Yes, I know.'

'During the season some of them give up fishing and go live with an English or a Swedish woman. But sometimes the husbands turn up, and then they're the ones who start a fight. So you see what life is like. We can't control it.'

'It's all very complicated.'

'Look here,' the guard continued. 'We see life as it is, hardly a day passes without something happening or someone coming to the barracks with some tale or other. I know what I'm talking about, and if you'll forgive my disagreeing with you, things are very simple. It's either this,' he said, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together, 'or this,' and he pointed to his fly. 'Begging your pardon.'

'You may be right. I don't know.'

'Take it from me I'm right. I tell you, we see life in this job. Ask any of the other guards and they'll tell you the same thing. It's just like the weather. The sun comes out and everyone's happy. You get rain or cold and they're at each other like cats and dogs. And in Andalusia it's worse. I served ten years in Ecija, in the province of Seville, and that's the way it is. The

climate, that's the whole trouble, you can't get away from it. That's why these women from Sweden and England come here; because their husbands' blood is frozen with all that snow and fog that gets into their veins. When the sun shines men quarrel but they don't fight. Bad weather eats people up, and they end by killing each other.'

I stood up and a few seconds later he followed suit. I threw my dead cigarette butt out of the doorway and when I turned the guard was covering the girl's body.

'No, I don't know her.'

'What happens,' he said, 'is that one face reminds you of another and you rack your brains till you remember whose. This girl's a foreigner, though, that's for sure.'

It was daylight by then but the low dark clouds turned the landscape into a creeping dusk. The guard walked with me for a few minutes, chatting all the time. I took one of the low footpaths through the pine wood. The ground was damp, almost muddy, and at the foot of the tree trunks was black as tar. The track ascended in slow curves, and from one of them I caught sight of the sea, the rooftops, terraces, trees, streets, swimming pools, tennis courts, green lawns, winding paths and french windows. I had the feeling this whole town belonged to me, for I had created it, and to Elena, for she had chosen the site. Strange to think it had all been done in six or seven years. And even stranger to recall that this was the spot where Elena had stopped the car one winter afternoon and where we had walked until nightfall imagining our garden city: the one I now saw lying still and silent in the distance.

It was so cold that I walked on. The gardens were empty, the windows shuttered. It was a long time since I had last sauntered along those streets, noticed the different styles of the villas, felt envy on seeing a roof, or a porch, or a stone chimney. Suddenly I sensed that I was not alone, and was amazed to find myself walking with my head low. Claudette was watching me from a corner. I hastened my step.

'You've become an early riser, haven't you?'

When I reached her I automatically stretched out my hand

and Claudette, quickly controlling her surprise at this unexpected gesture, took it.

'I've been walking around here for more than an hour and a half. How about you?'

'If you promise not to start shouting at me I'll confess that . . .'

'That you're off to the beach. Let me carry your bag.'

'I wouldn't dream of it!' She swung her blue canvas bag in the air and we set off together. 'I woke up with such a longing to go for a swim that I couldn't even wait for the sun to come out. In any case, it may never come out again.'

'Not in the next three months at any rate.'

Claudette's laughter cheered me up. By one of the villas a man was busy oiling a lawnmower. Squatting beside the machine, he didn't raise his head on hearing our steps and voices.

'The fact is I'm terrified of Santiago. We argue so much about the chances of my catching pneumonia by bathing in this weather that in the end I have a boiling hot shower and an aspirin.'

'How did you manage to get up without waking him? We all know you sleep in each other's arms.'

We stopped at the beginning of the path and Claudette looked at me out of the corner of her eyes with a mocking smile.

'What you've probably heard is that we sleep in separate rooms.'

'That's the way Dora and I sleep,' I said, without knowing what prompted me, I grinned as I said it.

Claudette immediately blushed. She took some time to answer, while by my silence I prolonged a pleasurable act of cruelty to myself.

'Oh well . . . it makes no difference, later you'll feel all the more like having children.'

'You're right, it doesn't settle anything. You or Santiago must give me your recipe.'

'Hate. It's all a matter of hating each other. I read it in the *Reader's Digest* or some such thing. If you manage to hate

conscientiously and at the right moment, nature—which as we all know is very wise—refuses to let anything come of it. Later you can start loving all over again.'

'I'll try to hate Dora next time.'

'You'd find it impossible. Marta and I were gossiping only the other day about what a model husband you are. Maudlin' almost.'

'I love you dearly, Claudette. It's wonderful to go out at dawn, like a lone hungry wolf, and run into someone as extraordinary as you. I love you because you're the straightest, most intelligent person I know. I keep hoping my daughter will turn out like you.'

'Well,' she held my hand a few seconds, 'I've seen you sentimental at all hours of the night but never at dawn. Or is it that you haven't been to bed at all and are just getting your second wind?'

Claudette unbuttoned the front of her dress.

'It looks good enough to make you want to swim a hundred miles out,' I said, pointing to the sea.

'Well, don't worry, I'm only going to swim a few strokes.'

'If you drown don't call on me.'

She slipped out of her dress and her sandals. I stretched out on one of the towels while Claudette ran towards the water. Her long thin thighs were slightly curved and covered with freckles. The strongly marked tendons on the backs of her knees gave her legs a sad, chaste, spinsterish look.

'It's not at all cold,' she turned her head and shouted when the water came up to her knees.

I stayed with my elbows buried in the sand and watched her vanishing and reappearing among the swift, frothy waves. Breathing in the scent of the towel I dozed off. Claudette woke me by splashing a few drops of water on me. She ran along the ribbon of moist sand, rubbed herself with a towel, massaged her body with eau-de-cologne and took a swig of brandy. When she came to sit beside me, covering her legs with her short terry robe, I noticed the flush of the skin of her shoulders and her cheeks.

HORTELANO

'I'm worried about Andrés.'

'Well, yes, but what makes you suddenly think of Andrés?'

'Oh, that thing last night.'

I lit a cigarette for her. The clouds were beginning to disperse and a wide curtain of sunlight dropped down on to the distant waves.

'It's his way of showing off. Andrés drinks because he likes to.'

'Why doesn't he do anything?'

'He's always been lazy. And he doesn't need to work.'

'Neither do you. You could go on living as you do and still leave your children enough money to live on without doing a stroke of work.'

'You're wrong. I'm quite poor.'

'No, Javier, I'm serious. Amadeo said the same when you took Andrés out last night. But there's always some reason. Or many reasons. Heaven knows what they are.'

'Andrés himself doesn't know, so what's the point? Do understand me, Claudette'—she stopped shaking her head at me in contradiction—'I know Andrés very well indeed. He's my cousin and he's been my best friend since we were kids. But he's always been the same. Lazy, happy-go-lucky, affectionate and a drunkard. Nothing else.'

'I'm very fond of Andrés.' She stared, with a steady smile, at a point beyond the swelling waves. 'I remember the first year we came to the Colony. As usual, we were shunned for a long time, Santiago and I. Someone had taken good care to tell everybody about our relationship. One morning Andrés came up to us here on the beach. I can see him now. He sat down, we both lit cigarettes and he took the bull by the horns: "I couldn't care less that you aren't married, nor could Elena. Elena's my wife. The others will stop caring once they get to know you, because you're a nice couple." When Elena came out of the water the four of us went off to lunch together. It came as so much of a surprise that I've been fond of him ever since. That night Santiago and he got drunk together.'

'Yes, I remember.'

‘Within a week we knew everybody. I don’t know whether he forced them to accept us or made them forget. But he was the first to get us out of that idiotic situation. I’m sorry he drinks.’

‘Aren’t we all?’

‘Yes I know. When he’s drunk he gets very sad or very gay but never violent. He never does anything nasty. That’s what is so strange, that, and Elena’s having got used to it and still loving him.’

‘Elena loves him very much.’

‘. . . In that passive way? Deeply but . . . as if there were no way out. It all seems so horribly complicated.’

I stopped piling up sand and rubbed my hands together. She turned her head.

‘Just now I was with someone to whom life looks very simple. I believe the man has two or three stock explanations and they solve just about every problem for him.’

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘One of those guards in the hut there. He behaves as if he knew me quite well though I can’t think where from. He’s convinced that the sun, the rain and the fog are the only causes of human behaviour. To do something means just to go to his barracks and let him straighten out the mess. I’ve never met anyone so lacking in curiosity—except perhaps the man we passed oiling a lawnmower, who couldn’t even be bothered to raise his head and see who we were. I suppose it’s a question of economics. Of lack of economic resources, I mean.’

Claudette jumped to her feet.

‘Will you now explain to me’—she flexed her tight yellow bathing suit—‘what makes you go and see that dead girl at seven in the morning and then start to analyse the only two human beings you’ve met on the way?’

I helped her to put her things back in the bag, and we both laughed.

We found Santiago strolling round the garden with a pair of pruning shears and a few packages of seed. After we’d had a cigarette together, Claudette and I managed to disperse his

HORTELANO

early morning grouch. They pressed me to stay for breakfast but I refused.

At home Dora was setting the table on the veranda with Rufi's help. By now the weak, intermittent sunshine had reached our garden. I told Dora I hadn't been able to sleep and—perhaps she knew how much that sort of question irritated me—she asked whether I'd mind if she went to the village again that day with Marta.

'I'm sorry to saddle you with the kids but I'd like to get my shopping done while this cloudy weather lasts.'

'I think it's a splendid idea.'

'We'll be back early.'

Facing one another across the table we lapsed into a long silence. I finished my cigarette and, without looking at her, asked if the car was running all right.

'Yes, fine. Why, were you thinking of using it?'

'No.'

'Listen, Javier, I could easily . . .'

'I said no. I wouldn't dream of it. It was simply a question. I only wondered if it was all right or if you'd like Rafael to have a look at it.'

'Rafael's already gone out with the station wagon,' she said. 'You know there's nothing I hate so much as lies. I'm sure you were planning to use the car and now you've given up the idea out of politeness.'

I looked at Dora. She was a stranger sitting stiff-backed at the other side of the table, with her hands among the silver, the plates and the cups she herself had laid out.

'Now, Dora, don't let's start again. I don't want to argue with you about stupid little things like this. It's as if we were trying to cheat each other, playing some game . . .'

'Javier,' she cried, 'don't speak to me like that!'

I tried to sound persuasive:

'I assure you that I don't need the car. It hadn't even crossed my mind to use it this morning.'

At the same time it struck me that I was being unfair. I was involving Dora in something that didn't concern her, something

that had bothered me for a long time and was now coming to the surface. Dora had a vacant look on her face that mirrored her weakness, her almost defenceless stupidity.

'Do me a favour. Take the car.'

Just as she rose from the table the children came rushing on to the veranda. I felt a surge of anger, an unreasonable desire to strike at something.

She helped the children to their seats and tied a napkin round Dorita's neck. Her own coffee cup was still more than two-thirds full. I expected her to sit down again and finish her breakfast but she didn't. She joined in the children's chatter, made their toast and hovered round the table, apparently unaware of my sitting there, angry, sad and dismayed. The sun had broken through a long fringe of cloud, a few birds were singing in the branches, the colours of the flowers had an unfamiliar violence and I felt drowsy and drained of all strength.

'Daddy, may we go down to the beach?'

'To the beach? All right, son. If the sun stays out we'll go down to the beach.'

'Mummy, shall we go in the boat together?'

'No, Enrique. Mummy won't be able to come with you. She has to do some shopping.'

'But why?'

'In any case,' she took up the thread, 'it's hardly the weather for the beach. Promise me you'll behave so that when I come back tonight Rufi can tell me you've been . . .'

Along the path the sand was still damp and lumpy and the gap in the clouds was closing again. I wandered away from their voices, between the flower beds—Dora knew all the flowers by name—and passed the box hedge which Leoncio never tired of trimming. From the edge of the empty pool I watched Leoncio bending over the faulty drain at the bottom, in his blue overall and khaki shirt, both bleached by the sun and worn. A strong scent drifted across from the garden whose outlines stood out sharply in the changing light. At last I admitted to myself that my head was aching.

On the veranda Rufi was clearing the breakfast things. I sat

HORTELANO

down and heard the children pattering in the hall. It soothed me to know that Dora was upstairs. What I needed was a good rest until lunch time—perhaps until dinner time—if only I could sleep without interruption. I was anxious to sink into a long dreamless sleep that would rid me of a feeling of unease. I thought of Claudette's long freckled legs, of Andrés who drank too much and lived in terror of being confronted by four-foot-high Joaquín during one of his bouts, of the trampled beach and of the boat with naked people, drinking and laughing, who pushed Emilio as he tried to jump on the gunwale and clasp his empty arms round bronzed skin, sunken cheeks, lips painted an extravagant shade of pale pink.

Rufi's hand on my shoulder woke me.

'Sir, Don Emilio's here.'

I opened my eyes to scurrying clouds promising rain. Emilio came up the last step to the veranda and I roused myself.

'Hello. How's everything?'

'Listen: don't do what you did yesterday again. Let's be frank about this because you're more of a child than the rest of them. But you know what they don't know.'

He sat down flushed with heat, his hands almost shaking. The sky was overcast and Joaquín ran by, pursued by Enrique and José.

'What do you mean?'

'Don't ever do what you did yesterday again,' Emilio repeated, clutching at the edge of the table and staring straight into my eyes.

5

‘YES, PLEASE,’ I said.

‘Stop sulking and ease off on the Camparis,’ Elena scolded me.

Amadeo smiled as he filled my glass. He dropped a lump of ice into it, picked up his cigarette from the ash tray and settled back in the canvas chair.

‘It was then,’ I continued, ‘that I realized he was beside himself with rage. Until then I’d taken the whole thing rather lightheartedly. Half my mind was on the kids who were rushing about in the background. I was about to call them because Joaquín was screaming louder than usual and I thought one of them might be up to some mischief. Anyway, Emilio must have realized I wasn’t taking him seriously and that made him angrier still. He was livid, and sweaty and his hands clutched the table so that I wouldn’t see them trembling. He’s upset me for the rest of the day.’

Amadeo laughed loudly. Claudette came out of the house with the rackets and Elena rose.

‘But you stood up to him, didn’t you?’

‘You bet I did, Amadeo. It took me some time to see what he was driving at but after that—no more roundabout civilities. I gave it to him straight and he listened.’

‘You must admit,’ said Elena, ‘there is something to be said for his point of view.’

‘There is not!’

‘Santiago!’ Claudette called out.

‘No, darling. I’m tired, and I don’t feel like changing.’

'Shall we go?'

'Yes,' Elena replied.

Santiago came up the path holding one of the flowers he'd been contemplating in his right hand. He sat down opposite Amadeo. The two women talked at the net.

'Think nothing of it,' said Santiago.

'I must admit it has shaken me.'

'Well,' said Amadeo, 'he's an unbearable person.'

Claudette was serving.

'But all of you know what he's like.' Santiago, arms crossed, stopped staring at the tennis court. 'He has certain fixed ideas . . . he belongs to another generation.'

'That's what you think! How old do you think Emilio is?'

'I don't know. Fifty. Fifty-two . . .'

'He's forty-five!' Amadeo shouted. 'Forty-five years old. That makes him two years older than me and one less than Javier. Am I right?' I agreed. 'It's a question of character.'

'I never remember Emilio's age and always imagine him to be older than the rest of us, but the fact is that . . .'

'The fact is that he's a damned fool,' I interrupted Santiago. 'And we put up with him out of habit, and out of pity for poor Asun, or because the kids are friends, or something. But it's incredible that a man like him should be one of our group.'

'Do you know why you think of him as being over fifty, Santiago?'

'Because he's prematurely old.'

'No. Because he wasn't in the war. He spent the war in an attic in Barcelona working out how much money he was losing and how much he'd have to earn in the following years.'

'Amadeo's right,' I said. 'He's an unhealthy type. Do you know what he said at one stage? That I was bringing up the children like a communist!'

'Good lord, he sounds just like that old bore, Don Antonio!'

'It's not surprising. Lately they've spent a lot of time together. Soon he'll be talking exactly like Don Antonio.'

'I think,' said Amadeo, 'he's working on the old boy because he's got some deal in mind.'

'I hadn't thought of it but you're probably right. Most likely Don Antonio is the only man left in the Colony he hasn't approached about an investment yet. He tried it on you once, didn't he Santiago?'

Santiago was looking at the flower whose stem he held between his fingers.

'Yes, a couple of years ago He wanted us to start up a chain of cafeterias in Barcelona. That was after he found out I was doing some décor for shops. I told him I was no good at business.'

'No good at business with him,' Amadeo completed the phrase. 'You missed the chance of making a two thousand per cent profit, which is the minimum he'll work for, but you also saved yourself from becoming a neurotic.'

Every now and then we heard the dry click of a volley, a cry of Elena's or Claudette's. Sometimes I caught sight of Elena leaping up, her short white skirt clinging to her hips, her arms stretched out. Santiago finished his gin before returning to his flowers. Amadeo wanted to hear more of my discussion with Emilio.

'He was just plain rude. He called me a fool with modern manias, a snob, a savage and a dreamer.'

'But tell me, how had he found out about the whole thing?'

'One of his kids, I suppose. I didn't want to go into it with him, but apparently one of the little girls asked a question that shocked him. Believe me, what I did yesterday was the only way out. I had to calm down the children after what they had seen.'

'Of course I believe you.' Amadeo patted my leg. 'You did the right thing. He's the one who doesn't understand and doesn't know how to bring up children.'

'They were full of questions when I met them and I tried to explain. In all decency, of course. Damn it. My own children were there . . .'

'Your two children were there and so was my daughter and Joaquín, and Emilio's four kids, including the little girl.'

'What do you mean?'

HORTELANO

'Only that he has more kids than any of us. He thinks of himself . . .'

'Yes, all right, I get you . . .'

' . . . as the senior father of the Colony.'

'The children were very excited. After all, it was the first time in their lives that they'd seen a woman stark naked. And they had a good look at her without anyone or anything getting in their way. I had to tell them something that wasn't a lie. At that age you can't lie to them.'

'That's what Emilio will never understand. He's a puritan who wants to keep the stork alive until they've all grown moustaches.'

'Well, he told me I wasn't to talk to his children about such things again. I could do what I liked with my own but he'd bring up his family his own way. He didn't want any more mischief. So I told him to go to hell. I said I was sick of lies and didn't enjoy lying myself. If he wanted to bring up his kids in a hothouse, the best thing he could do was to take them off to the Sahara. Things got quite heated, believe me. And it would have been worse still if your wife hadn't arrived.'

'And what did Marta have to say?'

'She came to pick up Dora. They only stayed a minute on the veranda but it was long enough for Dora to take Emilio's side. Marta tried to keep the peace.'

'An artificial peace. It's her speciality. I've often thought of writing to UNO and suggesting they sign her up.'

Elena and Claudette had finished their game and Santiago walked up to them. For the last few minutes a strong wind had been blowing in the garden and the clouds were getting darker.

'Emilio's hopeless,' said Amadeo.

'He's a stupid fool.'

Santiago disappeared behind the tennis court and Claudette ran past us into the house.

'I hope he didn't punish the children.'

Standing only a few steps from us, Elena bent over her racket and tightened the screws. When she looked up our eyes met for a moment. Amadeo lit a cigarette.

‘Are you still running down poor Emilio?’

‘Serves him right for being such an idiot!’

Elena sat on the arm of one of the canvas chairs, her mouth half open, her legs apart, her arms hanging limp, barely holding the racket which almost touched the floor. Perspiration dappled her cheeks. I saw her lips move and, above the rattle of Amadeo’s bronchial cough, I guessed she was singing softly.

‘You’ll be frozen,’ said Amadeo.

Elena jumped up, made as if to plunge her hands into Amadeo’s hair and went into the house, singing aloud in a deliberately melodramatic way.

‘We’ll have a storm again this afternoon.’

‘Why don’t you come over and play?’ Amadeo suggested. ‘We’ll be alone so there’ll be no one to stop us drinking a few whiskies while we work out our moves.’

‘I’m tired, so I’m going to sleep.’ I stood up. ‘Anyway, we’ll meet this evening.’

‘Fine!’

Hunched over the stone wall, Santiago was examining some weeds. He raised his head on hearing me.

‘Are you off? Claudette was hoping you and Amadeo would stay to lunch.’

‘I expect Amadeo will be staying. I’ll just have a snack and lie down. Say goodbye to Claudette for me.’

‘See you later then, Javier.’

Out in the street the wind was even stronger. I noticed my shoes were coming apart at the seams of the soles. Don Antonio greeted me from the other side of the railing.

I listened to the news without taking it in until Rufi announced that lunch was ready. Enrique and Dorita didn’t talk very much and when we got to the dessert I noticed that Enrique gulped it down.

‘What’s up? Do you want to run out before you’re finished?’

‘José’s waiting for me.’

‘Isn’t José being punished?’

‘Punished?’ Dorita cried.

‘So I’d heard. Never mind.’

HORTELANO

'He isn't being punished.'

I had a brandy by the french window. Later, Leles and Martita arrived. I thought of calling in Rafael to ask him what stories were going round the village. The bedroom window had been left open and the wind was shaking the curtains, the flounce of Dora's dressing table and the looped hems of the bedcovers. While I undressed I indulged my hatred by imagining a fire consuming this ridiculous satin drapery round the dressing table, which made the bedroom look like a high-class brothel.

I was afraid of falling asleep before finishing my cigarette, but the telephone rang in time.

The tone of Elena's voice, clear and gay, contrasted with the worry she expressed.

'Why worry? He's probably playing somewhere and has simply forgotten about lunch. It would be just like him. By now you ought to be used to Joaquín disappearing for a whole day.'

'You're right.' She paused, and I felt sure she was smiling a little. 'I thought you'd be staying at Santiago's.'

'Amadeo wanted a game of chess. Was he there?'

'Yes, of course. I had lunch with them too. I've just this minute arrived back home.'

'Is Andrés still asleep?'

'Javier, darling . . . Don't you remember Andrés went off to the village this morning?'

'Did he?'

'I told you so. I told you about it an hour ago at Claudette's place.'

'I'm sorry. I don't seem to have taken it in. What did he go for?'

'He had to see the doctor and collect some books. Ernestina's due tomorrow and he's going to wait for her there. I told you all about it this morning and you certainly seemed to be listening. Now will you tell me what was on your mind while I was talking to you?'

I put out the cigarette in the ash tray, passed the telephone to my other ear and sat down on the bed.

'Listen, are you feeling happy? Don't deny it, I can tell from your voice.'

'Yes, I am.'

'Fine, then all right.'

'Wait, wait . . .' there was anxiety in her voice, a sort of husky eagerness. 'Do you think we'll be able to manage it?'

'Why not? Dora won't be back before ten. Oh damn, the car! Has Andrés taken your car?'

'Yes, but I have an idea.'

'To walk?'

'Silly! I'd like to think you were prepared to walk fifty miles to snatch fifteen minutes alone with me.'

'What's your idea?'

'Ernestina's Lambretta.'

'But . . .'

'There's nothing wrong with it, and the tank's full. I was out on it a couple of days ago.'

'Let's hope it doesn't rain. I think we'd better wait until six.'

'Fine. I'll catch up with you before you get to the pine wood.'

I thought I heard rain and knew I should be setting the alarm clock but I couldn't fight against the desire to sleep.

The telephone woke me with a start and I sat up with a hazy picture of the dead girl fading in my mind like an echo.

'Hello!'

'Javier? Sorry to wake you up.'

'It's all right, Elena . . . I was just . . . Good grief! It's half past six!'

'Listen, Javier, I'm very worried. Joaquín hasn't turned up and nobody's seen him.'

'Don't worry. I'll try and find him.'

'I'll be at Claudette's. Amadeo's gone off to the village looking for him.'

'Elena, for heaven's sake, don't worry.'

I lay back on the bed, smoked a cigarette and felt the gastric juices raging inside me, burning my throat. The fluorescent light in the bathroom dazzled me. I took a glass of liver salts, peered out of the french window and then sat in an armchair.

The silence and half light eased me into gradual relaxation.

It was after half past seven by the time I went out. The house was in darkness and a strong wind blew through the veranda. Rectangles of light from the servants' quarters lit up the garden in places.

It suddenly struck me that Elena's distress might be justified and I hurried my steps.

'Good evening everybody,' I said from the doorway.

Amadeo and Santiago had come back without Joaquín. Elena was cowering in one of the leather armchairs.

'What do the others say?'

'They haven't seen him all day.'

'I'll go to the pine wood.' Elena looked at me. 'Can you lend me a flashlight, Santiago?'

'Wouldn't it be better if . . .'

'I think you'd better keep quiet, the lot of you,' I interrupted Amadeo, 'and stop worrying, otherwise in half an hour you'll have the whole Colony upset.'

'He's right, you know,' said Claudette.

Santiago handed me a flashlight and I casually passed my fingers through Elena's hair. She hadn't taken her eyes off me.

'Poker's with him, unless the dog disappeared by himself.'

I was out on the porch when the telephone rang.

'It's all right, Javier, don't wait,' Santiago shouted from the hall. 'It's only Asunción to say they're on their way here.'

Low clouds were scurrying and the wind was drying the stone walls, the road, the tiles and the slate roofs quickly. I walked to the main road and once there, switched on the flashlight for a few minutes. The mountain peak was invisible, but over the hills were tow-coloured clouds shot through with moonlight. I climbed the slope and shouted several times. From where I stood the hut looked like a dot on the roadside. I took the path that went up to the spring, lit the flashlight again and made my way over rain-soaked branches, tree trunks, stones and puddles.

As I paused to catch my breath the smell of the pine sap made me think of ammonia and of one of Claudette's perfumes. Near the spring I called out again.

'I'm here!'

The beam of light leapt forward as my hand jerked. Joaquín, sitting on the cement water pipe, was rubbing his eyes. At his side was an empty sardine tin and a chunk of bread. I walked slowly, meaning to dazzle him with the light which I raised on reaching him.

'Put it out,' he said.

'Your pranks will end by driving your mother out of her mind.'

'Why have you come here?'

'Because I knew that this year you had taken to hiding in the pine wood.'

'But you don't know where the treasure's hidden, do you?'

I put out the flashlight. For a few moments Joaquín's face was just a pale smear somewhere in the direction of his voice.

'Have you eaten?'

'Yes.'

'You must have got soaked.'

'No. When it rains I go into the hut. But the treasure's somewhere else.'

'Were you going to come home?'

'Only when it got completely dark.'

'When it got completely dark? Why not before?'

He jumped up from the pipe and collected his sling, his pen-knife and some comic books which he put under his arm.

'Is daddy very cross?'

'Let's go.'

'Wait.'

He put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. Poker waddled gaily out of the darkness without even a bark.

We made our way down in silence. Once on the main road he said he wasn't tired but began lagging behind.

'Apart from driving your mother frantic I can't think what you're up to all day in the pine wood.'

'I look out for Indians.'

'Why didn't you come back this afternoon?'

He tried to race Poker but his legs gave way and he fell in the

HORTELANO

gutter. Before I could reach him, he was back on his feet. His smile gave his face a mask of innocence he had inherited from Elena; it was difficult to resist.

‘Will you back me up?’

‘I don’t know, Joaquín. I’m not at all sure I like this kind of behaviour.’

Gradually the lights of the villas began to appear. The wind brought with it a tang of the sea. Joaquín walked at a few yards’ distance from me. We went round the little square with the flagpole and made our way towards Santiago’s house. Suddenly, Joaquín stopped.

Sitting silently on the edge of the pavement were the other boys, and leaning against a garden wall stood Martita, Asun and Dorita. Joaquín seemed to be gazing at some distant point at the end of the street; he pursed his lips as if to whistle when Enrique, putting his hands against a lamp-post, got to his feet. Poker barked and jumped towards José.

‘What’s up?’

With an air of assumed indifference, Joaquín came close to me and took my hand.

‘Have you quarrelled?’

‘No. But they want to know where I keep the treasure.’

Elena came rushing towards us along the pavement. A light shone on the glass table in Claudette’s veranda. While they tried to find a pair of Santiago’s slippers for me, Emilio held forth on the advantages of a good spanking in certain circumstances. Don Antonio, who under his suède jacket was wearing a shirt with green stars on a yellow background, warned us to expect a visit from the police the next day.

‘They don’t know anything.’

‘That’s what I say,’ Don Antonio continued. ‘They need a few days to find out everything. They never fail.’

‘Did you get very wet?’ Claudette asked me.

‘Only my feet. It’s these old shoes.’

6

NEXT MORNING it was raining. I smoked a cigarette in the darkness and listened to the sound of the drizzle outside. I decided to go down to the village and find out what I could at Raimundo's shop. The previous evening I hadn't succeeded in having one minute alone with Elena. Dora turned over in the bed with a hoarse groan. As quietly as I could I took a shower and got dressed. The grey light of a rainy day came through the window at the end of the passage. I made up my mind to have breakfast in the village. Under the telephone in the hall I left Dora a note saying I'd be back by mid-afternoon.

I had just raised the garage shutter when Leoncio appeared.

'Are you going out, sir? Vicente was coming to see you.'

The cigarette in Leoncio's mouth had gone out and his striped shirt was hanging outside his trousers.

'Vicente?'

'Yes. Won't you have some coffee? María is up.'

'I don't feel like it. Tell the Señora there's a note for her under the telephone in the hall.'

'I will. The builders won't be able to come today.'

'Who's Vicente?'

'Let me have that air gadget, sir.'

While Leoncio pumped some air into the tyres, I gazed at the garden, the rain and the low overcast sky. There was a steady murmur like the distant rumble of artillery.

'Vicente's from the seafood shop. He wanted to speak to you this morning.'

HORTELANO

‘What for?’

‘He didn’t tell me. They’re OK.’ I took off my raincoat before stepping into the car: Leoncio felt obliged to make things plainer. ‘They’re all right now . . . the pressure in the tyres, I mean.’

‘Thank you.’

‘What shall I tell Vicente?’

‘I don’t know. Ask him what he wants.’

‘He wants to talk to you.’

‘Well, tell him to come back some other time.’

‘When? Vicente lives in the village.’

‘Whenever he feels like it! If it’s something urgent he can tell you or Rafael. Goodbye, Leoncio.’

He raised his right hand shoulder-high as the car passed him. Then he rushed to open the garden gate.

Along the coast the clouds looked less menacing, but the main road ran inland. The car was doing well in spite of the bad, steep surface. I began to whistle to the rhythm of the windshield wipers. From the hilltop the sea appeared covered in mist as far as the lighthouse. Along this part of the road there were many holes that splashed water all around me. Just beyond the crossing which led to the camping site, my road joined the main road. There was no one in the bar of the petrol station. I sat down and ordered coffee and a French omelette. I began to think back to the days in the war when the noise of artillery from the command post sounded like the beating of drums. But mainly I thought of the square mouth of the girl on the beach and the waxen colour of her skin when the light fell on it as the guard opened the window. I drank four or five cups of coffee and chain smoked. Every now and then a truck or a sports car stopped outside and someone came in, but mostly I was conscious of a silence interrupted only by the hiss from the coffee machine. By ten o’clock the rain had become a mere spatter.

I felt numb. As I stepped on my right leg it began to itch; it gradually turned into a dead weight that seemed to have no connection with the accelerator. I braked, rubbed my leg, walked a little way and urinated against the hedge.

Inside the car it was hot. I opened the windshield and a damp, fragrant breeze revived me. The sky above the village was as blue as on a starlit night. Leoncio would be pouring out endless excuses to that fellow Vicente . . . and by now Joaquín would be snooping round the garden in Wellingtons and a long raincoat. I thought of calling Elena from the village, but knew that I wouldn't do it.

Just before I got there the rain stopped. On the shiny pavement and in the gutter the wind rippled the surface of puddles. Cultivated fields had given way to vegetable gardens. I turned left along the cobbled road to the centre of the village. To the right were the barracks; several guards sat on wooden benches outside the door. Their eyes followed the car. The sentry's bayonet was dull, without a sparkle. In the square the main door of the church was open and a glimmer of candlelight broke the darkness inside. I parked, following the policeman's instructions, crossed the square with the bandstand and, as I pushed open the door of Raimundo's shop, suddenly remembered that Andrés had been in the village since the previous day.

'Good morning, Don Javier.'

'How are things, my boy?'

'Fine, Don Javier. What about you?'

'Just the same.' I shook the boy's hand. 'Where's Raimundo?'

'At the wedding.' In answering, he jerked his chin towards the shop window.

'Anyone in the family?'

'Not even twice removed, but you know how it is. Raimundo knows everyone round here.'

The boy hauled out several trays with baits and flies. I poked around the place until Raimundo arrived. By now the square was alive with people, mainly children running after the carriage of the bride and groom.

'Is there no reception?'

'Yes, Don Javier, and a very good one, too. But I try to avoid receptions. What I enjoy is the church service.'

'I suppose that's why you're getting married soon. I've heard it said it'll be this summer.'

HORTELANO

Raimundo gaped at me for a few seconds and burst out laughing. I slapped his shoulder. Then we sat on a couple of chairs leaning against the counter. Raimundo was fatter, balder and perspiring even more freely than the year before.

'I'd missed you, Don Javier. It had even crossed my mind to pop up to White Sails.'

'Why didn't you? Do you know I haven't been out fishing once? Though I don't believe I've missed much . . .'

'Not a thing.'

' . . . to judge by what they're saying in the village.'

'You haven't missed anything. There isn't a poll or hake to be had along the whole length of the coast. Only dead girls.'

'Yes.' I raised the grappling iron I'd been holding between my legs up to my knees. 'You're right there. And it's in the colony we're getting them.'

'Today,' the boy said, 'they brought her down to the village.'

'Here?'

'Yes. They arrived at seven o'clock.'

'Listen, Jordi, don't think you'll get on any quicker in this business by joining in the conversation!'

Jordi blushed and returned to the other end of the counter. Raimundo, who had his thumbs under his armpits, stopped smiling.

'Don Julio was here yesterday.'

'Yesterday?'

'Yes, yesterday, Thursday. He came through on his way back from the Colony. He turned up late on Wednesday and slept here in the village. Yesterday I was with him in the bar but I didn't manage to get anything out of him. Which means he doesn't know anything, otherwise something would have slipped out.'

'Just a moment, Raimundo. Tell me first who the girl is and then repeat what you've just said.'

He hooked an arm over the glass-covered counter and leaned closer to me. I made a sign to Jordi and he came to relieve me of the grappling iron.

'Nobody knows who the girl is.'

'What about Don Julio?'

'He doesn't either.'

'I mean, who is Don Julio?'

'Oh . . .'

'Don Julio is from the police,' Jordi answered my question.

'He's from the city squad. I know him well. He's very fond of fishing and also . . .' Raimundo looked in the direction of the boy and, with a sudden grin, lowered his voice: There was a time when we had two girl friends who were sisters. He's a fine fellow and keen as a hawk on the job. A few years back he used to come here five or six times a month. That was when he was stuck on that girl. I always tell him what's going on but nowadays he's all for fishing further south. I reckon he's got himself tied up with someone in Alicante or Murcia. He's the sort of fellow who drives them crazy, you know? Full of life and very generous.' From the other side of the counter Jordi was sidling up in what he intended us to think an absent-minded manoeuvre.

'Also he's very cultured. In 1939 he was taking law.'

'So the police were up at the Colony yesterday?' I said.

'They were on the beach examining the scene of the crime.'

'Of the crime?'

'Look here, Jordi, what the devil . . .?'

'Don Raimundo,' the boy began, 'may I take these *Life* magazines?'

'Take them and leave us alone!' The boy disappeared into the back of the shop. 'Would you like a beer?'

On our way out Raimundo called to the boy that we were going to the bar opposite.

'I gave Rafael your rod.'

'Good.'

'Is there anything else you need? The boy can deliver it to the hotel this afternoon.'

'No thanks. In any case, I'm going back before lunch.'

A busload of tourists had just arrived. We sat out on the pavement on iron chairs and Raimundo ordered beer and clams.

'Who told you it was murder?'

HORTELANO

'That's what everybody thinks.'

'Why?'

Raimundo glanced at me before answering.

'Wasn't the girl found naked? You ought to know. You had the coroner up there, didn't you? We don't even know what she died of here.'

'We don't either. I didn't speak to the coroner, or to the magistrate, or to the police.'

'Well, I think it's obvious. She's a foreigner who got herself into trouble. You'll see, within a week Don Julio will have found the culprits.'

The beer was abominable. A hot breeze blew clouds of dust round the kiosk in the centre of the square. My forehead, my cheeks and my hands were clammy with perspiration.

'I don't think she was murdered. There were no signs of violence on the body.'

'You get some very odd goings on round here. A short time ago—I don't know if you heard about it—we had one hell of a mess. I very nearly got involved myself and they had me worried for a few days, I can tell you. It all started with a young Dutch couple: he looked the younger of the two and she was a bosomy blonde rearing to go. Well, they started a little racket—a damned good racket it was, too. They were staying here in the village but some nights they organized film shows in one of the coves, near the camping site. They took all their tackle in the car, batteries, projector, films, the lot. They set up the whole thing in the open air and people flocked to see the filth. Some show, let me tell you!'

'Did they find you out?'

'I only went four nights. But of course, the news got out and the party folded. They even threatened to close the camping site, so you can imagine the row! There was one film . . .'
Raimundo laughed and spluttered with a mouth full of beer. 'There was one film, I remember. It didn't last more than a quarter of an hour but in that time there's nothing they didn't get up to. And the girls, God Almighty, what girls! They appeared . . .'

At other tables people were talking and laughing loudly. The wind dropped and left behind a sticky heat. Raimundo continued with his stories. I tried to make out the hotel where Andrés stayed on his visits to the village. The tourists walked about in groups, stopping in front of the shop windows and going in and out of the gift shops. One of them took a photograph of the headquarters of the Fraternity of Fishermen. On its main balcony, under the flagless mast, there were five wooden arrows painted red.

The boy came running across the square to tell Raimundo that there were people waiting in the shop.

‘I’ll be on my way, too,’ I said. ‘I’ll be back in a day or two.’

‘Drop in some time. As a matter of fact, I wanted to consult you about some trucks my partner and I were thinking of buying. You remember my partner? Agustín?’

‘Yes, I remember. How’s the partnership going?’

Raimundo straightened his tie and buttoned his jacket.

‘Fine, fine. But if you happen to know someone in the Ministry . . . Never mind, I’ll tell you all about it some other time. Come back soon.’ He got up from his chair. ‘Anything you want, just send Rafael with a message and it’ll be ready the same day.’

‘Thanks, Raimundo. We’ll see about the Ministry. It’s just possible I might have a friend there . . .’

We shook hands and Raimundo said, ‘Leave the bill to me.’

We argued a bit but in the end I managed to thrust a note on the waiter. When he reached the kiosk Raimundo turned to wave goodbye.

Some Italians sat at the next table. One of the women said something to me in a soft voice as she placed a raffia bag on the floor next to my chair. I amused myself trying to catch her eye, had another beer and smoked a few more cigarettes. I imagined that along the coast it would still be raining. Finally I tore myself away. While the Italian woman lit a cigarette I took a last look at her legs. The man with a camera hanging from a strap round his neck was still standing motionless opposite the balcony with the painted arrows.

HORTELANO

I walked slowly as far as the tobacco shop. There'd been a few changes in the village: more shops than I remembered. The one café, opened the previous year, now had green plastic blinds hanging over the windows. For a long time I stayed in front of a gift shop, without seeing what was beyond the glass, without even thinking. Displayed on the walls outside the shop were some brightly coloured blankets with long fringes, a variety of straw hats and a huge net full of different sized balls. If I made up my mind to buy one of the balls it wouldn't amuse Joaquín for more than about ten minutes, I thought idly. Suddenly I came to the hotel.

At the desk I was told Andrés was not up yet. As I crossed the bar, Fermín called out to me before I caught sight of him. After we'd shaken hands he made his excuses to the three men he'd been drinking with, took his glass of whisky and sat down with me at a table under the ventilator that cooled the darkened room. The walls were lined with light-coloured wood. Conversation was an even murmur that ran between the sharp rattling of ice cubes in glasses. I felt suddenly happy—almost euphoric—in that atmosphere; I slapped Fermín's knee, offered him a cigarette and ordered a whisky for myself.

'We're discussing some take-overs. We'll be off after lunch. The worst of it is that I have to eat with those characters and I haven't the nerve to inflict them on you.'

'Don't worry. Andrés is staying here and he should be down directly.'

'Andrés? Well I never. Now, tell me the news.'

'A few days ago a dead girl was found on the beach at the Colony.'

'So I've heard. An accident I imagine. And how's Dora? And Amadeo and Marta? Some day I'll drop in on your paradise. The ones I see most of are Emilio and Asunción.'

'You must do that. As soon as the sun comes out come and spend a week with us. How's the electrification going?'

Fermín spread his arms.

'Haven't you heard the big news? In December, we're off to Madrid. The job's finished and that means goodbye to the

country, the villages, the yokels and the whole damned show. A new life again!

‘Rosario must be delighted.’

‘She is.’

‘Fermin, you’ve got fatter.’

‘I’m going to seed. Before long I shan’t have the strength to keep a mistress any more.’

‘I’ve been told you’re a very good engineer.’

‘So they say.’

‘If you worked for one of my concerns we could do good business.’

‘You can stop joking because in December I mean to have a serious talk with you about this. But tell me, how are things going in the little hut with that foreign girl? I haven’t been there for more than two months. But at this time of year, with the new terrace and the trees it must be delightful. It’s a lovely spot. As a matter of fact, my friend—the one who arranged it all—is no longer here. He’s been transferred to Seville. So now, there are only two of us.’

‘Better that way. No, I haven’t been recently. A short while ago I nearly managed it one afternoon.’

‘But it fell through?’

‘Yes. Too bad. Listen, Fermin, I think your companions are getting restless. Don’t bother about me.’

‘I’m really sorry not to be able to stay with you. I promise I’ll drop by White Sails. Give them all my regards. Especially Dora.’

‘And give mine to Rosario.’ We shook hands. ‘And don’t forget in December to get your brain working, and I’ll see how we can make out on the stock exchange.’

‘Ah, December . . . It’ll be like coming to life again. In this country the only places you can live are Madrid or Barcelona provided you spend eight months of the year in France.’

I finished my whisky and asked what time the train was due. I enjoyed the cold soup, the smoked salmon and the veal which finally took away the taste of the morning’s beer. It struck me that I was going round making business propositions to my

friends, just like Emilio. It had started with Fermín who always thought of me as involved in romantic adventures. It would never occur to him that it was Elena who had walked into the little hut by the roadside speaking English. Likewise I had never imagined Fermín capable of getting involved with someone in our circle of friends. I was working out a list of possible mistresses for Fermín when I suddenly realized time was running short.

I walked towards the square to pick up the car. The dusty wind was still blowing though it was warmer than in the morning. Small clouds rode high in the sky. The tourists were having coffee on the terraces of the bars.

I was at the station ten minutes before the train. Ernestina, leaning out of a window, spotted me at once. She called a porter and handed him her luggage through the window; then, jumping down, threw herself into my arms.

‘How wonderful! I was sure someone would be meeting me but it never crossed my mind it might be you, Javier!’

‘You look beautiful, too beautiful for words. Let me have a good look at you. As a matter of fact, you might easily have found no one on the platform. Let’s go to the car and I’ll explain. How are the family?’

‘Your mother is blooming.’

She went on talking and I hunted for loose change to pay the porter when suddenly I became aware of his eyes. He was a small man with a very wrinkled face and he stared at me as if I was from another planet. I gave him almost double what he asked and without speaking he raised his hand to his battered peaked cap. Ernestina kissed me again as I sat at the wheel.

‘You mean to say that disgusting relative of mine came a day early and then got too drunk to meet me? Marvellous, isn’t it?’

‘He came yesterday because it was his day to see the doctor. We don’t know whether he got drunk . . .’

‘Don’t we? Well, what’s he doing asleep at four o’clock in the afternoon? We’ll wake him this minute and have a showdown, eh, Javier? I’m ready for a good time. Zarauz was deadly.’

‘Have you quarrelled with José Manuel?’

‘No, but he’s a louse. He sent you his regards.’

'How is he?'

She crossed her legs, bounced on the seat a couple of times and laughed.

'Magnificent as ever. Every now and then he has to step into a doorway to rest his dazzling looks.'

We walked up to the second floor accompanied by a bellboy who opened the door of the room. Ernestina marched in ready for battle. There were pieces of clothing on the floor, on the chairs and on the chest of drawers. The suitcase and the wardrobe stood open. Ernestina, who had already opened the curtains, sat on the edge of the bed and put her arms round Andrés.

'Forgive me, my child, forgive me.'

His pyjama top was open and his sunken chest made his shoulders sag.

'Off you go to your shower and get rid of that hangdog look. I'll call White Sails and let them know we're on our way, all ready to be amused. How lucky I am to have you two together—I love you both so much! Get a move on, Andrés. May I telephone from here?'

'Once I've shaved you'll think I'm a new man.'

She sat in an armchair. Andrés smiled at me from the bed . . . a tired smile that somehow filled me with shame.

'Yes,' I said. 'You can telephone from here. What on earth have you done to your hair?' She shook her red hair and I, rather self-consciously, tried to sound cheerful. 'You must be dead beat, Andrés.'

'The doctor says I'm very well. Thank you, my dear,' he said, taking the dressing gown which Ernestina had finally found.

7

'YOU'RE BORED,' said Ernestina over Andrés' shoulder.

'Of course not.'

The six members of the orchestra were wearing blue shirts with large white buttons. For about an hour they'd been playing mainly slow, sugary tunes. At times we heard the sound of raindrops on the window-panes that separated us from the garden; but there were moments when the rain seemed to be part of the percussion. I ordered another round of whiskies.

'I can't ask them to open them because the people sitting at the end tables would get wet.'

'Why don't they have air-conditioning? Just a moment.' The waiter placed the glasses on the table and turned towards Ernestina. 'You don't have air-conditioning, do you?'

'Oh yes, señorita. The ventilators are on.'

'The ventilators . . .' Ernestina straightened the straps of her dress before lighting a cigarette. 'Perhaps it's not raining down in Almería.'

'Perhaps,' said Andrés.

'All these people, the tourists, I mean, must feel cheated,' I remarked.

'Well, think of me as a tourist,' said Ernestina.

'We're all right here, anyway.'

'Andrés, how can you say that after only three whiskies?'

'Here's the secret of happiness. I don't intend to drink any more for the rest of the evening.'

The lights dimmed and changed colour to introduce a fla-

menco dancer. Ernestina dragged her chair to the edge of the dance floor.

'So the doctor told you you'd improved?'

'Yes,' he answered. 'Though Elena won't believe it, I'm fitter.'

'And have you decided to drink less?'

'Of course. So that I can drink more.' He laughed and placed an arm round the back of my chair. 'Don't you follow? If I can accumulate health, I shall hoard it as if it were money. Once I'm bursting with it I can start squandering it again. I worked this out all on my own.'

'You'll be drawing cheques on your liver.'

Ernestina had her legs crossed and her wide skirt billowed over the chair. She turned her head in feigned anger at the noise of our conversation.

'Yes, my dear,' said Andrés.

Applause greeted the end of the dancer's *zapateado*. Her partner took the floor and a minute later she reappeared wearing a different flounced dress. The foreigners watched the dancing intently. In the reddish half light, their sunburnt faces had a kind of exultant glowing look. The members of the new band were wearing Hawaiian shirts. Andrés took his arm off the back of the chair. I looked at him; smiling and amused as he watched Ernestina. The light danced in her red hair. Perhaps Raimundo might turn up later on. An outburst of enthusiasm from Ernestina startled me.

'*Olé!*'

'Where on earth did you learn to shout *olé* in such a Spanish way?'

'In Paris.'

I went to the lavatory, which smelled of disinfectant and of a strong scent reminiscent of the elevator in Marta's house in Madrid. I pattered in front of the mirror, cleaned my comb meticulously, yawned and retreated once more on realizing I'd forgotten to button my fly. When I reached the table there was an ovation for the flamenco dancers. Then I danced with Ernestina.

HORTELANO

'This is wonderful.'

'You'll be bored stiff after a week in the Colony.'

'It's wonderful, wonderful. Even the rain is wonderful.'

On the tables were little lamps with shades of different colours. Ernestina danced well and she gave me her fragrance, her casual proximity and the smooth skin of her shoulder. I had a chat with the band leader while Andrés took my place.

The current hit filled the floor with couples. Ernestina's face shone triumphantly. The newspapers devoted a lot of space to the Algerian problem and the song, according to her, came from Algeria!

*Chérie, je t'aime,
chérie, je t'adore
comme la salsa di pomodoro*

I became aware of a girl sitting on a high stool in a sleeveless yellow blouse that hugged her hips above a tight black skirt. Her eyes wandered round the room without stopping anywhere. She saw me arrive, swivelled round on the stool and leant her forearms on the bar.

'Hello,' she said.

'How do you do? Would you care for a whisky?'

'Yes. Are you alone?'

'I'm here with friends.' I ordered the whiskies and watched her. 'You've got pretty hair. What a pity it's so short.'

'Easier for bathing.'

We drank in silence and then we danced. Ernestina contrived to manoeuvre Andrés until she was close enough to be able to examine the girl from head to toe.

'Are those your friends?'

'Yes, you know how . . .'

'Don't worry. Let her look, she'll see I'm no freak. They always react the same way and think whores are freaks.'

'Really . . .'

'I'm sorry. I know a girl shouldn't use the word.'

'It's not that. But a girl shouldn't think like that.'

'I'm feeling low.'

I pressed her body. She was tight, but it was hard to imagine her losing her self control. Dancing cheek to cheek I winked and got Ernestina into such a fluster that Andrés had to whisk her off in the opposite direction.

‘Let’s see if whisky makes you feel better.’

We returned to the bar and she sipped her drink slowly.

‘You’re not from round here are you?’

‘No.’

‘I’ve never seen you here before and I come every night, except at the weekend. On Saturdays he arrives, you understand? and we drive around in his car or just stay at home. There are two or three of us like that in the village. Well . . .’ She smiled—‘five.’

‘Do you live in Madrid?’

‘Yes. How did you know?’

‘Because of your accent.’

She laughed and took a drink. Then she held on to me, half turning on her stool.

‘I’m glad you spotted my Madrid accent. Everybody talks differently here.’

‘That’s why I recognized your accent. I live in Madrid too.’

‘Splendid! Let’s drink to it.’

We raised our glasses. After that she became a little merrier and a little tighter.

‘Do you enjoy spending the summer here?’

‘Yes, I actually do. I sleep in the morning. Then I go down to the beach and have an apéritif. After lunch I take a nap, then have my English lesson. I love English but I’m not much good at it. Do you speak English?’

‘I only know ten words and I usually keep those to myself.’

‘You’re nice,’ she laughed. ‘After the lesson I go back to the beach, go for a walk or go to the café with one of my girl friends. But I don’t have many girl friends. It’s better that way, I must say.’

‘What’s happened to you?’

HORTELANO

‘Nothing.’

‘I suppose your friends pulled a fast one on you. Tell me about him.’

‘Who?’

‘The tall, blond young man your girl friend stole from you.’

‘No, no . . .’ She smiled a little sadly. ‘Nobody’s ever stolen any man from me. Besides,’ she took a deep breath, ‘I don’t like them tall or blond or young . . .’

‘You must like me then.’

‘Yes, I like you very much, though you are young.’

She brought her face closer, and I kissed her on the cheek.

‘In the evenings I come here. It’s nice and cool in the garden and this dive has a nice garden. I sit up at the bar and watch the lights through the trees. Every now and then I dance with someone. I like these villages because one can wear shorts in the street and a bikini on the beach. By the way, my name is Anna.’

I blew out a match and told her my name.

‘You’ve got a wealthy man’s name. Are you married?’

‘Yes, and I’ve got money.’

‘Very much? Very much, Javier?’

‘Well, yes, very, very much. Does it matter? There are more important things.’

‘Yes, when one’s got a lot of money.’

‘Haven’t you?’

‘Of course! I’ve got shares. He invests my savings. When I’m old . . .’

‘In other words, in fifty years’ time.’

‘. . . I shall have enough to live on. But don’t exaggerate. I’m twenty-six.’

‘I like you, Anna.’

‘And I like you. You’ve got class. It tells.’

‘How?’

‘You don’t ask personal questions. You haven’t even asked me about the man who keeps me.’

‘What is he like?’

She laughed as she drank and the whisky choked her. She pushed her body towards me and I put my arms round her shoulders.

'He's a . . . Come on, let's dance. You're not in the least like him. If you were my lover I wouldn't cheat on you.'

'Anna, that's as good as a declaration!'

'Hell! That's what summertime is for, isn't it? Shall we have another shot?'

'Another . . .? Oh, yes, of course. I'm only afraid . . . that . . .'

'Don't be afraid of anything. I can take it. I'm a northern girl.'

'Let me guess. From San Sebastian?'

'No.'

'Bilbao?'

'No.'

'If I don't guess this time, I forfeit the kiss I was betting for. From Santander?'

'No. From Vitoria. Well, a village in the province of Vitoria. But I haven't been back home for a long time.' Her face suddenly touched me. 'I'm paying the bet. Listen, shouldn't you go back to your friends?'

When the barman had finished filling our glasses our eyes met for a moment.

'I'm sorry,' she murmured.

'Don't worry about my friends.'

'Are they married?'

'Heavens, no. She's a distant niece of his and he's my cousin and best friend. I'll introduce them to you.'

'You don't have to. Don't you want to dance?'

'Yes. So do you . . .'

We turned our stools round and sat with our backs against the bar. Ernestina was dancing with an old, one-armed man and Andrés with the man's wife, a slim, very elegant American woman who had him agog. The four of them were singing the song and eventually everyone joined in. By my side, with the glass in her hands and her legs apart, Anna was also singing

HORTELANO

and smiling distantly, which brought out a lot of little wrinkles round her eyes.

‘You’re different, quite different
From anyone I’ve ever known
You’re different, quite different
Perhaps that’s why I love you alone.’

‘She looks nice.’

‘Who?’

‘The girl. Your friend’s cousin. She’s got class too. She’s the only person in the place who has sparkle.’

‘What about Andrés?’

‘He’s nice too. But she’s got loads of class and you need plenty of it to play the tart and get away with it.’

Anna put a hand on my neck.

‘Well now, tell me something.’

‘You’re getting sentimental.’

‘It’ll pass.’

‘Where does your name come from, Anna?’

‘It’s short for Angustias. Anguish. It’s a very sad name and I don’t like it. I’m a gay person.’

Ernestina and Andrés came towards us with the Americans. We all shook hands, standing by the bar.

‘They live in Rota,’ Ernestina explained. ‘And they speak Spanish better than we do.’

‘You’re very kind,’ said Mrs Lansing.

‘Too bad for you, Ernestina. You won’t be able to show off your rotten English.’

‘She speaks it very well,’ said Mr Lansing, ‘with a New York accent.’

‘Mrs Lansing dances flamenco,’ said Andrés. ‘Didn’t you notice?’

‘Yes,’ Anna said. ‘You’re wearing a beautiful dress.’

‘You like it?’

The band played an Italian song and I danced with Ernestina. Andrés danced with Anna, who began to laugh when he whispered something in her ear looking at me.

'But who are they? Doesn't it upset you to dance with someone who's had an arm lopped off at the shoulder?'

'They're really high class. He was a colonel and lost his arm in the Philippines. She's in child welfare. They're very much in love, help each other a lot and have always lived together. They've been married since 1920. This is their fourteenth honeymoon trip. He thinks I'm the nicest Spanish girl he's ever met and she's falling for Andrés. What's wrong with that?'

'Your habit of striking up friendships with strangers.'

'I like that! What about you? Anyway, your girl's quite striking, I must say, in spite of that blouse. Andrés is the one who's fallen for the colonel's lady.'

The Lansings smiled at us from their table. Ernestina tossed her hair and fluttered her eyelashes.

'It's a fabulous night, isn't it?'

Lansing spilled tonic water from his glass and laughed. His wife wiped his jacket before the waiter could come to the rescue. He went on smiling as the waiter brought new glasses and his wife poured him another gin.

'Well, Ernestina, you'd better go back to your Americans.'

'Do you know,' said Andrés, 'that he was born in Chicago?'

'No. So what?'

'I've been to Chicago.'

He stood up, raised his one arm and shouted:

'*Viva España!*'

'We must celebrate,' said Andrés. 'Are you sticking with gin?'

'Yes,' replied Lansing, 'another Scotch for you?'

'No, I've had enough. Waiter, a gin and tonic!'

'Won't you sit down?' said Mrs Lansing.

'No thank you. We're going to finish our drinks at the bar.'

Anna looked at me silently, in a rather strange way that made me think the time had come to get things settled.

'Where do you live?'

'What? Sorry, I didn't hear you.' I repeated the question and she stopped looking at me. 'In a little place just outside the village. A two storey affair.'

HORTELANO

'Alone?'

'During the day I have a maid. But I can trust her, don't worry. Do you want us to go? It's fun here now.'

'Yes, all right.'

We smoked in silence. Gradually the place was emptying. In the middle of the floor, Andrés and Mrs Lansing were dancing *sevillanas* to the beat of the jazz band. At the table Ernestina was beating time while Mr Lansing was tapping a bottle with a little spoon.

'Listen.'

'What is it?'

'I'm not being very fair to you.'

'Why?'

'I can't today. It started this morning. I swear to you by my mother that it's true. It's impossible today.'

'It can't be helped. One can't fight nature. But what'll happen on Saturday when he arrives?'

I raised my hands above her big round eyes, which were made up with green eye shadow.

'Ugh! Promise me one thing. I mean, give me your word that you'll come again another day soon. Next week, for example. Listen, Javier, I know you must think I'm behaving badly but . . .'

'Of course you're not.'

'Will you come again?'

'I suppose so. But you've got to realize that . . .'

'No. You must promise . . .' She gripped my hand. 'It's quite easy for you to come to the village. Your friend told me you live at White Sails. That's not far . . . only an hour or so by car.'

'But why do you want me to come again?'

'Listen,' she went on, still holding my hand, and her smile suddenly dissolved as if she were about to cry. 'Come and stop making excuses. Or do you only like me as a drinking partner?'

'You know that's not true!'

'I don't know anything. Honest to God I don't. And yet there are times when I think I could know all there is to know. Like now, for instance. If I made an effort, closed my eyes and

clenched my fists, I would know everything. But no! I don't want to know anything about anything. Even if I could.'

'Anna, my dear, you're suffering from the effects of deceptive lucidity.'

'The truth is I'm blind drunk.'

'No you're not, but you will be if you go on drinking.'

Leaning on me, she got down from the stool, and with a clumsy gesture tried to reject my help. She picked up her bag and made for the lavatory. The bag, of blue canvas and white straw, dangled from her arm. The band was playing a *paso doble* at Ernestina's request. All the tables were empty except three. Andrés was having a lively discussion with Mrs Lansing. I called the barman and asked for my bill. He was an elderly man and I was reminded of the porter who had carried Ernestina's luggage that afternoon. Then I began to wonder what a pale lipstick would look like on Anna's mouth. Andrés came over for a moment to see how I was feeling.

'I can see you're drunk.'

'Even Elena wouldn't blame me tonight. Where's Anna?'

'In the powder room. What were you talking about before?'

'Believe it or not, I can't remember. But you can be sure I didn't mention Dora or even the possibility of your having a Dora. I'm taking them back with me. We've invited them to spend a few days at the Colony. Don't you go and do the same thing with your girl friend. Her legs and her . . .'—he drew an eloquent curve over his chest—'give her away. But she seems like a nice girl and I'm seldom wrong about people.'

At that moment Elena's thoughts were probably with us. The orchestra packed up, leaving behind a sudden silence punctuated by murmurs, an odd remark in English from Ernestina and peals of laughter. The barman started to check the bill and the headwaiter came part apologizing that the music was finished but urging us to stay as long as we liked. I finished my whisky. A whole range of little sensations had found an outlet in my burning cheeks.

Anna came back with fresh make-up and a new radiance on her face, loosening her dark hair as she walked. We went

HORTELANO

towards the table and I told the waiter that the bill had been settled.

'No, no, no . . . I don't like that at all. You're much too quick to pay,' said Mr Lansing.

'That's what is known as Spanish courtesy,' his wife added.

'Put it down to the oil pipe.'

'Are you in the fuel business?'

'Javier,' Andrés interrupted, 'is in many kinds of businesses. Shall we go?'

'Certainly. I've got a bottle in the car; come and have a drink.'

'Let's drive down to the sea!' said Ernestina.

Outside the air was damp, but the dark sky and the immensity of the night soothed us. Lansing walked unsteadily, clutching Ernestina's arm. Andrés was making him laugh. When we reached the car Anna began to dance.

Mrs Lansing drove well at an even speed. I leant against the window which was open to the shadows, the lights and the transfigured profiles. They stopped speaking English and began to sing some local songs. After about fifteen minutes we stopped. There was a heady, too heavy smell of orange blossom and Anna dozed on my shoulder. We walked a little to clear our heads. We kissed and necked among the orange trees but it made Anna too excited.

In the village square, where the lamp-posts had clusters of flowerpots around their necks and shed a greenish light, we said a lingering goodbye. I accompanied Anna along darker streets that were unfamiliar to me. She kept on whistling a tune that we had danced to earlier. When we arrived at her house she leant against a wall which supported an iron railing. She put her arms around my waist and raised her mouth to my chin. For a long while she didn't move.

'Do whatever you want do you understand? But I'd like to see you again. Tonight . . . do as you like.'

'Don't worry, I'll come back next week. Thursday or Friday.'

The hotel was some distance away and for a few minutes I lost my bearings. In the still night the breeze brought comfort. Everything would seem different the next morning, without a

SUMMER STORM

stream of alcohol to swell the vessels of my brain. The whisky had given me a feeling of space, of unlimited perspective, like a deep, silent embrace.

In the hotel room, Andrés, asleep face down, did not stir when I switched on the light. I stopped trying to subdue the visions which battled with my thoughts and it took me some time to sleep.

8

MARÍA PLACED the teapot on the table and Dora served.

‘That man came to see you again this morning.’

‘What man?’

‘Leoncio’s friend. Vicente, I think his name is.’

‘I know. Where are the children?’

Dora rose to shut the french window.

‘At Asunción’s.’

‘Joaquín too?’

‘I don’t know. He spent all yesterday afternoon in the loft, according to Elena.’ The telephone rang and Dora got up again. ‘Excuse me. María can’t hear from the kitchen.’

Since Dora had closed the window, the room was filled with silence and I could hear snatches of her conversation from the hall. The tea was settling my gastric juices and the mellow afternoon light pacified me. It would probably rain again in a few hours, at dinner time perhaps. Among the mail on the glass table I caught sight of a large envelope from the Madrid office. I heard Dora’s footsteps and opened my eyes. Her high-heeled shoes lengthened her legs below the short flared skirt. She stopped in front of me as though looking for something.

‘Was it Ernestina?’

‘Yes. They’re all at Marta’s.’

‘Run along then.’

‘I don’t like to keep them waiting.’

‘Go along, I shouldn’t think the man will need you. If I’m in

doubt about anything I can always telephone you so that's that.'

She walked round the living room once more before making up her mind.

'You'll have to open the door yourself.'

'I can manage.'

She sat on one of the arms of my chair.

'I can't remember if Ruffi's off until Monday or Tuesday.'

'Where was she going?'

'To the feast in a village where she has relatives. Somewhere near Gerona. I couldn't refuse. It's absurd that you should have to open the door to the police. But you do understand that the others can't very well start without me . . .'

I rose to see her out. The wind was shaking the branches in the garden. I thought of taking a look at the pool but came back inside.

Emilia's letter covered three pages; in meticulous style it gave an account of everything that had happened in the office during the last few days and explained several enclosures. I made a mental note to pay Emilia an extra month's salary for giving up her holiday. Letters would have to be written to the lawyer, to one of the consultants and to the suppliers in Bilbao. I went on reading but soon lost interest in the correspondence. The tea, cold by now, had a metallic taste. For a few minutes I gazed at the framed photograph of the children. Enrique had grown since it was taken. The book I'd started a month ago must have been lying around somewhere but I didn't have the strength to look for it or even to pick up the newspaper which was within reach of my hand. I worked out on a pad the profits that could be expected from a certain import of valves and then resumed work on a costing statement prepared by Amadeo for the installation of a luxury sanatorium. When I remembered that I was waiting for the inspector I began to doze in the half light, with the papers spread on my knees and a ball-point pen twirling in my fingers. The bell woke me up. Before opening the door I switched on both the living room and the hall lights.

At the door the policeman gave his name and held out his hand.

HORTELANO

'Come in. Raimundo, the shopkeeper told me about you.'

He brushed his feet on the mat before following me to the living room. I noticed his unusual jacket, his tie and his shiny shoes.

'Would you like a drink? Please sit down.'

He put on glasses and took out a small notebook with a shiny black cover, looking at me with an apologetic smile.

'I'm sorry I'm late. One can never be sure how long interrogations will take.'

'It doesn't matter at all. I was working.'

'Yes Raimundo and I are friends.' He stopped smoothing the crease of his trousers. 'You know what it's all about. Just a formality in case there's anything of interest you can tell me.'

'I'm at your disposal. Are you sure you won't have a drink? Coffee perhaps?'

'I've just had coffee at Don Antonio's. Will you tell me how you first heard of the appearance of the body on the beach?'

He adjusted his rimless spectacles. From time to time he noted something down as I spoke.

'Did you see the body while it was on the beach?'

'Yes. And next morning I went down to the hut where they'd put it. The guard let me in and I had a look at the girl's face.'

'You don't know her?'

'No.'

'What age would you say she was?'

'I'd say she was in her late twenties. I don't know. It's not easy.'

'Have you heard any talk that might be relevant?'

'Not really. Forgive me, but do you know who she is?'

'We're not far off. There's something else . . . do you think the children who discovered her touched anything?'

I answered hurriedly because at that moment there was a ring at the door.

'I don't think so,' I said on my way out. 'The children were frightened.'

I showed Amadeo into my study. When I returned the inspector was looking at the pictures in the living room.

'You have some good reproductions.' He sat down again.

'The Dufy isn't a reproduction. Are you interested in painting?'

He blushed to the top of his balding head.

'I hardly know anything about it. So you were saying that the children were frightened.'

'Frightened and startled. They were seeing a naked woman for the first time—as well as a corpse.'

'I understand. Now, it's possible that the children saw or heard something that startled them. Have you thought of that?'

'They would have said so. Leoncio, the gardener, who lives here with his wife all the year round, appeared almost immediately.'

'I questioned him this morning.'

He removed his glasses and put away the notebook. His eyelids quivered for a fleeting moment.

'Anything else?'

'I won't have to trouble you any more.'

'No trouble at all. I confess I had a different idea of interrogations. The sort of thing one sees in films or reads about in novels I suppose.'

'Well,' he smiled, 'it isn't always the same. It depends on the person, of course.'

'Thank you.'

'And on the case.'

His jacket was too long and wrinkled at the bottom. He turned his head when I said:

'I hope this one will be solved soon.'

'It often happens that a case that seems complicated at first is solved quite quickly. It unwinds like a coil when you find the right end.'

'Raimundo told me yesterday that you were a first-class fisherman.'

'He's very kind about his friends. I'm fond of fishing, but not very good at it. Least of all in this weather.'

I accompanied him to the first step of the veranda. The afternoon was overcast and the wind rustled through the

HORTELANO

garden. I went indoors and suddenly felt cold. Amadeo walked towards me from the door of the study with his hands in his pockets.

‘How was he?’

‘All right. Was he at your place?’

‘No. I came across him at Claudette’s and he fired his questions at me there.’

‘Will you have a drink or shall we go for a walk?’

‘The weather’s terrible. I’m in the middle of a game with Santiago but I left him thinking out a move and came over to hear your news.’

‘Well, you know it now. Did you know his name was Julio? He wanted to find out if the children . . .’

‘No, not that . . .’ Amadeo interrupted me, laughing. ‘Spare me the gossip about the poor creature. I’m more interested in last night. I want to know what you and Ernestina and Andrés were up to.’

‘Nothing special. We had a few drinks, we danced, we went to bed late. The usual thing . . .’ I took his arm. ‘You know it’s always the same.’

‘Ernestina says you had a great time. What did she mean?’

‘Ernestina always has a great time when she manages to get away from home.’

Amadeo stopped.

‘Let’s walk towards Santiago’s, if you don’t mind.’

‘Of course, I’m sorry.’ We crossed the road. ‘We met some Americans . . . extraordinary people but nice. I’m afraid we even invited them to spend a few days here. The fact is, I woke up at noon with one hell of a hangover.’

Amadeo buttoned up his coat and I let go of his arm. The street lights had just been lit and in the deserted streets the wind swept fleeting shadows across their beams. We turned the corner and stopped in front of Claudette’s villa.

‘I’m sorry to have disappointed you about last night.’

‘It seems a little unfair. One spends one’s time rotting in this dump, bored to tears, and when it looks as though things are livening up . . . Oh well, never mind . . . Won’t you come in?’

'I'm off to your place to see how the ladies are doing with their canasta. Checkmate to the best man.'

'See you later.'

The wooden door creaked as Amadeo pushed it. The shadow of the pointed terrace roof fell beyond the porch, which was lighted in front. The wind was arching some of the venetian blinds. I sat on the stone wall separating Amadeo's and Santiago's gardens. Bright green weeds grew between the stones. Irregular rectangles of light fell from the house on to the lawn. For a few moments I thought I heard the women's voices, one strident tone trying to impose itself over another. I went back to get the car.

In front of me the nearly invisible mountain was dark with pine trees. Light was lingering in the orchards. Sun filtered through the clouds and blurred the outlines of the landscape. I parked the car by the side of the road, a mile or so from the village and took a short cut deeply rutted with the tracks of carts. It amused me to think that I was leaving all the others behind me closeted in their villas, packed like matches in their boxes, playing chess or canasta, the children with their toys or exchanging stories. I whistled, then lighted a cigarette.

The sea glimmered faintly in the dusk. The path dropped sharply towards the fishing village. The land was less cultivated and poorer. I inhaled deeply the smell of the damp earth. Not far off a light was moving; it was an oil lantern held by someone walking between the terraces.

That girl must have had a family. It had not occurred to me before. The sight of her lying on the sand under a blanket, or in the early morning light that gave her skin the weight of dead flesh, had led me to think of her as of an object, valuable once upon a time. But in all likelihood her parents were still alive, or her brothers and sisters; she might even have had a child. As I walked on I amused myself by morbidly inventing a possible background for the girl. I found myself then thinking of her in an entirely new way, because from that moment on the girl had acquired a kind of life in my mind—an added dimension.

HORTELANO

The light of the lantern and my own path were converging towards the same point. It was now completely dark and I slowed down my pace. Shortly afterwards I saw a naked bulb seemingly suspended in the air, a few minutes later the corner of the house from which it hung. Like most of the houses in the village it had a single storey. I had never before really looked at those lopped-off walls, low roofs or uneven beams of rotted wood. In the sinister light of the naked bulb the wall was like a barrier of misery incarnate, cutting off the road, the wind and the smell of the earth.

I walked along mean, deserted streets, heavy with the smell of fish and the murmur of the sea. Suddenly I emerged on to the beach which for about two hundred yards was lined with more single-storeyed houses facing the sea. Dirty water filled the gutter along the edge of a rough asphalt pavement. A row of lamps lit the jetty where the boats were tied up.

Groups of women sat on low chairs outside the wide doors of the houses and small boats dotted the beach. The coast formed a curve of high rocks from which the quay jutted out. A group of small boys who had been following in my wake now overtook me. I caught sight of Juan leaving the tavern. On reaching him I jumped on to the pavement and shook his hand.

‘How are you, Don Javier? Come to see the boat?’

‘Just taking a stroll. How’s the family, Juan?’

‘The boy’s not too well. His stomach always gets upset this time of year. Nothing seems to do him any good.’

‘I’m sorry. You haven’t been out to sea, I suppose?’

‘Not much chance in this weather.’

‘Listen,’ I said, suddenly remembering something. ‘I owe you some money.’

‘Never mind,’ he answered, taking a step back, ‘we’ll straighten our account some other time.’

‘There’s nothing to straighten out. It’s just a case of my paying you for the last few weeks. How much is it?’

‘There’s no hurry, Don Javier.’

‘Tell me, will you? It had slipped my mind, but I haven’t

paid you since we arrived. I've no money on me now but I'll send it round tomorrow.'

'It comes to . . .' Juan's voice died away. 'Three hundred pesetas.'

'Fine. Now tell me, how are things going?'

'Badly.'

We walked along the pavement side by side. Some women greeted us and a few of the fishermen raised their caps. Little boys ran about the sand, leaping over the puddles and looking silently at Juan and me.

'Things will get better.'

'We've not been out for quite a few days, and according to the radio we'll have storms until about the middle of next week.'

'The sea doesn't look all that rough.'

'Not here, but just go out a couple of miles and the swells start. In any case it's useless, because there're no fish. Do you want to have a look at *Dorita*?'

'There's no need.'

In one glance I took in the long room of the tavern, the smoke, the electric bulbs, men sitting down, men leaning against the bar.

'Would you like a glass of wine and a sardine?'

'No thanks, Juan. I don't feel like anything. Haven't been down to eat sardines for a long time. Let's hope the weather improves.'

'We were remarking that just the other day that nowadays you folks never come down to eat grilled sardines.'

The boys ran shouting after a car with a German registration number.

'Are they from the camping site?'

'Yes, sir. Foreigners from the camp. They come to buy wine and take pictures. By the way, Don Javier, what are people saying in the Colony about the death of that girl? The police came here to ask questions but of course nobody knew anything.'

'They don't know anything either, but I don't suppose it will take them long to clear the matter up.'

'They have their ways. We knew nothing here. She was drowned, wasn't she?'

'Drowned? No, she didn't look as if she'd died of drowning.'

Juan lit the cigarette I'd given him. A woman called out a name to two youths who were winding a cable on the sand. Juan accompanied me to the end of the village.

'There's more work in the fields of course . . . but they don't all own plots and they don't all care for the land. You know yourself that's the way it is here. We should have a Brotherhood of Landworkers and a Fraternity of Fishermen.'

'I know you all work hard.'

'That's true enough. We work all right.'

'Well, I must be off. I'll send Rafael round with the money. I hope your boy gets better.'

'Many thanks, Don Javier. Would you like me to come along with a lantern?'

'There's no need, thanks. I've got the car quite near and anyway I know the road. Goodbye, Juan.'

'Goodbye, Don Javier.'

I walked quickly up the hill as if fleeing from the mean streets and the silent men and women. At the top I paused, caught my breath and took off my suède jacket. The wind blew weakly in short warm gusts. Before starting the car I smoked a cigarette in the half light of the dashboard.

A group of maids was strolling along the first street. One of them bent down to the level of the car window and told me the others were at Amadeo's house. I heard their voices from the garden. On the veranda, Andrés, glass in hand, was listening to Don Antonio. Ernestina ran towards me. Elena sat on one of the steps, her legs close together.

'Javier, I've had the brilliant idea of organizing a big party like the one we had a couple of years ago, do you remember?'

'Yes, I remember. An awful experience. Why?'

'Because she can't keep still,' said Asunción.

'Because you're all becoming mummified with sheer boredom.'

Marta handed me a glass so that I could pour myself a drink.

'What's new?' I asked.

'Come along with Claudette and me. We're taking everything

in hand. The radio's just announced that next week will be sunny. We shall outdo ourselves. The plan is to fill the gardens with lights and put down a carpet of flowers . . .'

Claudette was laughing. Marta had rearranged the furniture in the living room; the red leather sofa was facing the hall. I greeted Doña Pura and let myself be dragged to the porch by Ernestina.

'We must have all the invitations in the mail by the day after tomorrow.'

'Let me sit down!' I placed my glass on the table under the lamp with the parchment shade.

'The earliest we can have the party is ten or fourteen days from now,' said Claudette.

'Javier, do you want something to eat? We've fixed up a cold supper.'

'Thanks, Marta'—from where I sat I could see Elena's legs—'for the moment just a couple of caviar canapés.'

I thought, looking at her high heels, that perhaps she'd been to the village.

'Listen and don't interrupt. Otherwise, I'll tell everybody about last night, sparing no details . . .'

 Ernestina took her hands out of the top of her slacks. 'Claudette, you and I will be the organizing committee.'

'Let him rest a while. Where have you been?'

'For a stroll across the fields. I got as far as the village.'

Amadeo placed a record on the gramophone and the three ground-floor rooms, all connected by sliding doors, were filled with music.

9

SHE RAISED herself on one elbow and the blanket slipped, leaving half my body bare. The four window-panes, separated by narrow strips of wood, were still covered with raindrops. For two hours the fine, persistent drizzle had darkened the afternoon. The whiteness of Elena's legs gleamed in the shadows. The cigarette she had smoked afterwards was a short cylinder of ash on the bakelite ash tray. A penetrating odour of sweat, tobacco and damp wood mingled with Elena's scent and the smell of her body. When I withdrew my outstretched arm my fingertips brushed her knees.

'I fell asleep.'

'Yes,' she said in a whisper. 'Do you feel well?'

'Hmm . . .'

'It's still raining.' She turned and I was able to see her face.

'It's lovely here.'

'You'll catch cold.'

'No, it's not cold.'

I stretched out a hand and groped for the pack of cigarettes on the little table. I raised myself to give Elena a light and, cupping the match in my hands, kissed her lips. As I fell back on the bed I heard her small satisfied laugh. For a long while we lay in silence except for the rain on the window-panes.

'Put something on or you'll catch cold.'

'Don't be a drag, I'm fine like this.'

'Yes, you're fine like this. You've never been finer.'

A wardrobe of pale, newly varnished wood filled more than

half the room. Next to the wardrobe, the door to the shower stood ajar revealing the green lustreless tiles that covered the wall.

‘Come.’

She sat on the armchair, opened her arms and without quite standing up, kissed me. I pressed my mouth against her neck and my hands on her shoulders. She moved her legs almost imperceptibly and softly sang to herself. I felt the readiness of her body and the happy anticipation of moments of pleasure.

Suddenly she knelt on the bed.

‘What are you thinking about?’

Her movement made me blink. Supporting herself with her hands on the mattress, Elena’s face and her swaying breasts were very near my lips.

‘Nothing. Not a thing.’

‘You might have said you were thinking about me.’

‘There’s no need to think about you. I have you and that’s much better.’

She rocked the mattress. I raised my head and found her chin; I put a hand on the nape of her neck as we kissed. I turned my head on the pillow. She continued kneeling, watching me with a mocking yet tender smile.

‘One is always thinking about something when one has the expression you had just now.’

‘You couldn’t see my expression.’

‘I don’t need to see it to know.’

‘And what sort of expression was it?’

With studied thoughtfulness, as if playing a game, she folded her arms and lay down beside me.

‘It was one I’ve often seen on your face in these last few days. Like a man who’s not really there . . .’ She brushed an arm over my chest. ‘You come back from strange walks, you sit down and you remain there with a glass in your hand and a smile that’s a mask. It could be very disarming if it weren’t for the fact that seeing you worry upsets me. I’ve never seen you be with people and yet so much in the clouds.’

‘There’s nothing special on my mind. It must be the weather that’s getting me down . . . and making me drop off every now and then, as I did a moment ago.’

‘Yes, it must be the weather.’

I lay on my side and our cheeks touched.

‘Did you play tennis this morning?’

‘Yes. What did you and the children do on the beach?’

‘Nothing much. We collected shells, climbed over the rocks and built a castle. It was fun. Asunción scolded us later for having gone straight from church without changing. The children were certainly ready for a bath when we got back, shoes and all.’

‘After my tennis I had to use all my social cunning to arrange to be with you now.’

‘I can just see you, playing with human pawns and getting your checkmate. Like Amadeo who always wins.’

‘Do you want a cigarette?’

‘Thanks. I haven’t finished this one yet.’

She stuck one leg out of the bed, slowly bending and stretching it. The light in the room was fading. The still air had a strong tang and I began to sweat. Elena’s thigh felt cool beneath my fingers. When she turned her head, her eyelashes brushed my forehead.

‘Do you want anything?’ She shook her head. ‘Coffee or something to eat?’

‘No, thank you.’ She sat up on the bed. ‘I’d rather not have to see that horrible woman’s face.’

‘I could go and get it.’ I opened my eyes.

‘No.’

With my head resting on one shoulder, I stared at Elena’s short, full back. I got up to go to her side of the bed, facing the window. The red tiles of the terrace, which was the roof of the shed where the car was kept, were draining the water into the gutter. Beyond the first trees, smooth fields of many colours were soaking in the drizzle. One could just see a curve in the road. At dusk the lights of a passing car would glimmer for a moment and vanish.

‘We’ve never spent a whole night here.’

‘That’s true.’ She turned her head. ‘It’s a long time since we spent a night together.’

‘You know,’ I began, ‘I’ve been shocked by the business of that girl. Not so much shocked—something else. It’s made me begin to think about what I see around me. I used not to.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ she said.

‘I used to see people without giving them a thought. Certain kinds of people. Porters, waiters, servants, fishermen . . . I don’t know why but they’re always on my mind. They seem to be alive.’ She took a step back and sat down on the bed. I imagined her with her hands clasping her legs waiting for me to go on. ‘I’m telling you because I have to tell someone.’

She gave a short laugh. ‘How silly you are! Do you feel you have to explain yourself to me?’

‘Now that I’ve started telling you, something that’s been bothering me seems to have got clearer.’

‘It was obvious there was something wrong.’

‘The face of that girl took me back to the war. At first I thought of it as of a detective story or a film. The questionings, the coroner, the magistrate, the police. But eventually I stopped thinking about it that way. We know nothing about that girl; not her name, her family, where she lived, what she wanted from life, or why she died . . . We don’t even know how old she was. I don’t know if you understand.’

‘Yes, go on.’

‘It was like discovering a new race of people.’ Sitting on the bed I put an arm round Elena’s shoulders. ‘People you never think about, who are almost like things. The man who carries your bags, the boy who cleans your shoes, the person you buy cigarettes from on the corner. They’re not friends, they’re not clients . . . they’re nothing. But I’ve started to look at them now and ask myself who’s to blame.’

‘Who’s to blame for what?’

‘For the fact that until now I had not thought of them as human beings.’

‘Javier, this is childish. We all know those people are the same as us. They just live differently.’

'That's what I want to know! Why do they live differently? That's what was on my mind a little while ago. You and I are together, we've found a good excuse to spend the afternoon together, we'll have dinner together and tomorrow we'll go on being together. But this takes a lot for granted. A lot of things one must have. Why do I have them? Why is it that I'm not spending my life shining shoes in some bar somewhere or other?'

She laughed softly and at the same time sprawled across my chest and kissed my neck and my earlobes. I sat still, holding one of her hands in mine.

'Because you were born into a good family and because—no, let me go on—because you're very intelligent, very hard working and honest, and you know what you want. Am I right?' Her lips moved towards mine. 'Tell me I'm right. Otherwise I won't love you. Tell me.'

Holding her firmly, I pulled her back on to the bed. She teased me with a kind of happy solicitude. Then she fell silent, and after we had finished we lay quite still for a few minutes, locked in an uncomfortable position while the perspiration on our bodies evaporated and the rhythm of my breathing steadied itself.

'It must be getting late,' she said.

She jumped up and went to the shower, leaving the door open. I stretched myself, legs wide apart, taking up the whole bed. A glimmer of light came from the window.

She and I had never kept anything from each other, not the oddest sensation, not the most fanciful thought. But perhaps for the first time since we had been together I had explained myself clumsily and, possibly without knowing why, she felt cheated. The electric light shone through the door on to the pale wood of the wardrobe. When she emerged her skin was cool and fragrant.

'It's half past eight,' she stooped towards me and we kissed lightly.

'I'd like to smash your damned clock.'

'Me too, darling, but it is eight-thirty.'

She dressed methodically with her usual sharp, regular movements. Sometimes our eyes would meet in the half light,

and then she would pause to smile at me. Elena asked me not to sing so loudly under the shower. When I came back to the bedroom she had lit the ceiling light and the lamp on the bedside table; she was sitting on the armchair making up. I closed the shutters.

'You'll go down first, won't you?' She lit a cigarette. 'How long will it be before we come again? I miss our apartment in Madrid, this is like a rooming house.'

'You've always liked the room.'

'Except when it comes to facing that horrible woman.'

Elena stayed behind on the landing. I walked along the narrow corridor, newly covered with red flagstones, which led to the kitchen door. The woman was stooping over the stove with her back to me.

'We're off, Antonia.'

'Very well, sir. Wouldn't you like something to eat first? The table is laid.'

'No thanks. We must go.'

She took the notes without looking at them, but there was a fixed smile on her faded cheeks.

'The door is unlatched. I'll look out for you.'

'Goodbye,' I closed the door behind me.

Elena and I walked the length of the corridor hand in hand. We skirted the yard; a scuffling noise came from behind the wire netting of the rabbit hutches. I opened the door of the shed and Elena rushed in to get out of the rain. The engine was cold and slow to start. With no lights and in first gear I drove across the yard to the corner of the house. Elena was hiding her face behind the raised collar of her raincoat. Antonia waved an arm to indicate that the coast was clear. The engine stalled on crossing the gutter and the front wheels got stuck.

'They might have built a drive, considering their trade.'

'Nobody's coming,' Elena said.

With the nose of the car pointing to the centre of the road I accelerated. The windshield wipers clicked into action and beams of light cut across the rain.

'All in order,' she sighed.

HORTELANO

'Nothing ever goes wrong.'

'Maybe, but I feel happier once we're out.'

The wind whistled through the small gap at the top of my window when we speeded. I could see Elena's hands in the dim light of the panel, the glowing end of her cigarette and the skirt which stopped short of her large round knees. I checked the time. Elena toyed with the radio knobs but switched off when she got nothing but meaningless noises. We passed very few cars coming from the opposite direction. Beyond the bridge the road started to descend. In the distance, through the haze of sparse rain, I saw the lights of the Colony.

'Stop,' Elena said suddenly.

I slowed down and stopped by the side of the road.

'The last cigarette?'

'All right, but do you know where we are?'

'Yes, why?'

'No, you don't know. Seven years ago you and I were coming back from France . . .'

'I remember!'

'It was a sunny afternoon but it was cold. We stopped here to look at the sea. We walked between the pine trees and sat on the side of the road. And we decided to build a city there. Our city.'

'You chose the spot. That night we fell asleep very late making plans.'

'Do you understand now why you're different? Because you're capable of building a city on a patch of land that pleases me. And of making a mountain of money out of it. That's why you're different and because nobody knows that you and I thought of it together and that you did it'—her hand struck the steering wheel—'for the two of us. I think you have a right to feel different and not to worry about certain things.'

'But I . . .'

She silenced me with a kiss.

She put out the cigarette, laughing.

'Stop thinking about that girl. I don't like you to think about other women, specially if they're dead.'

I stepped on the clutch and the car moved downhill. After a few yards the engine started.

10

ERNESTINA'S RIGHT,' said Amadeo.

'Of course she is. The list of guests is something we've all got to draw up. As I was saying . . .'

At that moment we heard Joaquín shriek. For some time the children had been jumping from Marta's garden into Claudette's, occasionally invading the territory between our mattresses and Andrés and Emilio had shouted at them. Then, suddenly, before Claudette could finish her sentence, Joaquín began to scream. Really, it was more like a long moan that startled us all.

'Those damn kids . . .'

'What's the matter, Joaquín?' cried Elena.

Amadeo, Andrés and I ran to the low stone wall. We saw no one either on the lawn or at the fringe of trees in Marta's garden.

'Joaquín!' I called, almost frightened.

Ernestina was the first to go over the wall. When I had run round the villa I found Ernestina and Marta standing there, laughing at the boy. He was tied to a tree, not struggling, no longer crying, but with fat round tears rolling down his cheeks. I saw at once that he was suffering and rushed to untie the rope. It was not easy; Andrés had to go for a pair of scissors or a knife. The rope ran over his shoulders like braces and was wound several times round his body and legs. When I tried to loosen it and pulled, the boy groaned. Poker came up and barked softly.

I told Ernestina to get out of the way.

There were a lot of knots, and I started at his ankles. He had

HORTELANO

been tied up from head to toe and the esparto was rough on my fingers. For a moment I looked at the others. Elena was pale, her arms hanging loosely.

'Go away,' I said to the women who wanted to kiss him and stroke his face. 'Every time you touch him it hurts. Don't cry, son. You'll be free in a second.'

'Who did it?' Emilio asked.

'I've said it all along, the children are getting more like savages every day.'

'Be quiet.'

'Dora's right,' Emilio insisted. 'They're running wild without a timetable and without lessons. Like street urchins.'

'But where are the others?' asked Ernestina.

'Now be a brave boy.' He looked at me, his eyes dimmed by the tears which ran down and blurred the outline of his lips. 'It's nearly over.'

'Uncle Javier's rescuing you from the Red Indians.' He didn't even smile at Claudette.

'No governess, nobody to look after them . . .'

'Javier,' said Elena, 'can't you hurry up?'

'Let's see if Andrés . . .'

I unwound the last loops. On his forearms and on his legs and thighs the skin was reddened, but where the rope had bitten deepest, on his biceps, there were angry furrows. I wanted to unbutton his shirt and have a look at his chest, but his knees gave and I had to catch him quickly under the armpits.

'No, he hasn't fainted'—I had him in my arms—'and now let me through.'

I sat down with Joaquín in one of the deep armchairs in Marta's living room. Andrés caressed him and then stood there, staring at him. The boy clutched at me, his eyes closed. Slowly he began to answer our questions, but only by moving his head.

'It was nothing, really. More fright than anything else.'

'We can't leave it at that.'

'But, Emilio, what do you want to do?' asked Claudette.

Andrés massaged first his legs, then his arms and chest with

eau-de-cologne. Joaquín's tears had dried and left dark smudges on his cheeks.

'Marta, could you get some brandy?'

'Are you going to give the boy brandy?' exclaimed Dora.

'Yes. Just a little, please.'

'All right,' said Marta.

'But this is awful. We'll have to read them the riot act.'

'Let's see.' Amadeo squatted down and took the boy by his chin. 'Why did the Red Indians make you prisoner?'

'Indians, Indians . . . We must get hold of them at once, but at once.'

'Tell me, Joaquín, why?'

'Elena, calm down, it was nothing, you heard what Javier said. The child had a fright, that's all.'

'It must have been José and Enrique.' Emilio approached the armchair.

'Who tied you up?'

'Surely it was a game, without meaning to be unkind.' Claudette said.

'Oh, why can't you leave him in peace for a moment?'

'I want to know who did it. I can't stand it if our children behave like guttersnipes. Do you hear me?'

Nobody said a word. Emilio, without looking at me, stood opposite me; I saw a little tremor in his hands which he kept on rubbing. Joaquín held me still more tightly, while I struggled to restrain the tone of my voice.

'Listen, Emilio. You can do as you like. Organize a hunting party, if that's what you're after. And when you've caught them you can put them on the rack or eat them raw. But now leave the boy alone.'

Andrés made him drink a sip of brandy. Amadeo was still squatting, with downcast eyes, as if restraining himself. I saw Claudette approaching from the far end of the room.

'I said Enrique and José because they are the eldest. My son and your son. My son too!'

'So what? I make you a present of my boy so you can hack him to pieces.'

HORTELANO

'Javier, stop joking. I want to find the kids and show them what they've done. Punish them on the spot . . .'

'Emilio,' whispered Amadeo.

' . . . on the spot, in the act. Then they'll stop acting like the riffraff they . . .'

'Emilio, goddammit, go to hell for Christ's sake!'

Claudette said something I didn't grasp. Her voice sounded like breaking glass. Amadeo rose to his feet.

'Javier,' Dora cried, 'what is this?'

Looking at Dora, he was silent. Asunción broke into tears, Ernestina and Amadeo tried to pour oil on the troubled waters. Joaquín still clung to me in despair or fury. The others clustered round Emilio, who went on threateningly.

'Please, the servants . . .' warned Elena.

As they stopped speaking all at once, Asunción's sobs sounded more shrilly.

'Let him stand up,' said Andrés, 'we'll see how you manage. Does it hurt?'

'No.'

'All right, I like my son to be brave. Was the brandy good?'

I went up to Asunción who raised her eyes from between her hands and her lace handkerchief. Her naked arms were covered with little reddish dots.

'Forgive me, I lost my temper.'

'Javier, why must you behave like this?'

'Nerves. Please forgive me.' One of the straps of her dress had slid down; the flabby look of her back, her collar-bones, made me feel sad. 'I didn't want to offend you.'

'I know,' Asunción whined.

'There now, there now,' said Marta.

'What do you want to organize more parties for, Ernestina?' Amadeo asked sharply.

Ernestina laughed. Claudette tied a black scarf over her head and proposed a walk. I found that Joaquín was holding on to my hand and lifted him up.

'No, no, he's got to walk by himself. The boy's going to be spoiled,' Andrés said.

'Ready?' Claudette stopped in the door. 'Now go and give daddy and mummy a kiss.'

Elena held him close for a long while. When the boy came back and took my hand his eyes were full of tears.

'Now, son, enough crying. You're all right and the three of us are going for a walk.'

'To the beach,' Claudette added.

We took our time in the street. The afternoon was filled with a luminous grey filtered by the clouds which formed a level surface high in the sky. The brief sunshine of the morning had dried the stones.

Claudette started to sing an Italian song. As we went past my villa, Leoncio, who was pottering around the central garden path, came running to the gate.

'Vicente's come to see you, sir. He's in the kitchen.'

'I've no time now. He can come back tomorrow or some other time. Or he can tell you what he wants.'

'He wants to speak to you, sir.'

'Well, let him come some other time.'

'If you have to . . .'" Claudette started.

'Oh no. The man's a bore and I don't even know him. Leoncio, tell him to come back tomorrow morning.'

'He works at the seafood shop.'

'And what do you think I should do about it? I can't drop everything to listen to whatever the fellow wants to tell me.' Leoncio let go of the gate. 'Tell him to come back later.'

'All right.'

'I don't suppose he keeps the shop open all day long either.'

'Yes, he does. But it's all right.'

We went down the path in silence. Claudette lingered behind to light a cigarette but Joaquín turned his head and she ran past us, challenging us to follow her. When we came to the beach Joaquín was panting. Claudette tumbled him in the sand. While the two wrestled, I sat down to look at the choppy sea.

'Do you want a smoke?'

'No, let me recover.' Claudette sat down, cross-legged, opposite me. 'He seems quite all right now.'

Near the waterline Joaquín was building a network of canals.

‘Thanks to your motherly care.’

‘You can pull my leg, but the poor child must have had a tough time when he was tied to the tree and couldn’t free himself . . .’ I was making small piles of sand. After a while she said: ‘Don’t worry about Emilio.’

‘I wasn’t thinking of Emilio.’

She took out a cigarette. As she bent over to light it her hair slipped from the scarf and fell over the left side of her forehead, making her look younger. We exchanged a smile. The still air announced a thunderstorm.

Claudette whistled under her breath. The rush of blood I had felt burning my face was gone. Only my legs still prickled. My head was still filled with a welter of ideas, shapeless and confused. Claudette gazed at me, her lips rounded from whistling, her right hand holding the cigarette even with her temple.

‘You know, you must think I’m crazy.’

Her easy laughter was soothing.

‘No.’ She looked away. ‘I’m simply astonished at your state of nerves. I’ve never seen you as you were this afternoon and I’ve often heard you discussing things, after all.’

‘What was the matter with me this afternoon?’

‘You were upset. When you went up to Asunción and when you looked at Elena and when you held on to Joaquín as if somebody might take him away from you.’

‘But it was he who held on to me.’

‘And then Dora irritates you. Forgive me for interfering but I’ve discovered that Dora irritates you.’

‘Things aren’t going well.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘They started to go wrong long ago. I wish she’d occasionally take my side when I’m accused of being unfair or foolish.’

‘I expect you’ll soon work it out.’

‘Me? All alone?’

‘Yes, you.’

‘She’s the other partner.’

'But she's the weaker one. You're the strongest man I've ever met.'

'I never realized I qualified as the barracks' Strong Man!'

'Don't joke. I'm serious although it's something that frightens me terribly.'

'I imagine you think I'm strong because I'm a hard worker, go in for all sorts of business deals and am lucky with them.'

'That's one of the reasons, yes. But the most important is that you know how to handle people. People admire you.'

'People?'

'Yes. For instance Amadeo, who's cleverer than you and Andrés, who's kinder. Or Santiago, who's more astute, and Joaquín feels safe only when he's with you. I can't explain it, but you inspire confidence. Perhaps Dora hopes that you'll give her back her confidence.'

'Look, my dear'—I put my hand on one of her knees—'it's you who's extraordinary. Yes, you.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Because of the romantic image you have of me and, I suspect, of all the others you're fond of. Perhaps I have will power. A crude sort of will power that helps me attack or endure, which is more difficult.'

'I don't feel like analysing your strength. You have it and to a certain degree, many people depend on you, your moods, your quirks of character. And on your final decisions.'

'I'm also serious about this, Claudette, and I also have inhibitions when I talk like this. But I don't decide very much. Not long ago I began to realize that in the last few years all my decisions had to do with shares, credits and branch offices. It's a big world and there are lots of people in it—people who see me very differently from the way you do.'

'Oh well, if you're tired don't open letters, don't talk about business to Amadeo and don't think of things you have to do or get done. I hope this filthy weather will soon be over and it will be real summer and we'll all be happy and love one another. The good life, as Andrés always says. Tomorrow I'll arrange an excursion to the village or perhaps to Barcelona. With the

HORTELANO

wind and all these clouds, the Colony's no better than a burrow.'

'I agree. But without Emilio.'

'Poor Emilio. You must understand him, he's still surprised at having produced so many children. It's a heavy responsibility for him.'

It was getting dark. Claudette called Joaquín who came dragging his feet through the sand. She wiped his hands and asked him if he was cold.

'No.'

'Did they tie you up because of the treasure?'

'Yes, they want to know where I keep it.'

'And where do you keep your treasure, if it isn't a secret?' Claudette asked.

'It is a secret.'

'From me too?'

'Well . . .' he hesitated, 'from you too. I was told to guard it. It's my treasure.'

'If it's yours alone you're right not to tell,' I advised him.

'It's mine alone. And I don't want to tell them. Even if they tie me up again or torture me.'

'Torture?'

'They won't torture you,' I said. 'I'll speak to them and we'll draw up the rules of war. Haven't you got anyone in your gang?'

'Asun and Martita were against my being tied up, because they'd like to be in my gang. But I don't trust them.'

'Because they're women, naturally?'

'What?'

'What Aunt Claudette means is that you're right not to trust anybody till they've proved they're really on your side.'

'This is not'—she got up—'what Aunt Claudette means, but she realizes she's in the minority.'

He tugged at the collar of my shirt: 'And I can't tell you either, you know.'

'Don't worry. I understand perfectly that you can't tell a grown-up where you've hidden your treasure. Grown-ups always destroy treasures in the end. I hope yours is in a safe place.'

In the darkness, while Claudette was brushing off her skirt, I sensed that he was smiling.

'Yes, it's hard to guess.'

I carried him up the slope. When we came to the Colony he was asleep, and he didn't wake up even when the maid took him over. On his bed Joaquín looked quiet, tired but happy.

The others were in Marta's garden. Santiago, who had come back from the village a few minutes earlier, came out to welcome me.

'I've heard about your row with Emilio.'

'Give me a kiss, you gossip-monger.' Claudette pressed her hands against his cheeks.

Amadeo, Emilio, Don Antonio and Andrés were having a game of cards. Marta brought me a whisky.

I reassured Elena: 'Don't worry, I left him fast asleep.'

'Emilio got all the children together and gave them a good scolding,' said Asunción in a low voice.

'Believe me, Asun, I was sorry—for your sake.'

She patted my shoulder and smiled.

The women talked about their pregnancies, their maids, their refrigerators. Behind me the men pronounced the sacred formulas of the game. Marta handed out apéritifs and gave orders to the servants. Ernestina and Santiago were discussing plans for the party. I lit a cigarette and comforted myself with the thought that this, after all, was a fine night while people in Madrid would be exhausted by the sweltering, evil-smelling heat. When I took my leave Emilio didn't even look at me.

'I won't have more than a bite for supper, Dora.'

'Oh, by the way, Rufi's back.'

'Well, see you all tomorrow.'

Rufi got a sandwich and a glass of milk for me, and took them to the bedroom. She appeared slimmer than she had been. When I asked her about the village fiesta she was surprised.

'What news about a boy friend?'

'Goodness,' she smiled, 'there's hardly a man in that village. Just my cousins and a few others. Anyway, I care more for those at home.'

HORTELANO

'That's the idea. You're still very young, Rofi.'

Her brown almond-shaped eyes had a mocking sparkle. She let go of the door and walked out of the bedroom swinging her hips.

After a shower I looked into the children's bedroom. I had my supper in bed, intending to take up the novel I'd started reading. While I stared at the fleeting shadows on the rough paint of the ceiling, I thought with pleasure of Claudette, of her face sharply outlined by the black scarf. I fell asleep with an almost empty mind, and forgot to switch off the lamp.

THE CLOUDS were thinning. Not far out at sea there was a wide belt of sunlight. As I stooped to gather flat pebbles that would rebound on the water I noticed there were more shells than usual in the sand. My right arm began to ache. I collected my newspapers and walked on in a northerly direction.

Where the rocks began the beach narrowed. I sat down there to read the news. Intermittent gusts of warm air brought with them the scent of the sea. When I looked up the sun had gone. I thought of having a bathe naked, but first I walked barefoot to the edge of the water. It was cold and dirty.

I retraced my steps along the widening beach, which gradually flattened out. Solitude, and the familiar sounds of nature, accompanied me through the pine wood and up the rocky path that led to the Colony. The light seemed good for taking pictures, so I told Enrique, who was playing in Marta's garden, to go and fetch the camera.

I took two or three snapshots to pass the time, but the light meter didn't promise good results anywhere in the streets. In Don Antonio's garden the lawn was being cut with a new mower. Doña Pura's voice was giving an order; behind the panes of the bow window I could see a maid moving about, with a cloth tied turban-wise round her head. I went home, fixed myself a pink gin, and stretched out on the veranda. María and Leoncio were having an argument. Rufi was cutting flowers in the garden, aided by Dorita and Leles. The two little girls were wearing gaily-coloured pants which were con-

HORTELANO

cealed by their wide smocks. Dora must have kept Dorita in the bathroom for at least an hour to achieve that slick hairdo.

I went to the swimming pool. Near the drain at the bottom the cement had buckled and the iron waste-pipe was out of place. Earth, leaves, twigs and small black puddles made the pool look like a sewer. I called Leoncio but Rufi came instead to tell me that he had gone to the village. I climbed down the little ladder to examine the damage myself. There was a heavy odour of rotten leaves and stagnant water. The voices of the girls sounded nearby, they were probably sitting somewhere among the trees behind the villa.

Rufi kept the windows and venetian blinds of the rooms on the ground floor closed. I heard her singing upstairs, and returned to the veranda. First I solved the crossword puzzle, then I went out for a stroll. I counted the empty villas that were to let, and those that were empty because their owners were away. Even though more people were due, this was going to be the summer with the smallest number of families in the Colony. Opposite the Hofsens' house the station wagon, which had arrived that morning, had been cleared of mattresses and packing crates. In the deserted streets the light was growing duller under an increasingly overcast sky. I stopped in the drive to have a look at the gravel. Asun, Emilio's eldest, asked my permission for Enrique and Dorita to stay to lunch at Marta's. A little while later Rufi came to tell me that the meal was ready.

During my lonely lunch I read the letters and the stock exchange report. The weather forecast on the radio promised that the atmospheric conditions along the coast would become somewhat less unsettled; within a few days it was anticipated the weather would change for the better. Some of my letters mentioned how hot it was in Madrid. When the official anthems started, Rufi switched the radio off and asked me if I wanted coffee on the veranda.

'Yes, please. And telephone Señorita Marta's, I'd like Joaquín to come over.'

I intended to borrow Ernestina's car for a drive, but it turned out that they had taken Joaquín to the village with them. When

Rufi had served coffee and brandy, she busied herself straightening the cushions on all the wicker chairs. When I came back to the house she gave me an absent smile and started to hum a song.

With my eyes shut, ready to get up at any moment, I let myself drift to sleep. The woman who danced around me had Ernestina's features, but I knew with absolute clarity that she was Anna. Slowly I awoke. It was drizzling. Suddenly I remembered that not one of them had stayed at home and that it would take a long time before they came back from the village or from Barcelona. I took a shower, changed into fresh clothes, lit the lights in the bedroom and bathroom, and paced the floor. Now and then I found myself standing with something in my hands—a sock, massage lotion, toothpaste—or perching on the edge of the bath tub. I thought of nothing, or only of the passage of time. Therefore I was surprised to find it still daylight when I came down into the living-room.

The papers Rafael brought were no more sensational than the morning papers. It occurred to me to set down in writing all that had happened from the moment when the dead girl had appeared on the beach. I imagined I would come to some conclusion by singling out the basic facts. However, I let myself be sidetracked by the memory of Julio, the policeman—who probably had already done the same job—and of Raimundo and of the girl's lips, boldly designed, without make-up, square and dry, as though carved. On my notebook I sketched half-open and fully closed mouths and faces with nothing but a mop of hair and lips.

Rufi came to ask whether I wanted anything. When she came back with some tomato juice, I asked her if Leoncio had come back.

'No, sir. If you go out put on overshoes, there's mud everywhere.'

'I don't know whether I'm going out or not.'

'Do you want me to open the windows?'

A strong scent of moist earth drifted in. Rufi stayed in the hall. Perhaps she had seen my doodles: I tore up the sheet.

HORTELANO

Finally I sat in one of the old wicker chairs, my left arm on the window sill. The branches of the black poplar rustled; they darkened this part of the garden and the veranda. Afraid of falling asleep again, I went to get a record and was just about to put it on when the telephone rang. I told Rufi that if it was Don Antonio, to say I wasn't home.

'It's Señorita Elena, sir.'

'Elena, what's up?'

'How are you? I'm calling from the village.'

Her voice came through so clear and close that it was painful.

'I'm all right. What about you?'

'Oh, fine. I've just finished my round of the shops. Have you got over this morning's headache?'

'Yes, yes. Anyway, I think it was laziness, really. I'm almost sorry I didn't come along with you. I'm getting bored to death here.'

'Have you been working?'

'A little.'

'Marta and Dora send love and kisses.'

'Good.'

'How are the children? Have they given you much trouble?'

'I've hardly seen them. And Joaquín?'

'Amadeo and Andrés haven't come back from Barcelona. We'll wait till ten and if they aren't here by then we'll go home. Emilio'—her voice dropped and I thought she was smiling—'is still angry with you. He and Dora have been discussing yesterday's to-do all day.'

'They can go to hell.'

'Listen, don't get too bored. Any news at all over there?'

'The Hofsens' luggage arrived this morning. Is it raining where you are?'

'It rained a little after lunch. We had a marvellous meal. It was very pleasant. I'll tell you all about it. Ernestina had a letter from Luisa: she's coming.'

'Who's coming?'

'Luisa, Luisa Castromocho. Don't you remember her?'

'Yes, of course. And Joaquín?'

'He's all right. Don't get too bored.'

'I'm not bored. I'm only a little lonely. I'd need . . .'

'Yes, yes,' she laughed, 'I understand you all too well. See you tonight, Javier.'

'You can't talk, eh?'

'That's right.'

'All right. A kiss. Listen, do you think you'll be very late?'

'We'll wait for those silly men till ten, and then come back. Do you want anything from here?'

'I don't know . . . Tobacco. Or a magazine.'

'Right.' Through her laughter I could hear loud voices. 'See you soon.'

'Bye, Elena.'

For a while I kept my right hand on the earpiece, after putting it back on the 'phone. I sat on the veranda steps, arms on my knees, hands clasped. I remembered an evening during the war when I had been sitting like this, very quiet, very close to tears. Then I got on to the train and when I arrived at Burgos my father was already buried.

I heard the voices of Rufi and María going from room to room. The air was still, the afternoon ending with a shimmer of light above the trees, on the smooth level surface of the clouds. All the villas were dark. The silence was broken by small thuds, uncertain noises, a sort of remote emptiness that sounded like an echo of silence.

The scents grew stronger. My ankles were cold. At any moment Rafael was going to switch on the network of street lights. I remembered the pocket flask from my war years and went into the house to find it. My search started in the lumber room. Rufi was in the hallway, singing.

'Do you know where the old pocket flask is? The one that looks like a cigar case.'

'I don't know which one you mean.'

'The one that's dented. It's small, made of brass . . .'

'Oh yes. Wait a minute, I know where it is.'

Rufi opened the wall cupboard, searched among the gadgets for underwater fishing, among the straw hats, roller skates,

tennis and ping-pong rackets, coloured balls, air cushions, cork belts, and turned round with a grin, holding out the flask.

'Wait, I'll clean it for you. There must be something to it if you've kept it here all this time.'

While Rufi was cleaning it in the kitchen, I went down to the cellar for a bottle of French cognac and filled the flask with it. Only one of the words engraved on its base with the point of a knife was legible: *Regimiento*.

In their white hoods the fluorescent tubes of the street lights shone with a bluish shimmer. I put on my rain hat, buttoned my leather jacket and went out on the main road. When I reached the pine trees I stopped. The cognac tasted good. The farthest line of hills was edged with deep red clouds, like the sunset after a cloudless day. The needles covering the ground of the pine wood were damp and slippery. For a few moments I imagined I had lost my way.

I sat down on a rock that lifted its mossy ridge from the red soil. The smooth surface of the flask, whose rounded indentations gave me a soft sensual pleasure, soon warmed in my hand.

It may have been that Andrés became addicted to drink in the weeks he was at the front. Or possibly in the first post-war years, when life—that filthy and marvellous life, as he used to say—did not seem enough to him. Before he met Elena, in those blurred days of hard work and of casual girl friends on one of our frequent trips together . . . As the sailors say, a woman in every port.

The smell of the pine sap mixed in my throat with the warming taste of the cognac. The record was spinning.

Later, much later, each month had a different face and there were weeks, there were even single days, that stayed in one's memory more clearly than the days and weeks of the current year. It was enjoyable to remember without undue precision, without trying to establish whether it was in 1949 or in 1954 that Elena and I began to go together to the bars of the *Cuesta de las Perdices*. Or to that tavern on the road to France. Or to the discreet *pied-à-terre* on the road to Andalusia, where, naked,

in close embrace, we looked down from a window on the upper floor on to the Sunday dances of young clerks and shop girls.

A fleeting but sharp pain in the stomach made me feel hot and cold. I got up and walked a few steps. Then, my back against a tree trunk, my eyes shut, my hands in my pockets, I let my mind wander. A gust of wind carried my hat away and as I fumbled for it in the dark I slipped and almost fell. It amused me to imagine that, while searching for the hat, I might find one of Joaquín's treasures. Rubbing my hands with a bunch of pointed wet leaves, I cleaned off the resin as well as I could.

It surprised me to find that I was some distance from the Colony. In daylight I would have had a view of the coast, the camping site, the lighthouse, the roofs of the villas, the fields and the orchards. A dark mass shot with distant, shifting gleams blocked my way. Going back to the main road I saw the headlights of three cars, far off. I walked on, as though testing the path, and yawned.

12

ERNESTINA, WEARING a yellow bikini under a green sleeveless wrap that came down only to her hips, dashed out of the villa, pursued by the children. Her sandals had gilded straps. I shouted after them to wait for me but they didn't hear and ran down the street with much noise and laughter. Enrique came round a corner on his bike with José riding on the seat behind.

'Be careful!'

'Don't worry,' said José.

The bicycle disappeared behind the trees. I was about to sit down again when Dora called me from the veranda.

'Yes, I've had breakfast.'

'Are you going down to the beach?'

She had put on a long white robe with a wide belt ending in fringes.

'Yes, I think so. What about you?'

'Me?' She came down one step and stood still, her hands in the pockets of her robe. 'I won't have time. The house is in an awful mess. What day is it?'

'Wednesday.'

'I've forgotten to ask Rafael . . .'

'Listen, Dora,' I said, 'why don't we take the car, you and I, and go to some little hidden beach?'

'What do you mean?' She looked at me with raised brows. 'Didn't you hear me say that the house is in a dreadful state?'

'It was only an idea. Because the sun's out and it's summer again . . .'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, nothing.'

I went up the steps, towards the mattress.

'Come on, change and go down to the beach. You'll have a good time there with all the others.'

We were both silent. Then Dora went into the hall and a little later I heard Ruffi saying:

'Yes, ma'am, yes, I was thinking anyway of leaving the study until the last.'

I came to an instant decision and looked for Dora. I met her at the top of the stairs.

'But why do you want to go away?'

'I feel like going out for a breath of fresh air and driving for a while. And then, Raimundo must have got the hooks I ordered the other day.'

'The hooks?'

'Yes, the hooks. Why do you repeat every word I say as if you didn't understand me?'

'Nothing,' she murmured. 'I merely thought . . .'

'What is it you're mumbling?'

'Nothing. It's nothing, do you hear?'

She met my stare with a kind of frantic immobility. I took her arm but managed not to use my strength. Dora allowed me to lead her to the door of our bedroom, where she wrenched herself free and went in in front of me. I shut the door. Suddenly I felt that everything would be useless because to some degree it was my own fault.

'I simply wanted to go out for a drive. That's all.'

'Then go. Who's stopping you? Go away and don't make any more fuss.' For a few seconds neither of us said a word. Then she went on: 'I only asked you why you wanted to go and where to. Because, so you may know once and for all, I was hoping that you and Emilio would make up this morning and put an end to the situation you provoked. But all right, off with you. You're your own master and . . .'

I sat down in one of the easy chairs and cut Dora short:

'That's not the point. You could easily have said that

HORTELANO

according to your reckoning Emilio and I should have a love feast this morning.'

'Of course I was hoping for it!'

'Don't scream, Dora. Let's talk calmly.'

'I'm not screaming. Yes, I am, I can't stand it any longer. I'm sick and tired of your making a fool of me in front of everybody, as you did the day before yesterday at Marta's. That's why I was so sure you'd apologize to Emilio today and put an end to all that nastiness.'

'What nastiness?'

'Swearing and behaving so badly to poor Emilio who only wants to bring the children up the right way—don't you think that's nasty? Well, in my eyes it is. I'm not used to such behaviour in members of my family, I've never lived in surroundings where people go in for insults. And for the second time in a couple of days, at that! The least you could is apologize. But no, your idea is to run about with your friend the shopkeeper and with all the riffraff who're changing your character.'

Without lifting my head I asked:

'How have I changed?'

Dora was walking up and down in the open space between one of the beds, my easy chair and the window.

'And then, one day you'll have to see that poor fellow, Leoncio's friend.'

'Who?'

'He's been here three or four times. And we must be on good terms with them because we need them. One fine day we'll be left in the lurch, with nobody to work for us. And then you'll find out what's what.'

'I don't understand where that man comes in. I want to know why you say I've changed. In what way have I changed?'

'Oh Javier, please, leave me alone. How do I know? But the fact is you have changed, you quarrel with respectable people, you . . . you aren't as I'd like you to be. Is that clear?'

I sensed that my smile was irritating her but I didn't stop smiling until she turned away and went on pacing up and down.

'Yes, it's clear. And you can tell Emilio from me that he can go to hell a thousand times. To fucking hell, that is.'

'Javier!' she shrieked, 'but . . .' She stopped and raised her arms.

'And don't you give me a sermon about my vocabulary. I say what I like.'

'Not to me. In front of me you won't use that word again, I assure you. You can trample on everything else but I won't allow you to forget the respect you owe me, the respect we both owe each other. And the sacred bond that unites us. In this house I'll never allow an offence against decency, as if we were uneducated scum. Mainly for our children's sake.'

I wanted to make another effort but when I stood up and tried to put my hands on her shoulders, she stepped back and crossed her arms.

'Listen, Dora. I'd have to start from . . .'

'You would have to start by speaking decently.'

Turning my back, I lit a cigarette. The sun filled more than half the room. Beyond the green of the trees the sky was very blue, with the full light of summer. In silence and between the twitter of birds, I heard something like the distant murmur of the morning. In the bathroom a tap was dripping.

'What are you waiting for?'

'You're my husband, whether I like it or not. It was you who brought me here. I wait for you to tell me that I can go. I've a great deal of work to do.'

'Ah, yes, new tactics.'

She remained there, feet apart, arms crossed, her chin out, but now a few big tears fell from her wide open eyes to her tensed cheeks.

'Dora.'

'I don't need consolation.'

'Then what do you need?'

I waited for her answer, but all she did was swallow her tears and compose her face in a visible effort to retrieve her impassiveness. I said: 'You may go when you like.'

She rushed to the door and went out without slamming it.

HORTELANO

I leant against the back of a chair, then went to the bathroom and turned off the tap. It smelt of soap, of Dora's bath salts and scent; damp, wrinkled towels drooped on the rails, lay on the floor and in the bidet. In front of the mirror I passed my hand over my cheeks, mechanically. I heard Claudette calling me and looked out of the window, but she must have been on the veranda.

'Coming,' I called back.

Claudette, Santiago and Amadeo were in the hall.

'How are you?'

'Very well. And you? Come in. Everything is in the middle of a cleaning campaign, but we'll find a quiet corner. Do you want some drinks?'

'We're on our way to the beach,' said Santiago.

The three men were in bathing suits. Claudette was wearing white shorts.

'Dora . . .' I began.

'We've spoken to her.'

Amadeo asked: 'Have you got the last reports?'

'All right, we'll expect you there, but don't be late,' said Claudette.

I saw them out into the garden and went back to the study with Amadeo to collect the stock exchange reports.

'Take them with you, I don't need them.'

'No, no, I want to talk to you. Change and come along.'

'I really wanted to go to the village. Raimundo has some things for me.'

'Well, then I'll take the reports, and we can talk tonight. You'll be back for supper, won't you?'

'I think so.'

'Bye, Dora,' Amadeo shouted up the stairwell. 'I'll have another look at the figures.'

'Is it important?'

'No, no, old man. It can wait.'

Going to the gate with him I asked where Marta was.

'She's at home with the little girl.'

'What's the matter?'

'She's taken so many falls that she's skinned one of her knees. A great tragedy. See you later.'

'Adiós.'

Before opening the garage I felt the pockets of my trousers. I remembered that I had an old coat and a sweater in the car. Rufi stopped me at a curve in the lane.

'Very early this morning Master Joaquín was here and asked for you, sir. He waited for you, too, but then Manolita took him away for his breakfast.'

'Thanks. 'Bye.'

'Have you enough petrol? There isn't any in the house.'

'How right you are. I'll order some. Don't forget to remind Rafael about it.'

'I won't forget, sir, I've got the cans ready in the kitchen.'

'Adiós, Rufi.'

'Adiós, sir.'

Rufi's hair was pinned up leaving her neck uncovered.

The gate to Elena's garden was open. I stopped the car by the flower bed Andrés was examining.

'I'm a new man,' he said. 'A while ago I explained to Elena how good it is to get up early in this weather. There isn't any hangover that can resist these colours and this silence. I'm going to stay here till January. You're off?'

'To the village. Say, where's Joaquín?'

'He was here just now.'

I got out of the car and wandered round the villa. Far to the back the brick wall glowed red. The garden paths meandered in its direction through a small, shrub-grown meadow. I walked a few yards without being able to locate Joaquín's voice. At last I saw him astride a branch of the figtree just behind my back and told him to get down.

'Don't shout, or father's going to find out.'

'What are you climbing trees for?'

'I'm watching.' He came down without an argument.

'Watching what? From this figtree you don't see more than one side of the house.'

'All right, so I was thinking.'

HORTELANO

'Start looking for other places in which to meditate or I'll break your bones.' I rumbled his hair. 'What did you want this morning?'

'Last night when we came back I forgot to ask you if you were angry with me.'

'I'm mostly angry with you but right now I can't remember any particular reason.'

'I mean you might be angry with me because I didn't tell you where the treasure's hidden. The day before yesterday when we went to the beach with Aunt Claudette.'

'Oh, I see. No, I'm not angry. It's a private matter and you're right not to talk about it.'

'Are you in a hurry?'

'A little.'

'Come along.'

He dragged me to the wall to a spot behind a thicket where he had assembled three dilapidated wicker chairs, a few stones put together in the shape of a table, a long rod and several battered boxes of canned milk.

'Sit down. Careful, or the legs will break.'

He sat on one of the boxes.

'If you're worried because you haven't told me . . .'

'You see,' he interrupted, 'it's a very important treasure. I've got to watch over it. But if something happens to me . . .'

'What do you mean, if something happens to you?'

'We don't live forever . . .'

'Who told you that?'

'I mean, I might be ill or something.'

'OK. And so you're going to tell me where you keep the treasure.'

'Oh no, no, I can't tell you. But I've written it down and put it in an envelope and the envelope is underneath the third drawer of my bureau. Now you must get it dead right.' I nodded. 'You go into my room, open my bureau, pull out the third drawer from the top and the envelope is there on the board. But that's only if something happens to me.'

'And you trust me?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You tell me where I can find the envelope with the map of the hiding place of the treasure . . .'

'It isn't a map.'

' . . . and that's practically handing me the key to the mystery.'

'You won't take it out before, will you?'

'Of course I won't. You know I never betray a secret.'

'That's why I've told you.' He got up, I did too, and we shook hands. 'A promise.'

'A promise. And now I must be off. Aren't you going to the beach?'

'Later, with daddy.'

'Bye.'

'And don't tell anybody about the drawer.'

'Of course not.'

Andrés was still busy with his flowers.

'I haven't any petrol left,' he answered, 'but we can send to . . .'

'Never mind, I'll ask Don Antonio. He's sure to have some. See you tonight.'

As I turned he mumbled something. A window opened in the villa and the sunlight glittered on its panes.

'I'm glad you're feeling better.'

'Thanks.' He smiled.

I parked the car in the street. Don Antonio rose from an iron garden chair and came across the lawn a newspaper in one hand, his right extended in welcome.

'Good morning. Nice to see you, Javier.'

'It's only for a moment. Don't let me disturb you. I've come to ask you for a few litres of petrol. We've run out of it and until Rafael . . .'

'It's a pleasure. Right away. But do sit down. I know you're in a hurry . . . But what about a cup of coffee?'

'No thanks, I can't. How's Doña Pura?'

'Asunción came to take her down to the beach.'

'And you aren't going?'

HORTELANO

'Later on I'll have a little walk. Eusebio! Have you read the papers?'

'No. Is there anything new?'

'The situation in Japan. I hope the Government will handle the situation correctly. You know, just a while ago I was thinking that things are not as bad as they seemed at first. But do sit down.'

We sat down and he turned his head towards the shed: 'Eusebio!'

'Don't bother, I can go for it.'

'There he comes. I was thinking that although things seem to have been going badly these last few days the true situation is different'—Eusebio, in a khaki shirt, came running up—'because they're all embroiled. In Asia and in America things aren't too bad. It would be dangerous if they were united, but they aren't.' Eusebio, two steps from Don Antonio's garden chair, was scratching the thick hair on his arms. 'They're discontented, furious. Oh, listen, Eusebio, bring a can of petrol for Don Javier. And take it out with the rubber hose, don't pour from the big can directly into the funnel. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well then, get going. Will ten litres be enough?'

'Five will be quite enough. Many thanks.'

'Don't you think I'm right?'

'I confess I haven't quite grasped what you said. You mean the international situation, don't you?'

'Of course. Fortunately we have no such problems in our country. What I'm saying is that all those rioters, those revolutionaries in rags, are fighting among themselves. Or at least they don't agree.'

'I think you're right.'

'And that's the heart of the matter, my friend. While they . . . For instance, look . . .' (he leant back in his chair and began to speak more quickly) 'I have fifteen years' experience as head of a factory.'

'Right.'

'And your experience is very similar to mine. You will have

observed that work always suffers while the workmen are good friends and there are no conflicts. The more friendly the atmosphere, the lower the productivity. By way of contrast . . .’ (Eusebio came back, leaning slightly to the right where the petrol can gleamed in his hand) ‘when they’re at sixes and sevens they work harder. My wife’—he smiled—‘and you know that the women have a great understanding for such matters, even though it wouldn’t do to say so in their presence. Well, my wife says that housework prospers when the maids refuse to call one another by their Christian names.’ He suddenly uncrossed his legs. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Here’s the petrol,’ said Eusebio.

‘You walk like a cat. Go and put it in Don Javier’s car.’

‘I’ll have to . . .’ I said, getting on to my feet and taking the keys from my pocket.

‘Oh well, dear friend, I don’t want to delay you. I’ll come with you.’

Behind us, in rhythm with our steps, the gravel crackled.

‘Don Antonio, please don’t let me disturb you, today the sun’s very strong. I’ll see you get it back . . .’

‘Don’t mention it, please . . . You should come here more often. It’s a long time since we had a good talk, eh? And you know how delighted I am to exchange opinions.’

‘Yes, of course. Many thanks, I’ll see you soon.’

Eusebio lifted the can which he had left on the ground, I unscrewed the lid of the tank, and Don Antonio lingered at the fence. A fluttering vapour spread like fumes of cigarette smoke in a ray of sunshine. Eusebio’s big shapeless boots were encrusted with mud that had not yet dried. Don Antonio made his way back to the garden chairs in the shade of the trees. While I screwed on the lid I wondered whether I should give Eusebio a tip.

‘Thank you.’

‘Not at all, Don Javier.’ He stepped on to the pavement.

‘See you again.’

While he poured in the petrol I had avoided looking at his hands, so as not to embarrass him. Eusebio’s eyes looked at a

HORTELANO

point above my shoulder and his face had a crafty expression. Nevertheless he found the latch of the car door without fumbling.

'Have a good trip, sir.'

Six or seven miles farther on I stopped the car to open the windows. The bright light made neat profiles that contrasted with the dense shadows of hills, trees and rocks.

The village streets, especially those near the centre, were crowded, and so were the terraces of the bars. I caught myself examining the women, their garish dresses, their tanned skins, their unfamiliar faces. But I crossed the square without dawdling.

The garden gate was locked and I pulled the bell cord a split second before I discovered a push button. A girl came through the tiny garden, wiping her hands on her apron. Instead of opening the gate she smoothed the hair at her temples.

'She isn't in.'

'Will she be back soon?'

'She's gone swimming. She said she'd be back for lunch. But you never know.'

'She expected me.'

'Come in.'

'Thanks.'

I saw nothing in the dusk. The girl opened a door at the other end of a narrow passage from which a staircase of unpainted wood led to the upper floor.

'Please sit down, sir.'

'How does she get to the beach?'

'Pardon?'

'I mean, how does she get to the beach and back?'

'Oh. On the Vespa. Sit down.'

Under the window stood a green leather couch. The easy chair was near the television set and the table and six chairs were in 'colonial style' to match some of the engravings. The table-cloth was green plastic, the dolls, water pitcher, leather-bound novels and the clock on the double shelf were green as well. I sat down on the couch. The Venetian blind was half way down.

The room looked out on the back yard of the small villa. It had a cement floor, broken by a few oleander bushes, a high white surrounding wall, and a pair of deck chairs. I had the feeling I had seen it before. The front garden had a single sickly acacia and gloomy shrubs and flower pots half sunk in the ground.

I leafed through a magazine and listened to the noises that reached me intermittently. At the far end of the yard the girl was taking some clothes from the lines where they had hung to dry; when she reached up, the lower part of her thighs was visible.

I smoked two cigarettes, one after the other. Far away a dog barked. By now the whole back yard was in the shadow cast by the high wall. In a kind of niche, on a shelf level with the sideboard, there was a wireless set. I looked at my watch and switched it on. The regional station retransmitted the noon news.

Demonstrations in Japan had multiplied, the President of the United States had been enthusiastically received in South Korea. Don Antonio would be listening too, in his dusk-filled dining room where the furniture was not 'colonial'.

In the French engraving, the father opened his arms and ran, impulsively, to the nurse who looked out from under the heavy draperies to announce something extraordinary. I got up and read the title: *Monsieur, c'est un fils!* The other reproductions were badly tinted, representing infantile subjects in a falsely ingenuous style. Next to the row of books a picture of Our Lady was stuck to the wall with a pin.

I listened to the weather forecast and thought of leaving. When the regional announcer returned to a long list of advertisements, I switched off the set. Silence filled the room. I opened the door: 'Hello there.'

The girl came out of a room that looked on to the corridor. She was chewing furiously, getting ready to swallow.

'She'll be here soon, I'm sure.'

'You don't know which beach she's gone to?'

HORTELANO

'Sorry, I don't, sir. One day she goes to one place, and next time another. With the Vespa she goes anywhere she likes. Are you leaving?'

'Yes. But tell her I'll be back in the evening.'

'Who shall I say?'

'A friend. She was expecting me.'

'And you'll be back later?'

'That's right.'

I drove to the end of the street, to a waste area covered with bramble and ditches like the trenches for the foundations of a house. There I had room to turn. The gate was shut again. I felt how much I wanted Anna to be there.

13

FROM THE terrace I could see the beach. The waiter removed the cup and saucer, and brushed off the tablecloth with his napkin.

‘Another coffee, please.’

‘Yes, sir.’

One of the men was still lying in the shade of the beach hut; the other came up to the restaurant with the two girls who had put short jackets over their bathing suits. I half-closed my eyes. There was an irregular fringe of foam on the crescent-shaped beach.

‘Would you like some more soda?’

‘No, thanks. The bill.’

The girl in high heels took the man’s arm. The other walked on ahead. As they were climbing the steps to the terrace, the girl in high heels gave me a look. The other girl had short but well-shaped legs.

‘Your bill, sir.’

They ordered coffee and coca cola.

‘Later on,’ said one of the girls. ‘By the time we take it it’ll be like warmed-up soup.’

‘All right, later,’ said the young man.

The waiter served them first and then came to pick up the money I’d left sticking out from under the saucer.

‘We *are* having a good time, don’t you agree?’ said the girl in high heels.

I began to doze, with a sense of ease that softened the tense

impatience of the last few hours. Everything I'd been thinking about seemed unimportant. The young people kept up a lazy conversation filled with long pauses. When I opened my eyes the beach looked larger, with the curve of the water, the rocks and the deserted sand. There was a thick warm taste of coffee in my mouth. The waiter moved about, adjusting the metal clips of the tablecloths. As I got on to my feet the others stared at me.

'I can't take it any longer. Five minutes more and I'll be in the water.'

'No, no, beautiful, be a good girl and wait those two and a half hours the doctor ordered.'

'Oh darling, it's the one day we're free . . .'

Grass grew between the stones of the terrace. Behind its shutters, the bar smelt of cooking. On the distant hills dense shadows set off the dazzling blue of the sky. My hands were sweaty. I leaned back in the driver's seat and stepped on the accelerator. Soon afterwards I went through another village. I blew my horn at every curve. As I left the town, a tall white terraced building with awnings reminded me that Amadeo wanted to talk to me about the plans for the sanatorium that night. The cypresses of a churchyard rose behind a stunted adobe wall on a hillside overlooking the road. Further on I passed a jeep belonging to the Civil Guard. The road left the coast and went uphill; trees and rolling fields hid the sea. I drove with one hand, leaning heavily against the door. Gravel from the macadam rattled in the mudguards. When I saw the first houses I slowed down. Although I had never approached the village from this side, I assumed there was a street leading to Anna's house.

Children were playing in the trenches and holes in the deserted field. Closing the car windows, I noticed that the door to the house was ajar. I pushed the iron gate and went in. Anna held the door open and stood aside to let me pass.

'Why didn't you wait for me?' She put a hand on my arm. 'I came back right after you left. Not ten minutes later.'

'I thought you might not be back until dinner.'

In the sudden darkness she put her arms round me with a nervous little laugh. We kissed, our bodies touching.

'We're alone. It's good you left the message you'd be back.'

'I looked for you, that's why I went out. But of course I didn't find you and I had to lunch alone.'

'What fools we are. Come in.' The ash tray on the green plastic tablecover was piled high with cigarette butts. 'I wanted so much to see you, it made me furious to think you'd been here.'

'In here. In this room.'

'Sit on the sofa. Would you like some cognac?'

'No, I'd prefer something cool.'

Anna wore tight-fitting pants and a white sleeveless blouse that left her shoulders bare.

'What about a coca cola with ice and lemon?'

'Fine. I like your house very much.'

'Do you really like it? It's just a little place for the summer. One day I'll have it full of the things I want. Wait a second, I'll show you round.'

'Fine.'

I got up to look at the prints. The shadow from the patio, where the Vespa was, made the room dark. Anna came back with a tray.

'Let me help you.' Together we shifted the table. 'Won't you have a drink too?'

I gulped down half the glass. Sitting sideways on the sofa, one leg drawn up, she was smiling at me.

'I wanted so much to see you again. If you hadn't come back I'd have died of rage.'

'But I am back.'

'A century after promising it. Give me the glass.' She put it on the table. 'I've been waiting for you since Monday.'

'Did I say I'd come on Monday?'

'No, you promised you'd come in the middle of the week.'

'Today's Thursday. I've kept my promise.'

'True. But I would have preferred you not to keep it and that I'd seen you on Monday.' She let her head fall on to my chest. 'Don't mind me.'

HORTELANO

'I've been impatient too.'

'I like the way you lie.'

'Believe me.'

'I shouldn't even talk to men like you.'

I laughed. 'And why not?'

'Because you're the type who knows more about women than they know themselves. You always know how to turn the head of a poor girl like me.'

'This poor girl's so lovely.'

'Don't tell me I'm lovely. I look terrible with my skin sausage-red from this morning's sun. The damn rain cost me my tan. But you, you're handsome. And you've got thinner.'

'Thinner?'

'Tell me all you've done since the last night we were together.'

'Which was the first night.'

'How's that?'

'The last night we were together was the first night we met.'

She knelt on the sofa, her hands clasped on her thighs. Her unpainted lips were moist.

'You're right. And why do I love you if I don't even know you?'

'Do you love me?' I pinched her lower lip. 'You're one of those poor girls who always knows the right way to make a man crazy about them.'

'Don't laugh at me.'

She lay down across my legs. The full, taut flesh on her throat was smoothly quiet, like water.

'I like you, Anna. Your blouse, your beautiful arms and your hair short like an urchin's.'

'I bet you couldn't remember what colour my hair was.'

'I remembered very well that your hair was short and black.'

'And what about my eyes?'

'I remembered your eyes too: your round green eyes.'

'I don't give a damn if my eyes are hazel. Men like them, and that's what matters. Now tell me quickly, what have you been doing with yourself all these days in your millionaire's paradise?'

'Millionaire's paradise . . . But, Anna, White Sails is only a

little place, still under construction. Thanks.' I emptied the glass she gave me. 'Don't move. I can get my cigarettes and matches without your moving. See? Anyway, I haven't done anything special in my paradise. I've been rather bored, I haven't had anybody in my arms, I've been working off and on and on the whole I've been very lonely.'

'Does your wife make you feel lonely? Oh. Forgive me. I know that's not a question to ask. Forget it, will you?'

'Here, light your cigarette.' She lifted her head a few inches to reach the flame. 'My wife and I have long stopped living a normal life together.'

'Have you any children?'

'Two.'

'How old?'

'The boy's about nine, the little girl, six.'

'Does she look like you?'

'No. At least, I don't know. Why?'

'I'm ashamed asking so many questions. But these past days I've been asking them in my mind. How many children you might have, what your wife was like, what you were doing indoors with all that rain and bad weather. But now I have the feeling you take me for a worse bitch than I am.'

'Come on now, don't get complexes. It's stupid to think of me as a *grand seigneur*, or one of those tycoons in films with his yachts and a languid blonde for a wife. If you're silly enough to think that I won't play. Life is more complicated than that. I'm a man like any other. Or at least I try to be.'

I felt her nails in my neck, her aggressive lips took me by surprise. We stayed like this for a long time, then she slumped back with a muted smile.

'Don't'—She put her hand over my face—'don't look at me.'

'Anna, my sweet, you and I will get on very well together.'

Light was fading in the room. From the back yard came a fresh, cool smell, and a distant murmur of voices or of singing. I leaned my head back over the top of the sofa. The blue of the sky had grown paler. Oleander blooms glowed crimson amid the dark leaves.

HORTELANO

'It's good being here, Anna.'

'Would you like to see the other rooms?'

'What about the maid?'

'She won't be back till tomorrow.'

'That's nice. What about your weekend? You're all right by now, aren't you?'

'Yes, silly. We went to Castellón, had a meal in Benicasim and came back in time for the movies. Monday morning I went shopping. The film was boring. Oh yes, I met the Lansings in a hotel at Castellón. It was only four o'clock, but he was already tight. We talked about you people, and they said they might look you up. They're nice. They've gone back to Andalusia.'

'And your English lessons?'

'Bah, I don't care. I'm too old for studying.'

'But you speak it well. Who's your teacher?'

'A boy in the village here. He wants to become a Customs officer. In Madrid I go to classes. He isn't expensive and is a good teacher. With me he's got to be very patient.'

'Has he fallen for you?'

'He's just a boy.'

'I didn't ask how old he is.'

'In any case he hasn't shown it. Most afternoons we don't have lessons.'

'Tell me, is your friend married too?'

'Yes.'

'Is he older than me?'

'Much older.'

'Does he treat you decently?'

'Of course.'

'I'm glad. I suppose he isn't jealous.'

'He doesn't mention it if he is jealous. He can buy lots of things, but not everything. If he doesn't like it he can look for another girl.'

'But he loves you.'

'He sticks to me out of habit and because I behave myself. We've known each other for a long time. Are you jealous of him?' We laughed together. 'And now I'll fill up your glass and see

what there is for dinner. You're staying for dinner, aren't you ?'

'Yes.'

'If you like we'll eat early. At eight.'

'Why so early ?'

'It will give you time to get back home.'

'Are you taking classes in diplomacy as well ?'

'You can leave your car at a garage and take a room at the hotel, to cover up.'

'Which means you take it for granted that I'll stay till . . .'

'No, don't say till when.' Her tone changed abruptly. 'I want to talk to you.'

'What about ?'

'We'll talk later.'

'Tell me now.'

'Now ?' She slipped out of my arms, laughing. 'How do you expect us to talk seriously if you don't stop making love to me ?'

I got up too. Anna switched on the light and we went out into the passage hand in hand. In the kitchen I had to admire every gadget, every corner of her refrigerator and washing machine. At the front of the house, looking on to the garden, were two rooms; we didn't stop long in the dining room and even less time in the bedroom. The furniture was varnished a shrill shade of brown. A blue shiny spread was on the bed.

'Come upstairs to my domain. A little empty but all mine.'

The upper storey was different. Two easy chairs and a little table stood under the window at the back, in the corner of the passage.

'That's where you sit and think, looking at the landscape ?'

'You're very clever.'

'No, I mean it. Here you sit sometimes at night and ponder your problems. It's very pleasant. The village, the roofs, the little streets. It's bound to be nicer still when the street lights are lit.'

'Much nicer.'

'And the river. I've never seen this part of the river.'

The next door led to Anna's bedroom. She switched on the light. Leaning against the doorjamb she enjoyed my amazement as I went round the room.

HORTELANO

'It's the best there is in the house.'

'Of course. Do you really like it?'

'I didn't expect you to have modern furniture. Or orange curtains. Or a door of unvarnished wood.'

I slid my hands from her shoulders to her hips.

'Now you . . .'

'You're lovely . . .' I found her mouth.

' . . . now you take the car to the garage while I cook.'

We exchanged a long, strange, unfamiliar look before we kissed, patiently or, at least, with patient slowness.

Anna gave me the key to the front door.

'Do you want me to bring something, a bottle or a can of something?'

'I have everything. Don't be long.'

In the market place the street lights were lit. I found a garage next to the barracks but the mechanic couldn't tell me where to buy flowers. I went to the café, had a gin, and learnt from the waitress the address of a place where I might be able to get some. The streets were crowded with girls strolling arm in arm, with groups of young boys and tourists and the terraces of the bars were jammed. Small boys were running around the kiosk at the centre of the square. In front of Raimundo's shop window a few men stood talking.

I had to cross a barnyard filled with moving shadows to get to the house the waitress had mentioned. The front room was lit by a single bulb encrusted with dead flies. A middle-aged woman in black waited on me: 'I don't know if you'll like any of the few flowers I've got left, sir. There won't be any fresh ones till tomorrow.'

I bought a small bunch, mainly carnations and had to wait for a little boy to bring me the change for a thousand-peseta bill. As I walked across the yard shut in by grey walls and yellow roofs I wondered whether it had been a good idea. It made me feel quite shy to walk to Anna's house, with that bunch of flowers in my hand.

Countless stars, glittering harshly, whitened the cloudless night. Voices, barks, acrid smells filled the crooked alleys. When

I went past a bar I heard the clatter of dominoes on marble tables.

I left the flowers on the table in the entrance; the kitchen lamp threw a rectangle of light on the floor and the wall.

‘Was I long?’

Her short skirt revealed her knees and the lace border of a starched petticoat. She had put on shoes with thin red straps, and also stockings.

‘Very long!’

The enamel beads on her bare neck matched her ear-rings. I lightly kissed her heavily made-up lips and she lifted her hands—one of them held a can opener.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I suppose you spent a lot of time at the post office, telephoning.’

‘Wrong. I spent it in a private matter.’

‘I warn you I’m a very bad cook.’

‘I thought so. Beautiful women are the worst cooks. May I have a shower?’

‘You know where it is upstairs. I think I’ve put out everything for you.’

When I came out of the shower with a towel draped round my waist I put the flowers on the bed. When I called from the top of the stairs Anna came immediately. She came in and fell silent.

‘I really thought you’d gone to telephone,’ she whispered.

‘Forgive me for making you come upstairs, but I didn’t know where to find a vase. And without water flowers don’t last . . .’ I stopped on seeing her seated on the edge of the bed, the flowers in her lap, and her eyes full of tears. ‘But Anna . . .’

I squatted at her feet.

‘Thank you,’ she ran her fingers through my hair.

‘Did it make you sad?’

‘No, no.’ She shook her head twice. ‘It isn’t because of you or me.’

I kissed her knees, my arms round her legs.

‘Let me have them, I’ll put them somewhere.’

‘There’s a vase in the dining room.’

When I came back she was standing near the curtains, which

HORTELANO

she had drawn back, in the half-dark. My clothes were neatly folded. It reminded me that I had nothing on but the towel. I stroked the slippery material of her dress, and Anna turned round and put her arm on my neck.

‘Finished?’

‘It was only a memory.’

‘I don’t want you to have bad memories.’

‘Look out, don’t stumble.’

The bed gave way noiselessly. Anna took off her shoes, using her feet instead of her hands.

‘I won’t put up with this darkness. I can’t see you, my sweet.’

I began to unbutton her dress, but she got up from the bed. As though hiding herself, she crouched and quickly undressed. Through the window I saw the sky of a clear, hot night.

‘And the dinner’s half cooked.’

‘Is dinner so important?’

She jumped on to the bed and we kissed.

‘Not in the least.’

I noticed that she had shut the door. In the dusk I thought I felt the stir of a slight breeze. Anna was emerging as a different woman. Or rather as the woman I had inevitably thought her to be.

When our lips parted, she anxiously tried to catch my eye.

‘Come on,’ she said, ‘you’re driving me crazy.’

14

THE CEASELESS ticking led me down the stairs and into the kitchen, where it swelled to a loud noise from the refrigerator. I drank some water and stood there for a few moments, drained of energy. Although I was naked, I was covered with sweat, dull with fatigue and lack of sleep. I turned on the tap again full force and put my head under the strong stream. On the stairs I lost one of Anna's slippers. There was a faint light in the bedroom. I stretched out gingerly on the bed.

The orange curtains formed two dark columns. Anna had turned her head away from me, but her hip touched my body. I moved my hand forward until it rested on her belly. For a few minutes I thought I might go to sleep. But suddenly I found myself dripping with sweat and with a prickling sense of restlessness in my legs. Lying motionless, I worked out the series of minor movements I would need to light a cigarette. As I stared at the window I caught myself wondering whether dawn came earlier in summer or winter. I drew up my legs. The vague outlines of my knees rose like two peaks in front of the darkness. Any moment now I would reach the edge of the bed.

'Are you awake?'

I turned on my side. Anna had not changed position and even after her murmured question she didn't turn her head.

'Yes.'

Her cheeks and the corners of her mouth broke into a smile.

'And you?'

'The same.'

HORTELANO

'Can't you sleep?'

'Only in snatches.'

'Start counting sheep.' She gave a short hoarse laugh. 'I've sent ten herds across already.'

'When I was a little girl my mother told me I should say Ave-marias.'

'Does it work?'

'No. Not when it's real insomnia. I heard you a while ago. Did you go for a shower?'

'A drink of water.'

'You smell damp.'

'I wet my head.'

'Are you all right?'

'Fine.'

'I'm sweating. It's the hottest night of the summer.'

'Your refrigerator sounds like a clockmaker's shop.'

'I'm used to it.'

'Oh, I can't hear it now. Do you want a cigarette?'

Anna's eyes were two small sparks. I changed my position because of the stinging heaviness in my legs. When she put out her cigarette, half smoked, she caressed my chest. It was then I remembered, with an odd clarity, that I had forgotten to send Juan his three hundred pesetas as I had promised last Saturday. The omission made me lose the sensation of Anna's skin, of her scent, of the dusk, the slow continuous perspiration of our bodies.

'You saw her when she was found, didn't you?'

I felt myself sinking into a wave of drowsiness.

'Sorry, Anna, I didn't hear you.'

She cleared her throat.

'I asked you if you'd seen the girl who was found dead last Tuesday.'

'Yes, I did. But why do you think of that now?'

Suddenly I found her in my arms, pressing herself into me. First I assumed that it was desire. Then I felt her spasmodic tremors.

'What's the matter, Anna?' Her teeth grazed my neck. 'I'm here, child. Stop it!'

'I know.'

'Are you afraid?'

'You've seen her, tell me—is it true she wasn't disfigured?'

'You mean, was she injured with bruises, or blood?'

'That's what I mean.'

'No. She looked calm, as if she were asleep. I saw her on the beach, lying in the sand.'

'Did you see all of her? Her whole body?' I nodded, 'and was she naked?'

'Yes, she was.'

'There weren't any marks of beating on her body either?'

'No.'

Slowly her trembling ceased. We laced our legs. I felt completely awake and strangely peaceful. Anna lifted her face. With her wrists together she cupped her hands around my jaw; the ends of her fingers gently touched my eyelids.

'Javier, you're not lying to me are you? You're not saying that because they make you?'

'Just a second, Anna.' My voice, uncontrolled, sounded shrill. 'What do you mean? Who would make me lie to you?'

'Never mind.'

'But I want to.' I pulled her body upwards and propped her up with a pillow; 'I don't know you very well, Anna, but I do know that something is worrying the hell out of you. Are you afraid?'

'Not just afraid.'

'But afraid too. Why? Do you think it might happen to you?'

'It could happen to any one of us. Any girl like me could get it in the neck one day. It's an old story.'

'Who told you that the girl on the beach was beaten? I repeat, there were no marks of violence on her.'

'Then they poisoned her. Or they stuck a red-hot iron between her legs. How do I know?'

'Steady, Anna. Let's discuss it calmly. Suppose that girl did meet a violent death. Why should you be afraid of the same sort of end?' She took her hands from my cheeks. 'You aren't in the same situation. You're afraid of getting mixed up with some

HORTELANO

brute who might assault you. That other girl was different. We don't know what she died of, we don't even know who she was. Why should you identify yourself with her? Calm down, love. The heat's got on your nerves. That and lack of sleep.'

She forced herself to keep still, but she was crying convulsively, in growing, painful sorrow. I wanted to raise her head but she resisted.

'I've got to identify myself with her. I've got to. That's what makes me cry. She was another whore like me.'

'What are you saying, Anna?'

'A lousy stinking whore like me. Just like me.'

She threw herself half-way around and let her tears flow, her face buried in the sheet. I took my hand from her shoulder and waited. She opened her legs as though digging her knees into the mattress to contain her shuddering sobs.

The pale sky had the look of a field covered by snow or mist.

'Did you know her, Anna?'

The loud sobs had stopped and her shoulders hardly shook any longer. Seen close, her flesh was smoothly soft where the skin was not tanned. Her back, only faintly indented, bulged a little at the armpits. Anna pulled her hands from between her thighs and raised her arms above her head. I kissed her fingertips; she abandoned her palm to my lips. A truck rumbled past close by.

'You knew her?'

She propped herself up on an elbow. Absently, she let me wipe the sweat and tears from her face with a corner of the sheet.

'You should have a shower.'

'Yes,' she mumbled.

'A good shower, a good cold one. And I'll make some coffee. We had a lot of gin after dinner. A shower, coffee and a cigarette, what about that, Anna?'

'Yes.'

I thought she would get up, but she stayed with me, shoulder to shoulder. I smoked and knew she was awake. Absurd that the girl with the square mouth had been a friend of Anna's. I failed

to recall her features, the shape of her legs or breasts. Perhaps I hadn't even seen her eyelashes when I leaned over her body, spellbound by her death.

With my fingertips I stroked Anna's face.

'She was a friend?'

Turning her back on me, she drew up her legs. I kissed her slowly and repeated my question.

'Leave me alone.'

For a few seconds I stayed with her, then got out of bed. The glare of the electric light in the bathroom blinded me. Under the shower I began to feel better. Anna's cosmetics were littered on a small white table. I rubbed my neck and temples with eau-de-cologne; it was much too scented, but it was a tonic.

Anna lay on her back with her eyes wide open. I stretched out beside her, drifted into sleep. The fingers of my left hand touched the tiles of the floor. My mouth was dry and tasted of tobacco.

'Forgive me?'

'What is there to forgive?'

'That scene. You'll find out what I'm like. I'm a stubborn fool.'

'Well, if you don't feel like talking . . .'

'Are you sleepy?'

'Are you?'

'No. I've had a few bad days. The worst was that I had to keep my mouth shut. They told me I had to. When I saw her picture in the papers it upset me. I went to the Civil Guard, and one of the police was there. I told him I knew Margot. He asked me a lot of questions. As soon as I was there I was sorry I'd gone.'

'Which day was that?'

'The day we met, Friday. The policeman kept me there the whole afternoon and I had to tell him things I hadn't even remembered. Then I wanted to get drunk, so drunk it would stop me thinking. It made a great impression on me that you and your friends were living at the Colony. I would have liked to ask questions, but I didn't dare. The policeman said I'd be thrown out of the village if I said anything. I swore I wouldn't tell anybody I knew Margot. He said it was important that I

keep quiet, if they were to solve the case. But I was sorry because it meant they had me on record here and because it always means trouble if one has anything to do with the police. Anyway, I was out of my mind. And the things they said in the paper!’

‘They haven’t interrogated you again?’

‘I told that man all I knew. That I knew Margot slightly from the bars in Madrid.’

‘She lived in Madrid?’

‘The last five or six years. Before that she lived most of the time in France.’

‘Why didn’t you go to the police until Friday?’

‘I don’t know why. Her photo wasn’t in the paper until Thursday. Then I thought I’d wait till Saturday and ask my friend his advice or go to Madrid and try to find Margot’s aunt. Oh, I thought of a thousand and one things. I still can’t understand why I had to look for trouble. They would never have known that I was a friend of hers and we weren’t really friends. We got on well, but friends, no. It made me furious, you know? It seemed to me they’d done something with the photos so that the injuries didn’t show.’

‘Anna, am I the only person you’ve spoken to?’

‘First I thought you might tell me what you’d seen in the Colony, or at least what you’d heard. Then I decided I wouldn’t ask you anything. And as you see, I couldn’t stick it out. It was stupid of me.’

Holding her by the waist, I forced her to look at me and I spoke to her slowly, measuring every word.

‘I understand. You’re sorry you’ve confided in me, but I won’t say anything about it to anyone. You can trust me, Anna.’

‘Javier, I believe I’m in love with you. It doesn’t take much time to be in love, or at least to begin to fall in love. I know you’re different and won’t be interested in me for long. But I also know that you’re a good man. It’s easy to see and I see it. Will you help me to find calm again?’

‘Yes, Anna.’

‘If I think of who you are and how little we’ve been together it makes it seem funny I trust you so. These last few days when

I was in such a state I was thinking of things that happened while I was a little girl.'

'Anna, why do you think that I'm good?'

'One feels it.'

'Because of the way I treat you?'

'Yes, for one thing. And because the other day you helped me get over being tight. You have a mind for other people and what happens to them.'

'No, Anna.'

'Oh, yes. But I don't think you're foolish. On the contrary, you're very clever. And you know all there is to know about women.'

'You mean because I noticed you had put stockings on for me?'

'Don't pull my leg.'

'Look, it's dawn.'

'Would you like a cup of coffee?'

'It's good like this, being close together. Anna, that girl Margot, what was she like?'

'Just an ordinary girl. Like me. She didn't have a friend because she didn't like complications.'

'And she used to go to the bars on the Gran Vía?'

'Of course, that's where I met her. Sometimes early in the afternoon we sat down together and had a chat. She never borrowed money and never played dirty tricks. Sometimes you wouldn't have thought she was a whore. She spoke French as well as Spanish and she never swore. I told her she could get a job as a secretary. But she did drink a lot.'

'How old was she?'

'Twenty-something. Twenty-eight or twenty-nine, I'd say.'

'Anna, that girl's death made a great impression on me.'

'Her name wasn't really Margot, you know. Once I heard her say it was Maruja.'

'Since she turned up on the beach I've been thinking a great deal.'

'Really?'

'Yes. It's so strange you knew her, that you tell me things

HORTELANO

about her life . . . These last few days I've been imagining that her life was different from an ordinary existence. We always imagine that other people are different.'

'There, you see—you're good.'

'My friends say they find me strange, and I deny it. But the truth is, I find myself strange, Anna. I'm turning ideas over in my head of the sort that never worried me before. And people I've known all my life look different to me.'

'Are you sad?'

'Sad? No, not sad. Sometimes I'm angry.'

'Yes, it's good that you and I are here together. Close to each other.'

'Anna, you're getting excited.'

'Let me. Can I help it if I desire you? I'd like to be a normal woman.'

'Anna, my love, never that.'

The light shone into the room. It was still and warm and the air was sweet. Afterwards, in Anna's arms, I lay with my hand near a small bandage on her upper thigh and felt the lightness and pain of my body. Within a few minutes the sun would flood the window.

15

THE LAST of the sunlight touched the plants on the wall of Amadeo's roof terrace. It was a few minutes to nine by my watch. I heard the children laughing in the street. The door to the empty hall stood open. I opened the folding doors to the living room and heard them turn round with surprise.

'Haven't I told you a thousand times that you shouldn't watch television in the dark?' I turned on the lights.

'Oh Uncle Javier,' said Leles, 'now you've spoiled the best for us.'

Enrique got up, lit a standard lamp and switched off the ceiling lights.

'All right,' I went on. 'At least one lamp, even if it's a small bulb. Otherwise you'll ruin your eyes . . .'

'Be quiet,' said Martita.

I sat on the sofa and lit a cigarette. When the sheriff on horseback beat the rustler to the draw the children clapped. Sitting cross-legged on the floor they forgot me. I bent over Joaquín.

'How's your treasure?'

'Fine.'

'Have you been to the beach?'

'Yes.'

'Did you have a good time?'

'Sssh!'

'Papa,' said Dorita.

'With grown ups,' said José, 'it's very difficult to watch television in peace.'

HORTELANO

'If you want me to go . . .'

'Don't go,' said Asun, 'but be quiet.'

The free-for-all in the saloon bar was imminent. I shut my eyes. The music stopped. In the silence I heard the children's breathing. Ashes from my cigarette fell on Marta's red sofa. I quickly wiped the leather and rose to my feet.

'Give it him.'

'Smash him!'

'Look, Asun, what a hook!'

'Oooh, you'll kill him.'

'What a man!'

I shut the doors silently. It was very dark in the garden. I knelt down by one of the water spouts. The cold water wet my shirt. Anna would be lying in bed or she might be in the kitchen with the continually ticking refrigerator.

One of the street lamps was out. There was a light breeze as I crossed over to Claudette's garden. Santiago, who was sitting on the veranda, did not notice me till I got to the steps.

'Look who's here! The prodigal son!' He rose slightly from the seat of the wicker chair. 'What made you come back home?'

'Hey.'

'Sit down for a minute. The women are down by the tennis courts. Claudette and Emilio have gone across to the Hofsens.'

'Is Dora by the tennis court too?'

'They were playing until a short time ago. Sit down and don't worry about Dora. She'd forgotten that you existed. And where have you been?'

I slumped down in the easy chair. The faint glow that came through the window left this corner of the veranda in darkness.

'Not a breath of air here either.'

'What would you like to drink?'

'Nothing just now. When did the Hofsens arrive?'

'This morning. Amadeo, Marta and I had coffee with them. Dora stayed to lunch. It was too hot to go to the beach before seven. Your son Enrique sprained a wrist. Andrés is still asleep

—his siesta began at four. I’—Santiago chuckled—‘as you notice, want to see you on my own to hear that there is a world outside this.’

‘There is.’

‘A wonderful world without Don Antonio?’

‘Did he rattle on so much?’

He crossed his arms and tucked his hands into the short sleeves of his green shirt.

‘About international politics. By the way, he’s delighted with you. He says you have a complete understanding of events in Cuba, China, the Congo and the rest of a world in turmoil.’

‘He was the only one who said anything. Yesterday I ran out of petrol and asked him for some. Luckily it was short but while it lasted he practically smothered me in speech.’

‘He came down to the beach and even the kids ran ten miles rather than listen to him. He is the Grand Bore of the Colony.’

‘And Emilio—is he still angry?’

‘He and Asun came to lunch too.’ Santiago’s black leather sandals glittered. ‘A pedagogical meal, complete with discussion. Dora and Emilio on one side, Claudette, Asunción and I on the other silently imbibing educational methods. Not what poor Asun needs, exactly.’

‘Claudette is a marvel. Whatever she says I agree with.’

‘Fortunately Emilio had the rare tact not to mention you once during lunch.’

‘Which means he’s still angry.’

‘Touchy, at least. Andrés and I spent the morning with our grafts. It was lovely not to see and hear any one and to work on something so useless and beautiful. This autumn I mean to ask the Mayor to appoint me gardener in the park of Cuidadela.’

‘And Elena?’

‘She told me about Andrés’ siesta. She was playing tennis a little while ago. Dora’—Santiago’s laugh sounded mocking—‘is hoping you’ll apologize to Emilio.’

‘Dora always hopes that I’ll do what I least want to.’

‘Oh, yes, listen: Ernestina’s on the rampage. She’s got us all

HORTELANO

to take her plan for a fiesta seriously and you'll be roped in before you notice. In any case she'll ask you for a contribution.'

'I've forgotten to pay Juan again!'

'What?'

'Nothing. I owe Juan some money and I only remember it when I can't do a thing about it.'

Santiago hooked a leg over the arm of his chair.

'Do you feel like revealing the unofficial secret of your excursion before the women turn up?'

'But what do you imagine I've done? Do you think I've got a mistress tucked away in Barcelona or somewhere on the coast?'

'Perhaps a new business deal.'

'Smuggled goods, of course.'

'Smuggled goods,' laughed Santiago.

'No. Now listen. It's all very simple. Last night I came across Fermín. I don't think you know Fermín, but you may know of him. He's an engineer and works on electrification projects. So we started chatting after dinner, and we had some drinks. He goes back to Madrid in December. He's got certain plans, and I suppose he needs money. The old story.'

'But where did all this happen?'

'Oh, in the village.'

'Was it hot there too?'

'Yes, very hot.'

Santiago's cigarette-end was a red dot in the dusk. Behind the bluish line of street lights and the blurred mass of trees and roofs there glittered a few stars. There was a sound of water, or perhaps of wind.

'It's quite a while since we went down to the beach.'

'Yes,' I said.

Amadeo came out of the house and started laughing when he saw me.

'But can't I go away for a single day?'

'Shut up, I know you. Tell us at once what you were up to yesterday. And I warn you Dora is on the warpath.'

'Would you like a drink?' Santiago asked.

'Not now. I've just had the best shower of my life.' Amadeo sat down on one of the chairs, pushed it up to mine, and patted me on the thigh. 'Come on, take the stopper out.'

'Last night I met Fermín in the village.'

'Fermín?'

'Yes, Fermín.'

'What the hell was Fermín doing in the village?'

'Something about public works.'

'What public works?'

'Electrification. The shower doesn't seem to have cleared your head. I met Fermín, we had dinner together and drank whisky and talked. I was so tired I stayed at the hotel.'

'And this morning?'

'I got up late. Raimundo came to fetch me and I looked at some tackle in his shop. And at a booklet about a sixteen horse power out-board motor.'

'I do so want to go out to sea,' said Santiago.

'Tell me, what were you going to say about Elena when this character arrived?'

'I don't know, I've forgotten.'

'Elena told me Andrés was asleep. Andrés and this one spent the whole morning . . .'

'Yes, Santiago told me.'

' . . . with their grafting. Ernestina went to the village too. She took the car after lunch.'

'What did Ernestina go to the village for?'

'Something to do with that damned party of theirs, I suppose. Try to avoid her. She's worked out that we'll have to pay five thou' per head.'

'It'll be nearer six or seven thousand,' said Santiago.

'Have you been looking into the sanatorium project?'

'Yes, during my rest. Marta was sleeping like a log and there was I, sitting in bed sweating like a pig, earning my keep.' Amadeo let himself fall back against the chair, his hands behind his head. 'It's not a very good deal.'

'If I'm disturbing you . . .'

'Nonsense, stay here,' I said.

'For the moment it's no good. A couple of years ago I'd have been the first to advise it. But not now. At least we'll have to wait a few months, things may change. I'll show you what I've worked out.'

'Right.' I rose. 'Now I'll say hello to the women.'

'Haven't you seen Dora yet?'

Santiago got up too while Amadeo stretched.

'It might be better to sit in the pergola.'

'If there aren't any mosquitoes.'

'Now I'd like the whisky you offered me before.'

'There aren't any mosquitoes—we spray with DDT.'

'In the middle of the garden at night, and in all this heat, there are bound to be mosquitoes.'

'You see, he always contradicts.' Santiago took my arm as we went down the steps.

Amadeo followed us along the path in front of the house.

'I'd like to find the man who said the climate of this place was stable.'

'You built the garden city. The rest of us'—Amadeo caught up with me—'fell for it and bought your villas.'

'It's charming to see how you two work hand in hand to exploit your poor neighbour.'

'Santiago the neighbour.'

The bulbs concealed in the foliage of the box hedges filled the pergola with a faint light. Elena, Dora and Marta were seated around a table, while Don Antonio was telling Ernestina something that sent her into gales of laughter. Elena was wearing a blue dress with white shoulder straps.

'Look who's coming,' said Marta.

'Good evening,' I called.

'Well well,' said Elena, 'where did you find him?'

'Nowhere.' Santiago put his hand on Elena's back. 'He's got a perfect alibi.'

'Hello.' Dora offered me her cheek. 'I couldn't telephone last night. It was too late and . . .'

'I wasn't worried,' she interrupted me. 'Have you seen the children?'

'A while ago they were at your house'—Marta, a glass in her hand, gave me a smile—'staring at television.'

'This morning Rafael brought the Montserrat film,' said Amadeo.

'Which film?'

'Good evening, Don Antonio.'

'I hope the trip went well, Javier.'

'You know the film we took of the excursion to Montserrat.'

'Oh, yes. I know. It must be out of this world.'

'Javier, I want to talk to you.'

'I know what about.'

'My friend, Ernestina will get the last asset of your fattest account out of you.' Don Antonio squeezed through between the iron chair and the little table on wheels.

'Since you're all thirsty, I'll do the honours for Claudette.'

'Marta, you're an angel,' Santiago said. 'I'll help you.'

Ernestina dragged me a few steps away. I lit her cigarette for her. Marta raised a whisky bottle and I made a sign of assent to her.

'I passed you on the road. Well, you passed me.'

'This afternoon?'

'I drove the Lambretta and you overtook me. I shouted and tried to catch up, but you must have been doing a hundred. I haven't mentioned it here.'

'Why not?'

'Darling, I can't possibly tell whether you want anybody to know where you came from or not.'

'Ernestina, my love, I have no secrets.'

'You're a gang of sourpusses. And you're an ungrateful wretch. Well, never mind, our party will be fabulous. Santiago's going to look after the lights.'

Marta handed me the glass. I saw Asunción coming from the direction of the street.

'Hello, Javier . . . I managed to send the children to their respective houses. They'll be having their suppers by now.'

'How good of you, my dear,' Marta said.

'Asun'—I kissed her on both cheeks—'you look lovely.'

'When did you come back?'

'A little while ago. Last night I met an old friend in the village. Fermín.' I looked at Dora who had risen. 'And then it got too late.'

'Fermín? Here we had a marvellous day on the beach.'

'So I've heard.'

'Javier, come here,' Marta called.

I lifted one of the garden chairs and pushed it between Marta's and Elena's. Elena's skirt was above her knees, and her crossed legs gleamed.

'What do you want to gossip about?'

'I learnt it in Valencia,' said Amadeo.

'During the war,' Santiago answered.

'No, not during the war.'

'Well, what do you want to gossip about?'

'We only want to have you here between the two of us.' Marta bumped her chair against mine. 'Now tell us some stories.'

'During the war I wasn't in Valencia.'

'But, Amadeo, why deny that you belonged to the Red Government? That you were one of their bigwigs?'

'Hold it, I've a closet full of medals.'

'Santiago and his jokes . . . ' said Don Antonio.

'What about Andrés?'

'Don't talk to me of Andrés, my dear.' Elena leaned on my chair. 'He must've taken a pound of sleeping pills.'

'I don't like that sort of joke,' Dora said.

'Medals you had from the Reds, I bet.'

'Did he get drunk last night?'

'Not at all,' said Marta.

'Well, that's what one might call it. Then he wanted to sleep. A while ago I managed to persuade him to have a shower. I don't think he'll be long.'

Elena's lips were painted a strong colour that made them look thinner. We stared at each other as if we wanted to kiss.

'Well, don't quarrel,' said Asunción. 'The fact is, Amadeo makes a very good *paëlla*.'

'Let him prove it. Come on, make one tonight.'

'Ernestina, you're mad. In this heat . . .'

'Javier, do you deny that you're a lone wolf?'

'What's that? I'm sorry.'

'That you're a lone wolf this summer. You don't want to be with us.'

'But, Marta . . .'

'Wait a minute, Santiago.' Marta got up. 'We'll have to call the maid and ask her to bring some more ice.'

When Elena, after lighting a cigarette, left her hand on her skirt, I took it furtively.

'You're mad.'

'I like your new dress.'

'And you're mad.'

'I couldn't remember your face.' She didn't let my hand go at once. 'It was a strange sensation not to remember your face. And when I saw you I realized——'

'That I looked pretty?'

'Not just that.'

'That you loved me?'

'Not just that either.'

'I give up. Explain your strange sensation.'

'I can't explain it. It was as if I needed you.'

The others were laughing noisily. The maid manoeuvred the table on wheels. I looked again at Elena, who was still smiling.

'Amadeo,' Asunción shouted, 'don't tell stories!'

Elena half closed her eyes.

'Javier, this summer is good. I'm happy, because you love me more than ever.'

'Elena, have you ever thought . . .'

'What are you two up to there in the dark?' Ernestina sat down on the ground with crossed legs, her head against one of the legs of my chair. 'Amadeo's going to make us a *paëlla* and later he'll show us the film of Montserrat.'

'Amadeo's a wizard.'

'Who's got a cigarette for me?'

Elena and I both offered Ernestina a cigarette at the same time.

'Would you like a whisky?'

HORTELANO

I poured it for Elena. Don Antonio announced he was going.

'Yes, yes, Asunción. You don't know Pura.'

'Why doesn't she come herself?'

'Oh, she . . . she . . .'

'Ernestina!'

'Yes?'

'Go and fetch Doña Pura.'

Emilio and Claudette entered the pergola arm in arm.

'No, don't bother, please. To tell the truth, I also want to listen to the BBC news.'

'You can listen here,' said Santiago.

'Good evening,' said Emilio.

'I'm delighted you're all here,' Claudette said. 'Even Javier. It's wonderful.'

'Amadeo's going to make us a *paëlla*.'

'Which he learned to cook in the International Brigade.'

'Poor Amadeo, such a good person . . .'

Elena got up and went over to Asunción and Marta, stopping for a few moments with Emilio. The straps of her shoes made her veins stand out slightly.

'How are you, Claudette?'

Amadeo and Santiago accompanied Don Antonio down the path.

'I'm dead. And you?'

'All right. I was in the village.'

'Listen, Ursula Hofsen asked about you. Don't forget to pay them a visit.'

'I won't. How's Karl?'

'Thinner than ever, though it seems impossible. They don't like Berne.'

'But Claudette doesn't mind. Claudette!'

'Yes, Ernestina?'

Ernestina leaned on one of the arms of Claudette's chair.

'You don't mind if we organize a *paëlla* here tonight? Later Amadeo'll show us the film of . . .'

'Of course not. But you'll have to excuse me, I'm dead tired.'

Claudette lit a cigarette. Elena leaned against a table, her arms behind her; her breast tautened under the dress. Above the branches the sky was clear and dark. Anna would be lying on her bed by the open window, unable to sleep.

'Did you have a good time?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Any news in the village? Nothing new about the girl?'

'Perhaps they've found out who she was.'

Claudette stared at a spot on the gravel path.

'Why do you think so?'

'I don't know. I just imagine. The police are fast workers.'

'I stupidly wore myself out swimming. Will you mix me a gin and tonic?' She fell back in the chair.

When I raised my eyes Elena was watching me. I gave Claudette a glass and went for a short stroll in the garden, towards the low stone wall that formed an irregular line among the trees. Music drifted from the house.

'I told her,' Marta said, 'but my dear girl, you've no idea, not the slightest idea.'

'She has all her clothes made by a dressmaker in Puente de Vallecas, you know.'

'You're terrible, Elena,' said Dora. 'Javier, didn't you want to change?'

'Yes, let's go.'

'No desertions permitted!' Claudette said.

'And what about our game of cards?'

'We'll be back in ten minutes. Dora wants to see the kids and I want to change. See you later.'

The maid dragged one of the tables into a place that was better lit. Claudette, who had got up, went to Santiago, who was bringing a punch-bowl. Dora took my arm and hung on to it till we were out in the street.

'Are you tired?'

'Yes.'

'It's very hot.'

Dora's red trousers contrasted with her gilded sandal straps. As we turned the corner, we saw the big yellow moon behind the

HORTELANO

mountain. In our garden, a white light was battling with the shadows.

While Dora went to the kitchen, I glanced into Dorita's bedroom. The light went on on the staircase and I heard Rufi's voice.

I kept still under the cold shower. Perhaps Anna was already asleep. I heard Dora moving about in the bedroom.

'I'm glad Luisa's coming, for Ernestina's sake. The poor girl gets bored here, with no one of her own age and not a single young man.'

Dora, in briefs and brassière, sat in front of her dressing table and put on her shoes. I stopped in the bathroom doorway.

'You think Ernestina's bored?'

'Luisa and she get along very well. They could go dancing together. Last summer'—Dora was looking for a dress in the wardrobe—'some young men came to see us once in a while. Do you remember?'

'Yes.'

I put matches, tobacco and a handkerchief into my trouser pockets.

'Oh, listen, don't wait for me. I've still got a lot to do. Amadeo wanted a game with you before supper. And I must dictate a shopping list for Rafael to Rufi. Do you want anything?'

'No, thanks.'

She was in front of the mirror putting on lipstick.

'All right, see you later.'

In the street I felt certain that Elena had wanted to tell me something by her last glance. I hastened my step. When I entered the garden I whistled softly. The moon had risen over the hills and was smaller. I followed the path that circled the house. At the back a window was lit.

'Elena,' I whispered.

Suddenly I laughed a brief, half-choked laugh. I was under the fig tree near Joaquín's lair, waiting for her to appear. I wound my watch and put it on again.

She would come and we would be in each other's arms. My hands would feel the firmness of her flesh and the warm softness

SUMMER STORM

of tanned skin. Then, with the taste of her mouth still fresh, I'd look at her and feel better. I would see the reflected lights from Santiago's garden and hear the vague murmur of voices. We would be shivering with happiness in our island of shadows and silence.

I walked back into the street, bathed in sweat.

16

'LELES,' ELENA cried, 'stop churning up the sand, you'll blind us all.'

The little girl, with a brief blue and white fringed cloth round her middle, looked at me in bewilderment.

'Aunt Elena's right.' Stretching out, I patted one of her legs.

Leles ran towards the edge of the water.

'You'll get burned to a frazzle.'

'And you, too.'

'What do you want, oil?'

'What I want is for you to lie down by my side.'

There was not a single cloud in the blue sky, which hurt one's eyes. I buried my cigarette in the sand and put my forearm over my eyelids. Elena brushed my legs with the towel. Tiny multi-coloured dots kept flashing in front of my eyes.

'Aaah . . . it's good being here.'

'H'm.'

I moved my arm away and turned my head, with closed eyes.

'I feel like going into the water. Claudette says it's cool.'

'Is Claudette still swimming?'

'Yes.'

Elena passed a fingernail over my nose, as if she wanted to remove a few grains of sand. I felt the caress immediately. There was a small smile on her dry, half-open lips; they were very close to my eyes.

'I had a bad time last night, I didn't have you to myself for a single moment.'

‘Javier, you are bliss.’

I bent my head back as far as the length of my neck would permit and saw the still, green pine trees upside down.

‘You were delighted to be able to watch me among all those people knowing what a bad time I was having.’

‘You are the most blissful man any woman could have. You’re morose because we couldn’t be alone for a moment. It makes me feel seventeen.’

‘You can joke as much as you like, but I need you.’

‘Uncle Javier!’

I propped myself on my elbows.

‘What’s up, children?’

‘Enrique won’t let us have his shovel,’ said Asun.

‘Enrique, let the girls have the shovel.’

Enrique came a few steps towards us.

‘They have butterfingers.’

‘But they . . .’

‘And anyway, why haven’t they brought theirs?’

‘Now they’re going to bring them,’ said Dorita.

In the distance, Claudette’s head and arms were a white blob.

‘Where’s Joaquín?’

‘I’m here, Mummy.’ Joaquín was digging a hole a few yards from us.

‘Are you going to build the castle or not? Because if not I won’t make the ditch.’

‘We’ll do it.’ Enrique stopped in front of Joaquín. ‘If I don’t direct operations there won’t even be a ditch. Make it wider.’

I let myself roll over on my side. Elena’s belly was moving rhythmically. I examined her skin, the line of her hips, the small hollow of her navel. I stretched out my hand to stroke her arm. When she turned her head I saw a reflection of myself in her green sunglasses. The children were laughing. I heard the sound of the sea and breathed in a gulp of salty air.

‘What’s the matter with you and Dora?’

‘Nothing particular. She wants me to apologize to Emilio.’

‘Your wife’s a fool.’

HORTELANO

'Try to arrange for us to meet today.'

'This afternoon we're going to the village.'

'Who's we?'

'Marta, Santiago, Claudette, maybe Dora too. To the movies. Why don't you come along?'

'No. It would depress me. What time are you going?'

'Early. We want to do some shopping first.'

'And when will you be back?'

'Daddy, Aunt Claudette's drowned.'

Elena sat up with a start. 'What a silly thing to say, Enrique.'

'It isn't silly, Aunt Elena. Look if you can see her. We must go out in the boat to look for her, because she's drowned, I'm sure.'

'Enrique . . .'

'Yes, Daddy.'

Elena fumbled at her back to adjust her brassière. Before stretching out again she smoothed the towel.

'Your son's got a sinister imagination.'

'You'll be back for dinner, I suppose?'

'I hope so, but I don't know. If you stay alone all afternoon you'll be sorry afterwards.'

'I'll see . . . Anyway, I have to go to the village to pay Juan some money. Then I'll go for a walk and read. And I must look at Amadeo's report on the sanatorium.'

'How about it?'

'He says it's no good right now.'

I lit a cigarette. A few tiny drops of sweat clung to Elena's smooth armpit.

'I think we'll be back for dinner. At least I promise to do my best. Andrés won't be coming.'

'Andrés . . .'

'What's the matter with Andrés?'

'Nothing. Nothing.' I laughed softly. 'I expect it's jealousy.'

'Javier, please . . .'

'Perhaps we can go for a drive after dinner.'

'Yes, dear, I'll do everything I can, and even more.'

'If you arrange it I'll love you.'

Her hand lay between the sand and my back for a few moments.
'And if I can't, love me any way.'

'All right.'

I sat up and crossed my legs. Joaquín was helping with the sand castle and Enrique was grubbing for something among the nearest rocks to our right.

'You haven't seen my new printed cotton outfit yet.'

I touched the fabric that spilled from the canvas bag.

'What is it?'

'The sort of pants that aren't quite ankle length and a straight blouse.'

'What, a straight blouse?'

'Oh no. No such ideas, please, Javier.'

As I lay back I kissed her shoulder.

'You could have ten children in ten years and you'd still have the hips of a young girl.'

'I'd better not try.'

'You look like a smart young fiancée. Like one of those elegant fiancées I used to dream of in Salamanca in 1937.'

'And you look like a fiancé. With a crop of pimples you'd be the perfect fiancé. You're jealous, you're moody, you run after me . . . Only the pimples are missing. I love you dearly.'

Rufi came walking through the sand, clumsy in her felt slippers.

'Good morning.'

'Hullo, Rufi,' said Elena.

The children ran up to grab the nylon basket with their pails and shovels. Every time Rufi's black skirt fluttered and left her legs bare the blue veins on her calves showed.

'Do you want anything?'

'No thanks, Rufi.'

'Señorita Marta's coming down soon.'

'Tell her not to worry, the kids are no trouble.'

'Goodbye, sir.'

'*Adiós*, Rufi.' I searched in the sand till I found the cigarettes.
'Want one?'

'No thanks. Is there really nothing more between you and

HORTELANO

Dora? I ask because you're smoking too much, and that means bad weather.'

'Nothing particular. This morning she even laughed at a joke I told Karl.'

'Then what's the reason?'

'What for?'

'For your smoking so much.'

'I feel strange. I've told myself that so often it's become real.'

'Tonight we'll go out together. And warn the old witch at the cottage so everything's ready if we manage to slip away one evening.'

'Tomorrow's Sunday.'

'Yes, tomorrow is Sunday.'

'I believe all those rainy days have left me with a hangover,' I said. 'I ought to go out fishing, play cards, answer letters, play with the kids. If I don't I'm going to fall in love with you.'

'Be careful. Are you still thinking of the dead girl?'

I raised my arms and fluttered my hands. The excessively bright air shimmered.

'Our being at the cottage together seems too good to be true. Perhaps we could invent a complicated story and go off along the coast for a couple of days.'

'Tell me how.'

'For instance, you could say . . .'

The children's shouts made us sit up. Claudette was swimming towards us with swift, even strokes, her cap cleaving the water. When she was close the children waded in. Claudette jumped ashore and started running, with the children in pursuit.

'It's wonderful,' she cried as she ran past.

Marta, in lilac pants and a black blouse, came down the path. Elena took off her sunglasses, put her bottle of sun tan lotion in a transparent bag and joined in the chase. When Marta arrived they were all in a huddle, panting and laughing. Marta pulled the blouse over her head and took off her pants and shoes. Claudette took the cigarette I'd lit for her. Elena pushed her hair under her cap. I walked till the water reached my ankles.

It was an enormous blue morning: blue, green, grey among

the rocks, along the endless curve of the shore. Gulls were gliding over the sea further out. I tightened my belt and ran my hands over my face. The sun had scorched my shoulders so that they itched. Looking up, I saw Joaquín sitting in the wet sand, his muddy hands crossed on his chest. His face had an expression of conscientious endeavour.

‘Hi there.’ He seemed to wake up and smiled. ‘Why were you looking at me?’

‘Only because you have muscles like Superman.’

17

I DROPPED the match, which went on burning in the sand. The small white-crested waves no longer flecked the shore. Salt mixed with the taste of tobacco in my mouth and left my palate dry and acrid. Juan leapt from the boat, and Amadeo put out the lights. I could no longer see the children on deck, nor Asunción's motionless figure on the keel. Their voices were louder. Amadeo laughed.

'Well, here we are.'

'Come up with the boy and have dinner. And remind Rafael or Leoncio to give you the money.'

'Yes, Don Javier,' said Juan.

'Then they can take you down to the village again in the station wagon.'

'Right, sir.'

Walking beside Juan I went slowly down to the boat *Marta*. Asunción was trying to round up the kids. The boy was waiting, his hands in the pockets of the oil-cloth jacket.

'Come up tomorrow after Mass,' said Amadeo.

'Both of us?'

'Yes. Today we've beached her between the four of us, tomorrow we'll launch her the same way.'

'Enrique and José, go straight home.' Asunción, a bulging bag hanging from her arm, walked round the launch. 'You must set an example for the little ones.'

The children ran towards the trees and Juan's boy stood aside for Asunción.

'Take the lady's bag,' Juan said to the boy. 'All right, Don Amadeo, we'll be there tomorrow.'

'Thanks,' Asunción said. 'Don't be long, you two. Andrés and Emilio will be anxious to see you so they can be rid of Don Antonio.'

'Perhaps Santiago and the women are back from the other village by now.'

'Yes, Amadeo.'

Behind Asunción, José and Martita were dragging the tow-rope along. Juan and the boy walked up the path.

'Are you going to have a dip?'

Amadeo put his wrist watch down on the gunwale and nodded.

'Bye!' the others shouted from the pine trees.

While Amadeo went into the water I sat down in the sand. The launch smelt of pitch. Amadeo waded, his arms flung out. Darkness was closing in. I looked up to see if there was a moon.

My pants were tight over my knees. The sky was spattered with glittering stars. The Milky Way overhead was like a long strip of gauze or a thinning cloud of white smoke. I buried my cigarette in the sand. At this hour, Anna would be finishing her meal in some restaurant at the coast, or she would be in her friend's car, silent, her head cocked. I shut my eyes and saw Anna's face very clearly, her hands crossed over her belly, her wide lips. The others were probably back from the village. Not many yards from here they had found the naked body of the girl called Margot, drenched in the rain that had fallen intermittently that day. Asunción would tell them Amadeo and I had stayed on the beach. In a few hours Anna would be in bed in a hotel and let the man do as he liked, and end by being excited herself. Then she would lie still, would think of me, or of her dead friend, or of herself. Perhaps Elena was impatiently waiting for me.

I heard splashing and opened my eyes. The sky seemed lighter. I heard Amadeo breathing before I could see him.

'What, deep in thought?'

'It isn't hot,' I said. 'One can breathe. How was the water?'

'Marvellous . . . Shall we go and have dinner?'

HORTELANO

‘Whenever you like.’

He put his hands on the gunwale, pulled himself up and rolled on to the deck. His bald skull shone.

‘I’m hungry. The sea air makes me as hungry as a wolf.’

‘My mouth is full of salt.’

‘I could eat a whole horse.’

In the sand were the traces of footsteps and the furrows made by the ropes. Amadeo dressed next to the mast.

‘I was thinking of the girl they found dead here the other day.’

‘The papers haven’t mentioned her for days,’ said Amadeo.

‘Probably there isn’t any news.’

I tied my sandal, leaning against the gunwale.

‘Ready?’

‘Do you remember if the girl’s body was damp when you came to the beach?’

‘No, it wasn’t and I told the policeman that.’ Amadeo put his rolled-up bathing trunks into the rear pocket of his pants.

‘Perhaps the body wasn’t washed up at all.’

‘That wasn’t the point. It was raining that day and the girl should have been wet.’

‘What we don’t know is how long she had been lying there.’

‘True. I suppose, though, since morning. That is, she must have been lying in the rain for hours.’

‘Why morning?’

‘I imagine it would have been easy to leave the body there early, soon after dawn. Nobody was down at the beach, even the kids didn’t come to play till the afternoon.’

‘Emilio has forbidden them to run about. Every time they want to go somewhere, a grown up has to go with them. The kids are delighted, because it means they have the adventure of running away every day.’

‘Emilio’s an idiot.’

Amadeo laughed. We walked head down, careful not to stumble over the stones. After climbing the slope we stopped. The moon rose from behind the mountain peak.

‘It’s going to be very hot tomorrow,’ said Amadeo.

A few yards further on the first lights of the Colony became visible. Don Antonio called to us from Emilio's garden. While Amadeo walked along the path in the direction of two dark shapes, I remained near the street light, my hand on the gate.

'How was your cruise?' Emilio asked.

'We only went from the fishing village to the beach here. How are you, Don Antonio?'

'Very well, Amadeo. Will you come in, Javier?'

'I'm going for a shower,' I answered hastily. 'See you later.'

A light went on in the porch.

'So long,' said Amadeo. Asunción, leaning over a table, threw a shadow that covered the walls.

Emilio stayed quietly in his armchair. I started to whistle, and turned on my heel. The lights through the leaves of the trees made a lace pattern on both sides of the street. I met Andrés, who was sitting on a bicycle and chatting with José and Asun.

'A while ago I was with Don Antonio at Emilio's.' I shuffled my feet. 'Till the children came home.'

'Listen,' said Asun, 'will you let us go with you in the boat tomorrow? Daddy said we could.'

'We'll see.'

'The girls are a nuisance when we're sailing,' said José.

Enrique called to them from the other end of the street.

'Come on,' said Asun.

'Yes, I'm coming. I was asleep till about seven.' Andrés fumbled for his lighter in the pockets of his red jerkin. 'Then I spent more than an hour in aquatic bliss. The whole bathroom for me alone. Because it so happened that after lunch Elena had gone off to the village. And your wife too.'

'Didn't you know?'

'I suppose I did. It's a delight to have the bathroom all to oneself. And I need time and a lot of room for my hangovers.'

'This afternoon you haven't touched a drink.'

'Not one drink.' Andrés, one foot on the road, kept the bike balanced between his legs. 'I found even Don Antonio amusing. The other day I discovered a secret. Doña Pura was a money-lender when she was young. Don't you think that's fabulous?'

HORTELANO

'I'd like to know who invented the story.'

'A moneylender. A usurer, let's face it. You hadn't tumbled to it, had you? Elena says she had, she'd always noticed the certain something of a moneylender about that old walrus, Doña Pura. We must admit she's quite charming this summer. Hardly a smell to her. We'll have coffee together later on, shall we?'

'Yes, of course.'

Andrés trod on the pedals. Dorita and Joaquín, sitting on the sidewalk, were immersed in a magazine they held open between them. Rafael came up from the opposite direction.

'Did you take Juan and his boy to the fishing village?'

'Yes, sir.'

As I got to my garden I thought again that Santiago and the women would come back late and tired. All the lights on the ground floor were on. I lingered on the veranda to finish my cigarette. The familiar household noises drifted to me from the back.

I had a shower and changed. The garden smells came through the window of the bedroom. In case Elena and I were to go for a walk after all, I put on a suède jacket.

I switched off the lights in my study and in the living room. In the passage I came across Leoncio.

'Have you paid Juan?'

'Yes, sir.'

'See if you haven't time for the swimming pool in the morning.'

'I've called in the masons. It's their business.'

Rufi was trying to make Dorita eat a sandwich. Maria, busy in the kitchen, turned as I came in.

'The kids are dead tired, they're so sleepy they don't want to eat.'

'Tell them it's not true, Daddy,' said Enrique, drinking a sip. 'I've been eating ham.'

'Dorita's a very good girl and is going to finish this, aren't you, love?' said Rufi.

Dorita was chewing slowly, one hand dipped into the water

of the sink. Rufi was squatting on the floor, her black skirt two inches above the knees.

'You can eat as soon as you wish, sir.'

'Thanks, María, I'll wait for my wife.'

'The Señora said she'd be back after dinner.'

I wandered about in the back garden for a while.

Dorita was dozing in Rufi's arms. Enrique still hadn't finished his milk. 'To bed,' María told them. 'It's better for you to be in bed than to pick at your food.'

Enrique got up.

'Good night, son, sleep well.' I kissed Dorita too and she opened her eyes. 'Dream of angels, my child.'

I sat at the dining table, after turning on the radio. They read a long speech about the agricultural situation. I lit a cigarette.

Rufi came with the steaming soup tureen.

'After this I'll only have a little meat.'

'Yes sir. A steak?'

'But no potatoes, Rufi.'

After the soup I finished my cigarette. The announcer was reading statistics, his voice vibrating.

'Rufi, please turn it down a little.'

'Is the steak all right, sir?'

'Yes, fine. Are you going out tonight?'

'As soon as the Señora is back, I'm going out with my girl friends.'

'And Rafael? Is he still with that girl?'

'Yes, sir.' She smiled. 'They quarrel sometimes, but they go on.'

'She works at Señorita Elena's, doesn't she?'

Rufi's stomach pushed against the edge of the table.

'Yes sir. Her name's Manolita.'

'Of course, I know her. Rufi, aren't you bored here?'

'Bored?'

'I mean, without a boy friend.'

'No sir, I'm not bored. My girl friends and I have fun together. Not like that of course, but we talk a lot.'

'What do you talk about? The boys? Or Madrid?'

'Sometimes, yes, sir. And these past few days we talk about the poor woman on the beach. They say she's a foreigner.'

'Is that what they say?'

Rufi changed plates and put a silver fruit dish in front of me.

'There are some boys here who work in the camping place. They said so. You don't want any more to eat, sir?'

'No, thanks. What else do the boys say?'

'That she took poison because of her marriage.'

'But was she from the camping place?'

'I don't know. She had a husband in England and he neglected her. So she came to Spain and he was to come too. But he didn't, and he wrote to her saying he was getting a divorce. Then she took poison. A boy at the camping place, who's a friend of Julio the policeman, says that he had it from him. But what I say is, it's a funny thing to be naked if she wanted to kill herself. Though you never know. Those foreign women are very tricky.'

'You think that's true?'

'I think the police haven't solved it, or they'd have said something in the papers. Every time the police find out something, they make a great song and dance of it and tell it immediately. But *El Caso* this week doesn't have anything about it. They say she was very beautiful, a real blonde. You saw her, didn't you, sir?'

I dried my fingers on the napkin.

'Yes, Rufi. And she was beautiful. But she wasn't a blonde.'

'There, you see, people always exaggerate. You haven't eaten very much.'

'Thanks, Rufi, I'm not hungry any more. She looked asleep. She had a very lovely square mouth. No, I don't believe she took poison.'

'Poor little thing.' After a long silence Rufi blinked and said:

'Shall I bring the coffee now?'

'Yes.'

I got out the cognac and, before sitting down again, listened to find out whether the announcer was still going on with that speech. I sat down to drink the coffee when the door to the hall opened.

Dora, heaped with parcels which Rufi took from her, came up to me.

'I'm exhausted. And you? Are the children in bed?'

'Yes, and have been for quite a while. We went to the fishing village in Amadeo's boat. What's up in the village? Have a cup of coffee.'

'I will, but standing up if you don't mind.'

'Have you eaten?'

'After the movies we went to the cafeteria. Santiago was divine, he never stopped telling amusing stories. Marta, Elena, Claudette, Ernestina and I never stopped laughing.'

'Did you like the film?' I switched off the radio and took the cup and saucer from Dora.

'I'm going to bed. Yes, it wasn't bad. Italian. To tell the truth I didn't understand all of it. Films get more and more silly and involved. Are you going out? Elena asked me to tell you that the whole lot of them would be at her place.'

'I'll go there for a short time.' I touched one corner of Dora's mouth with my lips. 'Sleep tight.'

I took the bottle to the veranda, lit a lamp and slumped in one of the canvas chairs. Dora was talking to María and Rufi. Then María called Leoncio. Since I was sweating, I took off my suède jacket. Beyond the dark mass of tree tops there was a very black strip of sky without any stars.

'Adiós again,' Dora said from the window.

'Hasta mañana.'

The house lapsed into silence. I emptied my glass. I telephoned Rafael to ask him to get me the latest numbers of *El Caso* the next day. Then I telephoned Elena.

'Just a moment, sir.'

'If your mistress is busy don't disturb her.'

'Oh no, she says she's coming.'

'Thanks.'

She took a long time coming.

'So sorry, Javier, but that little devil Joaquin was a lot of trouble tonight.'

'You had a nice time, I hear.'

HORTELANO

'Yes.' She lowered her voice. 'I was thinking of you.'

'Do all you can so that we get away together for a while, Elena.' I attempted a slight ironic laugh.

'But you're coming now, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Amadeo, Andrés and Santiago are on the terrace. Claudette's just coming in.'

'Listen, try to stick it out till the end even if you're very tired. There's nothing in particular, but I must be with you tonight, alone.'

'All right, Javier.'

The air smelt of the sea, and of flowers and earth. In the lighted streets I walked briskly, hurrying more and more as I went up the slope.

The hall was empty. I climbed the outside staircase. Half way up the tennis court shone white under the moon, in ghostlike solitude. A light burned at a corner of the roof terrace. Amadeo was just offering whisky to Claudette.

'And the others?'

'Downstairs, helping Elena, because it's the maids' day off.'

I went to the lilo where Andrés was stretched out, his eyes closed, both hands clasped round a glass balanced on the pit of his stomach.

'Have you had dinner?'

'No. And I won't ever have dinner again.'

'Go on drinking, and within an hour I'll have to take charge of you and put you to bed. Is Marta here?'

'I don't care a damn whether you take charge of me or not. What a country! They force dinner upon you and then they don't let you drink in peace. Three cheers for Liberty!'

'Marta's gone to bed,' said Amadeo.

I lay down on one of the lilos, Claudette pushed the lamp a little further back and we were left in the half light. She gave me a whisky.

'Do you want anything else?' she asked.

'Yes, take Andrés' bottle away from him,' Amadeo said.

‘No!’

‘I respect other people’s liberty, Andrés. I’m taking your bottle away because I like you so much.’ Claudette bent over him.

‘Just when I was beginning to feel good . . .’

Santiago came out on the staircase with two more lilos perched on his head. Amadeo hurried to help him. Behind him, came Elena, her heels clacking, and Ernestina.

‘Right, and now I won’t move any more,’ Amadeo said, sitting down in a canvas chair.

‘Why all the shouting, Andrés?’ asked Ernestina, who was in pyjamas.

‘I didn’t shout. I was defending my rights.’

Elena smiled at me and in passing gave me a slight slap on the neck. Ernestina sat cross-legged on the floor next to Andrés’ lilo and Santiago plugged in the record player.

‘You weren’t going to bed?’ Claudette asked.

‘Yes, I was.’

‘But why so early?’

Ernestina raised her head to answer me. ‘Luisa’s coming tomorrow. And I’ve got to get up at seven.’

‘You won’t,’ said Elena.

‘Yes, my dear, I intend to get up at dawn.’

Claudette’s tall figure made a long clear outline broken by the line of her breasts under the sweater. From time to time ice tinkled in the glasses. Her legs crossed, Elena moved her left foot with the slow rhythm of the blues. Amadeo sighed.

‘It’s nice here,’ said Ernestina.

‘The truth is, we’re all tired.’

Towards the south a few clouds were suspended, motionless and very bright in the dark sky. I took a long swig of whisky and lit a cigarette. Elena was watching me.

‘Was it a good film?’ asked Amadeo.

‘Most amusing,’ and Elena stopped looking at me. ‘This is a beautiful song, and it’s very familiar. What is it?’

Ernestina turned towards the record player.

‘One of those silly sentimental pieces that so impress the . . .’

'Quiet, Santiago.' Ernestina listened until a clarinet joined the piano. 'Poor Butterfly.'

My hands smelled of tobacco. I removed them from my chin and took the glass from where I had set it on the tiled floor. Ernestina's pyjamas were a white blur. Claudette, perched on the railing, shifted her position.

'You're falling asleep,' said Amadeo.

'I'm not.' Santiago sat up in his chair.

'Javier, what became of that crank your father had as an accountant? An old fellow, as dirty as Doña Pura and as servile as a dog. When tobacco was rationed I let him have my card. A repugnant type.'

'He died.'

'Died?'

'Two or three years ago.'

'What the hell, I'm glad of it.'

'Andrés!'

'Elena, my love, I'm glad he died because he was a sample of the old domestic slave. With all the dirt of the firm on his shoulders—and they were full of dandruff—and with all the shabby tricks of accounting on his conscience. I'm glad.'

'What made you think of him?'

'I was seeing human shapes in the clouds. Don't you remember, Javier?' I suddenly sat up on the edge of the lilo. 'He was a mangy character but he always discovered human figures on maps, in flowers or in the grain of wood. I'm very glad I'm useless, as Elena thinks. Tonight I'm very glad that I didn't spend the last twenty years hobnobbing with accountants, consultants and the mucky rest, believe me.'

'Andrés, if you feel like saying shocking things, all right, but don't insinuate that I have thoughts I don't have. I've never thought you useless because you dislike business.'

'I hate all so-called business.'

'You're a good man,' said Ernestina.

'Dear Ernestina, that's just what I am. Since I was a small boy I've been very good. It hurt me to go to whores when Javier took me . . .'

‘Listen, Andrés, I . . .’

‘ . . . it hurt me to see the lack of honesty in business. This winter I’m going to found a university of Commercial Honesty. I’ve been so good, and I so enjoy being good that everybody loves me in spite of my drunkenness. Isn’t it true you all love me?’

‘We love you very much,’ said Amadeo.

‘And the women most of all. I noticed it the day we finished the war. At first, when I suffered so much because I was sensitive, I thought I was a sissy. Then I said to myself, hell, if I’m sensitive why hide it? And I told my mother, may she rest in peace, that I didn’t intend to move a muscle for the sake of the family fortune. My mother played the part of a widow with an only son. Then she, poor woman, put all her hopes in Elena. But Elena and I love each other. Fortunately there is Javier. Javier is the prop of the family. Without you the family would see its income decrease every year. You’re a splendid support, you keep us from sagging.’

Ernestina laughed shrilly, a background to Amadeo’s hoarse guffaw.

‘All you say is true, Andrés.’

‘Elena, I’m delighted you agree with me and understand the importance of goodness in everyday life. I’m delighted you love Javier and our son and my friends. I don’t intend to turn sentimental, Elena, but there were occasions at the beginning of our married life when I was afraid you would never love anyone.’

‘You’re extraordinary,’ said Claudette.

‘Tell me, dear husband, what do you mean?’

‘When I saw how beautiful you were, how well shaped, with that skin God gave you, you seemed to me incapable of tenderness. That damned sensitivity of mine made me suspect it constantly. Till the day it turned out that you were good too and then I stopped minding your beauty.’

‘How many whiskies have you had?’

‘Eight, Amadeo. When I’ve had twelve I always start explaining my life. It’s very pleasant here with all of you and the music and . . . well, everything. But I think something’s

happening all around us and we don't know what. You don't even seem to know that something's happening.'

'What's happening?' Santiago asked.

'I tell you I don't know.' Andrés lit a cigarette. 'Things happen. Ask Javier. He may know.'

'Because I read the newspapers?'

'You don't read them, Don Antonio's the only one who knows what's in them. But we all agree that the papers never say what's happening.'

I crossed over to Claudette. Elena put her hand on Andrés' forehead.

'That girl, for instance,' I said. 'The police go on investigating, but we know nothing.'

'Don't turn funereal, Javier. Go on, Andrés,' said Ernestina.

'You're sweating. Shall I bring you a damp towel?'

'Don't bother, Elena,' Andrés slid back till his head rested on the lilo. 'Your hand's more refreshing to me than all the towels in the world. I believe I'm so happy because the world seems to me a solemn, complicated dung heap. And I get on very well on the fringe. Santiago, when Claudette's blocking the bathroom, don't you hate her?'

'He'd like to murder me.'

'Don't hate her, Santiago.'

Amadeo pressed Ernestina's knees and got up.

'Come on, let's dance.'

Elena, still leaning over Andrés, kissed him on the mouth and stroked his shoulders.

'I think I'm going to bed,' I said.

'You're tired?'

Amadeo and Ernestina were dancing. I glanced at Claudette, who smiled at me.

'Well, see you tomorrow, everybody.'

'Javier old boy, don't go. I promise never again to mention that you took me to a brothel by the scruff of my neck.'

'I'm really tired.' Santiago dropped a piece of ice into his empty glass; Andrés and Elena were locked in an embrace with her sitting on his legs.

SUMMER STORM

I hurried down the stairs and walked to the first trees. From above drifted intermittent waves of laughter, confused voices and music. I leaned against a tree trunk, crushing myself against its rough bark with all my might. Then I could no longer bear it and began to run.

When I reached the beach I stopped at Amadeo's boat. My hands were shaking. Slowly I let myself dissolve in the loneliness of the beach. The waves came, small and frothy, from the distance which was sliced into minute fields by the moonlight. Much later I went home, very slowly, keeping as far as possible from Andrés' villa.

18

I OPENED my eyes and saw a light in the bathroom. The water must have been full on. I turned to the other side, trying to go back to sleep. Sun filtered in stripes through the venetian blind. After a while Dora walked past my bed to the closet, and put on some orange pants and a loose blouse.

My lids were heavy, my skin damp. Holding my pillow I kicked the sheet back with my foot. Dora was humming under her breath. Somebody shouted in the garden and at the same time a motor-bike came past. I opened my eyes a little. Dora pulled two slats of the venetian blind apart and looked out; the motor-cycle was already far away.

‘Javier.’

She had opened the curtains.

‘Javier, Javier!’

Dora shook me by the shoulder.

‘What?’

‘It’s half past ten, Javier.’

‘Half past ten?’ I turned on to my back. ‘Good morning.’

‘Don José María is sick.’

‘That’s too bad, nothing serious I hope.’

‘They sent word through Rafael that he was ill and couldn’t come this morning.’

‘What sort of day is it?’

‘I warn you, at twelve we must go to the village. It’s hot. Very hot. I’ll send Rufi up with the breakfast.’

‘And the papers, please.’

When Dora left the room I sat up and lit a cigarette. The bedroom had an unpleasant smell of stale air. I came back from the bathroom and went back to bed with a fit of coughing. Then I remembered Elena.

‘Sir . . .’

Rufi was at the door. The cigarette was mere ashes. I stubbed it out and wrapped myself in the sheet.

‘Come in.’

‘Good morning, sir. Did you sleep well?’

‘Quite well thanks, Rufi. Will you open the window, please? And draw up the blind. You look well this morning.’

‘I slept like a log.’

I balanced the tray between my stomach and my drawn-up knees. Before opening the window Rufi handed me the papers.

‘Did you have a good time last night?’

‘Oh yes, sir. Don José María’s sick and can’t come.’

‘So I hear.’

Rufi collected Dora’s clothes from the backs of the chairs and the floor. She went in and out of the bathroom a few times. As she put my leather slippers under the bed her forehead brushed the sheet; I stopped my reading. Rufi’s hair had an oily sheen. When she straightened up our eyes met.

‘Do you want anything?’ She smiled.

‘No thanks. I hope you don’t have too much work today.’

She turned round, standing at the centre of the open window, behind her the blue and green of sky and branches.

‘Pardon?’

‘I mean, it’s Sunday and I hope you finish soon.’

‘I try to, sir. This afternoon I’m going to the village. Rafael’s taking us in the station wagon. The other girls want to go to the camping place, but Rafael and I would rather be in the fishing village. And as he’s the driver we go where he likes. Beg your pardon, don’t stop reading the papers, sir.’

‘Don’t worry. If you wait a moment you can take down the tray.’

I slowly sipped what was left of the coffee. Rufi, arms crossed over her stomach, looked out of the window with a very slight smile.

HORTELANO

'You don't want anything else?'

'No, nothing.'

I soon got tired of the papers. With my hands behind my neck and the savour of the cigarette fresh in my mouth, I made a leisurely mental reconstruction of Anna's body. The light filtered through my eyelids and danced in a dizzy succession of coloured specks. Then Enrique and Dorita came in for their morning kiss. House, garden and street were full of small sounds and voices that seemed very near.

From the bed I telephoned Elena's villa.

'No, it isn't Andrés. How can you imagine that Andrés is up at this hour!'

'Ah, Santiago.'

'Andrés will be sensible in another hour. He's just got into his shower. Do you want me to give him a message?'

'No, no. I simply telephoned. I'm still in bed myself. Did you get home very late last night?'

'Not very late. Elena decreed we couldn't have any more whisky. Remember the brilliant form Andrés was in? Well, he outdid himself later on. We went out for a walk and he stopped in front of every villa and made up the case history of its owners in the form of a sermon. It was sensational. Oh, before I forget. Make your escape, because Don José Maria isn't coming and the women are organizing a trip to the village. Amadeo's gone down to the beach. In half an hour we'll launch *Marta* again.'

'That's fine. Listen, is Elena there?'

'She's with Ernestina and Luisa, who's just arrived. I'll call her.'

'No, no. Simply tell her to give me a ring as soon as possible.'

'We'll meet in half an hour on the beach. And keep it a secret.'

'See you later.'

I leafed through the newspapers, read the main news and got up to find a biro to do the crossword puzzle. Leoncio was examining a flowering plant in the garden. José ran down the street, ignoring Dora's shout from the veranda. Far behind the roofs, terraces and trees, against the even blue of the sky, the

mountain was cut in half by the shadow. The motionless tops of the pines were lighter in the morning. I sat on the bed and began to fill in the crossword. From time to time I was stuck and stopped to ponder, as if I were trying to remember, or about to discover, something profoundly important.

I heard voices in the corridor. Dora opened the door and stood aside for Ernestina and Luisa to pass.

'I came to see you because the forecast is that you're going to stay in bed till tonight.'

'Luisa, you look lovely! Let me see you.' We shook hands and she kissed me on both cheeks. 'Simply lovely! Hey, Ernestina.'

'You're a fine one. The day I come across a mature man like you I'll hang myself.'

'I leave you here with Lazybones,' said Dora, 'but don't hold him up, we have to go out at twelve.'

'It's a quarter past eleven, Dora. Sit down'—Dora shut the door behind her—'anywhere you like.'

'I love married people's bedrooms,' said Ernestina.

Luisa sat on the edge of the bed, crossed her legs, and patted her hair.

'You're thinner, my girl.'

'You angel!'

'You look five or six years older, which suits you because you're so young.' The shoulder straps of her chequered dress sat loosely over her angular collarbones. 'How old are you, Luisa?'

'All of twenty-two. And you?'

'The day you were born I was stuck in a trench up to my ears in mud.'

'Luisa's birthday's in August, so there couldn't have been mud in those awful trenches you're always talking about.' Ernestina turned to us, holding up one of Dora's hairbrushes. 'I wouldn't have dreamt that any of these heavily embossed silver handles were still in existence!'

'When did we meet last, Luisa?'

'In May, when Joaquín Maroto's son got married. Since then I haven't fallen in love even once.' She made the biro click

HORTELANO

in and out. 'I had a dreadful time at Zarauz, but it was brief thanks to Andrés, who wrote inviting me to Thursday's party.'

'Is it this Thursday?'

'Yes, it is.' Ernestina ran the brush over my head. 'So that's how much you care about the party! I warn you, Luisa, his mood's . . .'

'They send you their love and . . .'

'Unbearable.'

' . . . if you don't want to have their death on your conscience you should send the children there, to Zarauz. Your mother doesn't feel well if she's all by herself, even if she hasn't got rheumatics or whatnot. Well, now it's your turn. Of course you're still in love with Dora.'

'Go on.' Ernestina sat down beside me, her legs stretched out stiffly.

'Are you still earning money?'

'Recently nobody is.'

'My old man says he'll declare himself bankrupt. Why does she say you're unbearable?'

'Because he is. He doesn't care for anything.'

'I don't care about your great gala.'

'In other words, a business machine.' Luisa grabbed one of my ankles. 'I'll pep up the atmosphere, you'll see. Listen, I seem to remember you had a murder here this season.'

'A marvellous murder. Just like the movies.'

'They don't know whether it was a crime or not. Nothing's known. Anyway, it's about as marvellous as I'm fit to be a bishop.'

Ernestina beat me to the telephone.

'Yes?'

'Perhaps it's Elena.'

'We're with him . . . Well, in bed, oh dear . . . Yes . . . Now we're continuing our round of calls . . . See you later.'

Luisa leaned out of the window.

'We'll go so you can get up.'

'Tell me, Ernestina, how can you hold out here without a single unattached male?'

'Rubbish!' Ernestina patted the mattress before getting up.
'Now arise!'

Luisa took a few steps forward, arms akimbo.

'It may be because we're sick and tired of men, as you sometimes are of business.'

'I'm so glad you've come, Luisa. And forgive my get-up.'

'See you soon, Javier.'

'*Adiós*, handsome.' Ernestina threw the hairbrush on to Dora's bed.

I looked for the biro between the sheets, made a pile of the papers and lit a cigarette. Then I dialled. Elena answered almost at once.

'It's me. Ernestina and Luisa have just gone. Are you alone?'

'Yes. What did you want?'

'To talk to you.'

'I don't think we've many things to talk about.'

'What's wrong with you, Elena?'

'Nothing.' I noted that she tried to alter her tone. 'Briefly, what did you want when you called me before?'

'That's easy to guess. I want to see you and talk to you, since last night . . .'

'Better not talk about last night.'

'After all, I had the worst of it. I wanted to see you precisely to talk about last night.'

'What about, exactly?'

I changed the phone to the other ear and lowered my voice.

'I see it will be too difficult to explain by phone. Let's wait till we're alone together. What are you doing before dinner?'

'We may dine in the village.'

'Can we get away after lunch?'

'Impossible.'

'Why?'

'Because of Luisa.'

'What has she got to do with it?'

'Javier, Luisa came to my house this morning and I suppose Andrés . . .'

'Now listen . . .'

HORTELANO

'Let me finish.'

'All right. Go on.'

'Andrés will want us to go to some other beach. Anyhow come here.'

'I wouldn't think of going. What's more, I won't go to the village to spend a whole afternoon looking at you as if you were a stranger, without five minutes alone. No. I won't go. I don't want things to work out like last night. You can call for me when you like.'

'Last night . . . now listen to me once and for all, Javier, I stuck it out only for your sake. I was sick with sleep but I stayed because we'd planned to have a moment alone. And it was you who left, quite suddenly, in a flash. Now don't tell me . . .'

'Why did I go last night? Tell me, why?'

'That's what I'd like to know.'

'I left because I couldn't stand a conversation which didn't interest me in the least and to see you playing the beautiful part of your husband's wife. Do you understand?'

'But what should I have done?'

'At least realize that I was there. Waiting.'

'You're mad, Javier.'

'No, not mad, only fed up.'

'My dear, I can't see why?'

'With you, with me, with the life we live, shut up like rats. This is a rat trap in the open air. And you don't do anything to remove the difficulties either, Elena.'

'That's enough, Javier. It's too silly. You're being unfair and you know it. If you're fed up with me, find someone else.'

I left the ash tray on the night table, got up and faced the door, hoping to find the right words. The silence over the telephone was filled with a faint ceaseless hum.

'I don't want you to say such things.'

Elena's answer came with a rush.

'Leave me alone. It's your fault if I say those things. This morning I felt so calm . . .'

'Didn't you say you were annoyed last night?'

'Yes, of course I was. But I was calm because I thought you'd

explain, because I didn't expect this tantrum and . . . Well, I'll see you later.'

'Wait.'

'What for?'

'I'm not going to the village and . . .'

'You said so before.'

'Elena, please, I can't stand people around when I'm with you.'

'That's an old story, many years old. And I know some other things I thought you knew too. But for some reason or other you're bored or nervous or disgusted and you make me pay for it. I don't like it either if I have to act for hours. But have you forgotten I'm married?'

'If for once, like last night, I'm lucky enough to be on the point of forgetting it you're sure to remind me of it.'

'You're unfair, unfair and malicious.'

'No, you are, if you think I take it out on you if things go wrong for me elsewhere.'

'Of course you do, Javier. Otherwise, why all this?'

I said nothing. My throat was parched. I pressed my knees against the board of the bed and listened to the silence and the hum. It was some time before Elena spoke again.

'Now come on, Javier . . . See you later.'

As soon as I heard the click I threw the receiver down on the bed. Out in the garden the children were shouting. I picked up the receiver and put it back right.

I had just plugged in the razor when the telephone rang again. As I yanked at the razor I pulled the soap dish, the mug with my toothbrush, a few of Dora's curlers and the talcum powder on to the floor.

'Hello . . .'

Rufi had switched over from downstairs and for a moment I was disconnected.

'Hello, hello. . .'

'Javier, Santiago again.'

'What's up?'

'Come on, man, or you've had it. I've escaped from Asunción,

HORTELANO

but poor Claudette was caught. And I know Emilio's trying to find me.'

'All right, I'm coming.'

'Amadeo's just starting the motor; and you're still indoors, man! A nice Sunday morning, I don't think. Come on, quick.'

My skin was so slippery with sweat that the electric shaver bounced off and I had to leave some strips of my throat unshaven. Dora called to me from the garden. I came out of the shower, fumbled around for a towel, and by the time I finally looked down from the window, she had stopped calling my name.

'Javier, do you know how late it is?'

The car was near the entrance. In the street Emilio and Asunción, with a flock of children, were walking towards our house. Near them the Hofsens were chatting with Marta.

'Yes, I'm coming.'

Leoncio was still absorbed in his flowers. Ernestina's motor-bike, with Claudette on the back, appeared with the horn blowing rhythmically. Between the trees the orange blob of Dora's blouse moved towards the street.

I put on a shirt and trousers. Rufi climbed the stairs two at a time. I crossed the hall and heard the din out in the garden.

'Javier!'

I waited in the door of the lobby for Dora.

'But haven't you dressed? We won't get there in time.'

'I don't think I'll go to the village, Dora.'

'What about Mass?'

'I don't like hearing Mass.'

Enrique and José scampered on to the veranda. I hurried along the passage, crossed the kitchen and went out into the garden at the back.

'Good morning, sir.'

María was rolling up a hose.

'Good morning.'

I tried to open inward the gate of metal mesh, and then realized it opened the other way. I pushed at it with my foot.

My sandals were soon filled with dust. I walked fast, without

noticing the direction. Suddenly Joaquin caught up with me, panting and choking.

‘Where have you appeared from?’

‘I was hiding in your garden.’

‘Are they looking for you to tie you to a tree?’

‘No. May I come with you?’

I tore a dry stick from a shrub. Joaquín, breathing normally again, trotted alongside.

‘I was hiding because I didn’t want to go with them.’

As soon as we came out of the fir copse we saw the sea, dazzlingly bright, solidified into an immense stretch of varying colour.

‘Look, there’s the *Marta*. Shall we call? They’ll be expecting us.’

The noise of the motor sounded faint and far away. Anna would wake up in some hotel bedroom. Even Rufi knew what to do with herself on a Sunday afternoon. The boat was running smoothly, almost without rocking. I inhaled the warm, odorous air.

‘They’re sailing to Palma,’ said Joaquín.

‘No.’

He looked at me with the peculiar astonishment, half scared and half smiling, which I knew so well.

‘No?’

I put my arm round his shoulders.

‘Palma’s over there.’ I pointed.

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

Joaquín’s frown disappeared and he smiled broadly.

‘Shall we go to the pine wood?’

‘We’ll go into the water. It’s very hot.’

19

LUISA STOOD in the centre of the circle of canvas chairs and hammocks, her head bowed, absorbed by her hands which manipulated the lighter.

‘Have you been sleeping till now?’ Claudette asked.

I put my hands on the nickel tubing of one of the chairs and met Luisa’s eyes.

‘What news, sleepyhead?’

‘I got up three hours ago. You look better in your bathing suit, Luisa.’

‘And what have you been doing since five o’clock? Sit down here beside me.’ Claudette closed the book she was reading and patted the canvas chair. ‘This is marvellous weather.’

‘I potted around and tidied some of my papers . . . what are you reading?’ I touched Claudette’s legs as I picked up the book. ‘I see you’ve been in the water, Luisa.’

‘Your Mediterranean is wonderful. I’ve been here on the beach all day.’ Luisa got to her feet. ‘And now I’ll have the last dip of the day. Are you coming?’

I lay down on the lilo with my hands in my pockets.

‘Yes, it’s obvious that the weather is marvellous.’ I shut my eyes. ‘Yesterday the forecast promised good weather all week. Because of the anti-cyclone in the Azores.’

‘Very interesting. And above all, very comforting.’

I opened my eyes and saw Asunción, who was changing the clothes of one of her girls under the awning, some ten yards

from us. Claudette was still laughing when I turned my head towards her.

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘So I see. I want to say that the way things are going in the Colony it’s a comfort to hear someone talk about the weather.’

‘Which way are things in the Colony going?’

‘You know as well as I do.’ She crossed her legs. ‘Dora won’t speak to you, Marta doesn’t speak to Amadeo. Joaquín avoids his mother from morning to night, Emilio shouts at anyone who comes near him and Santiago seems to be stricken dumb. This is what one calls peaceful bliss. The only people one can still see are Ernestina, Luisa and you, because you at least use the rare times you are visible to talk about an anti-cyclone.’

‘And you . . .’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You are somebody one can see. What’s the matter with Santiago?’

‘He’s bored. Yesterday he had the traditional Sunday afternoon mood.’

‘He needs you.’

‘You’re very sharp.’

‘Why?’

‘There are certain expressions I have never heard you use before. It’s quite unusual to hear that Santiago needs me. I almost believe that you need somebody.’

‘I need you all. A little while ago I was thinking that I couldn’t understand why you didn’t tear Santiago away from this country. How you could bear to stay here after having lived most of your life in France.’

‘But you’ve always defended life in Spain as the best of all. Tell me what’s happened.’

I raised my hands. ‘Possibly only that I’m tired.’

Claudette took off her sandals and threw them into the air. Near the water, the children held Enrique down and tried to bury him in the sand. From under the awning José shouted that they must wait for him. A few yards further on Elena was swimming on her back and there was a kind of voluptuousness

HORTELANO

in the arc her arms described. The low sun filled the surface of the water with reflections of many colours. I slumped back in the hammock. Claudette, who had pulled on a yellow rubber cap, looked like a young boy.

'It's true. I can't explain how you can stand this milieu. As the years go by I'm becoming a revolutionary.'

'As the years go by we're turning into neurotics.'

Claudette ran down to the line of froth; when the water reached her knees she dived. The children, sitting in a closed circle, were silent. I changed my position to look at the sea.

'Hi, Javier!'

'Hello, Asunción! Aren't you going in?'

Asunción, propped up on her elbows, lifted her head and neck from the sand.

'I want to profit from the last sunshine. And Dora?'

'She stayed at home.'

With rhythmic strokes Claudette was swimming farther away. I watched Elena come out of the water and stop for a few moments with the children. Then she came up, straight towards me, her head low, her body swaying, her brown skin glistening.

'How are things?'

'Will you light me a cigarette?'

She spread a coloured towel on the hammock to my left. The smoke of her first drag at the cigarette hid her forehead.

'You've been in a long time.'

'I've only just seen you.'

'I came down only a few minutes ago.'

She stretched her legs and dug one heel into the instep of her other foot.

'Have you found Joaquín?'

'No.'

The almost horizontal sunrays hit me between the eyes and hurt. Elena was smoking, looking restlessly first in one and then in the other direction. Tense knots of muscles showed on her fleshy thighs.

'What did you do last night?'

'Sleep and go for a walk. I walked quite a long way. By the

time you came back from the village, I was already in bed. This morning I went with Amadeo to sail his boat to the fishing village.'

'This morning I was on the beach from twelve on.'

'Just now when I saw you come out of the sea, it occurred to me that my life depends on you this summer.'

'It doesn't seem so,' she smiled.

I reached out and stroked the curve of her chin. Elena's gaze and smile rested on me, quietly.

'Have you calmed down?'

We looked at each other for several seconds without smiling. I withdrew my hand. Asunción was reading the paper.

'No, I haven't.'

On her unpainted lips the evening light marked a few cracks. I smoothed a wrinkle on my trouser leg and sat down again, my arms on my knees.

'Why are you looking at me?'

'I'd like to kiss you and keep on kissing you. Hold you close, and forget everything.'

'Everything? Why did you behave so badly yesterday on the phone?'

'I don't know,' I lied.

'Why didn't you want to come with us to Mass?'

'I don't know that either.'

'You don't know anything.'

'No, I don't. I've been alone for many hours, many days. And I know less and less what's happening.'

'You mean what's happening to you. Because nothing is happening, Javier. Everything's just the same.'

'Maybe.'

'Yesterday you behaved badly and the night before even worse.'

'Let's forget it, Elena. I don't want to get tangled up again. When can we go to the cottage?'

She bent over to bury the rest of her cigarette in the sand. Her expression was normal again. It was almost indifferent, scornful.

'I hope sometime this week. Not tomorrow, and not the day

HORTELANO

after tomorrow. Not on Thursday because of the party . . . ?
She fell silent on seeing me get up.

'See you later.'

I had taken three or four steps before she spoke.

'Why all this, Javier ?'

'I'm going home,' I stammered. 'I've forgotten . . .'

'Why ?' In the silence I heard Claudette's voice and immediately after, Asunción's. 'Is it my fault that Dora makes life more impossible for you than ever ?'

She smiled, her hands crossed, her legs apart. Suddenly I became aware of what I was doing. I turned and walked quickly away, raising small clouds of dust.

At any moment the sea would be in shadow.

Andrés, Santiago, Amadeo and Emilio were playing cards in Emilio's garden and did not see me walk past, towards Joaquín.

'What are you doing here ?'

'I was watching the masons working in your bathing pool. When are you going to fill it up ?'

'Where have you been all day ?'

'Around. May I come with you ?'

'Look here, go straight to the beach and stop worrying your mother.' The boy leaned on a tree trunk. 'Do you hear me ?'

'Yes.'

'Well, then, go to the beach.'

'So I can't go with you ?'

'What for ?'

'Just to go.'

'No.'

Joaquín stayed there kicking the gravel against the oak tree. Rafael was squatting nearby, dismantling one of the wheels of the station wagon.

Leoncio came down the veranda steps.

'Vicente is here.'

'Tell him to come and we'll have our talk.'

I sat down in a wicker chair. Rufi was sweeping the tiles in a corner.

'Rufi, will you bring beer and gin please ?'

'Yes, sir.'

Vicente, guided by Leoncio, stopped at the edge of the gravel path.

'Good evening.' I got up. 'How are you?'

'Good evening, Don Javier. Forgive me for bothering you.'

'Come and sit down here.'

Leoncio went back into the house. Before Vicente stepped on to the grass he stared at it and then walked almost on tiptoe. From a pocket of his pin-striped jacket, he took out a pack of American tobacco. We lit cigarettes and Rufi put the drink tray on the table.

'Do you like beer?'

'Yes sir, very much.' Vicente sat on the edge of a chair and took a foaming glass. 'Thank you very much.'

'I do know you, but I couldn't remember your name.'

'Of course, we have seen each other several times in the village and Juan introduced us, do you remember?'

'Of course.' I drank a sip of gin.'

Vicente raised his glass to his lips.

'It tastes very good,' he said.

'Leoncio told me about your earlier visit.'

'Yes sir, I'm sure he told you. It isn't an urgent matter and I know how busy you are. I often say, Don Javier never stops working even on vacation. If my wife comes to the shop and tells me to leave I always say even Don Javier, who is a gentleman, works on his vacation.'

'Your shop is in our little local village, I believe.'

'Yes, sir. Dry goods, chemist's stuff, seafood and all sorts of things.'

'How's business?'

Vicente shrugged.

'Not so good. It was a nasty winter, sir. And the summer hasn't been much better. More than half of my business is on credit.'

'Were you born in this area?'

'I'm from Almería but I lived for many years in the Rioja district.'

'Right, Vicente, now it's your turn.'

'I don't want to waste your time, Don Javier. You'll want to see the gentlemen and I . . .'

'Which gentlemen?'

'From the police.'

'Has the inspector come?'

'Yes, sir, Don Julio and another, a young one I don't know. A short while ago they called on your wife.'

'I suppose they came because of the dead girl.'

'Yes, sir, that's it.'

'But there's no reason for me to see them. Why do you think that I . . . ?'

Vicente, the tip of the cigarette between his forefinger and thumb, found the ash tray at last. The black leather belt, several inches below the edge of his trousers, cut into his paunch.

'People in the village say you're in on the secret and that the police asked you what to do. Some of the young boys are afraid they'll be accused of something. As you know, Don Javier, it's always the poor who are suspected. And they're very wild, they're savages. We can admit it among ourselves . . .'

'But I know nothing.' I laughed drily. 'And I'm not told anything by the police either. All the same, I don't think there will be an arrest unless one of the boys knew the girl.'

'No, sir, none of them knew her,' he added hastily: 'or, that's what they say. I see it as a settling of accounts, if I may say so. Hereabouts we know what the foreigners are like. They leave pesetas behind and they leave trouble behind—more trouble than pesetas. You saw her, Don Javier, and you're a man of culture—the fluorescent light on the veranda divided table and lawn into zones of light and shadow—'you'll have worked it out for yourself. The boys are afraid because one or two of them have fun with foreign women. You understand, sir? The boys are young, the women attract them like bitches in heat, give them small presents, spend money on them . . . the boys hang around the camping place and some nights it's like a brothel with the boys as the whores. Begging your pardon.'

'All right, Vicente, such things have always happened in

secret. I hope nobody from the village is involved and if the police ask me I'll tell them so.'

'Thank you very much. I knew you'd defend the poor. Yes, sir, I was sure you would.'

'Is there anything else?'

Vicente drank some more beer, rose from his seat and pulled an envelope out of his pocket. Joaquín came along the path just then and seeing Rufi, ran up to her.

'If you can spare a moment more . . .'

'Yes, go on.' I stopped watching Joaquín.

'Well you know I've got a shop in the village? You can ask anyone and they'll tell you it's well stocked. It isn't an ordinary village shop, I've always made it my job to make work pay, but if it's to pay one's had to work hard.' Rufi and Joaquín turned the corner. 'To give you an example, I don't carry bleach in bottles. No, sir. I stock concentrated bleach in plastic tubes. That will show you that I make it my business to be up to date. One day it occurred to me that the Colony has no shop. I know that——'

'There are not supposed to be shops in the Colony.'

' . . . you don't allow shops in the Colony. I know it, Don Javier, sir. You people know how to live without shops or cinemas or a town hall, and good luck to you. But one day I thought it over and I saw that things could be different, begging your pardon, sir, and submitting to your better judgment.' He leaned back slightly in the chair and rested his glass on his paunch. 'Rafael goes every day to the other village with the station wagon and does the shopping. If you had a warehouse, for example in the hut, an open warehouse of course, Rafael wouldn't always have to go. He'd go to the warehouse, take what he needed, and that's all. You'd save the transportation and there'd be a commission in it too.'

'How's that?'

'I wouldn't reduce my prices but I'd let you have a commission if you lease me the hut as a warehouse. It's all written down on this paper.' Vicente put the envelope on the table, next to the beer bottle. 'If you could read it you'd see . . .'

HORTELANO

'Vicente, I get the idea. You want to be the only trader in the Colony and the letter sets out your proposal. Is that it?'

'Yes. Exclusive rights.'

'I'm not the only one who decides the Colony's affairs. There's an Administrative Board. It's a rule that there are to be no shops, and no establishment accessible to the public, within the boundaries. I can only promise you that your proposal will receive attention.'

'Many thanks, Don Javier.'

'The decision doesn't rest with me alone.'

'But'—he left the glass on the table and there was a sort of chuckle in his words—'you're the boss.'

'One of them, Vicente. If there's a decision I'll get in touch with you.'

While Vicente got up I felt a movement behind my back that made me turn my head. Joaquín and Leoncio were coming down the veranda steps.

'I'm most grateful for everything, Don Javier, sir. And my compliments to the Señora.'

'Don't mention it.'

The beer left in Vicente's glass was yellow and dotted with stationary bubbles. Joaquín was lying on his side and pulling out blades of grass. Leoncio shut the garden gate.

'Have you been down to the beach?'

'I get bored with the girls.'

'You get bored?'

In the whitish sky the first stars began to show as I finished my gin.

'Are you going out?' Joaquín asked.

'I've got to work.'

I took Vicente's envelope in the hand in which I carried the bottle. Dora, in black pants and a garnet-red tight fitting shirt, was talking to Rufi in the lobby.

'I don't want to be interrupted, Rufi, please.'

'When do you want to dine, sir?'

'I've had mine already, Javier.'

'Oh, all right.'

I left Vicente's envelope on my desk, turned on the table lamp and made myself comfortable on the sofa. The leaves of the trees glittered in the moonlight. I breathed in the air that smelt of earth. The gin made me sleepy and changed the shape of my thoughts. It produced a strange, soothing sleep.

'Javier,' Andrés shouted.

'Leave Javier alone. He's working, so leave him.'

'But he might like a walk down the road.'

After they'd gone I sat up, my mouth dry. I was not quite awake but felt a strange lucidity like a cold flame on my brow. Joaquín, sitting in an armchair in the hall, was cutting pictures from a magazine.

'Don't you ever go to bed?'

He put the scissors by the telephone.

'I'll go now.'

'It's midnight.'

'I'll get a glass of milk from Rufi. The cops have gone. They were at the beach and later they had a talk with Uncle Amadeo but it wasn't anything important.'

'Is your latest amusement to shadow the police?'

The still air in the garden was back to normal. Suddenly the sad lassitude changed to a need for action. It was absurd to expect the others to share my depression or nostalgia.

I walked briskly up the street. The street lamps made the foliage of trees, plants and box hedges greener. I sprinted for a while and then heard them walking ahead on the dark road. I heard Elena's voice.

20

THE GIRL came up one step, put her hand on the banister and shouted that I was there.

‘Are you sure she’s awake?’

Anna flew down the stairs two at a time, her green brocade dressing gown half-open. We shut the door of the room at the end of the passage and embraced. As we drew apart, still smiling at each other, I noticed radio music.

‘I didn’t expect you till Thursday.’

‘Shouldn’t I have come?’

‘You know the answer.’

‘I would have liked to come yesterday.’

‘Come on, be good and let go.’ She slipped out of my arms and turned off the radio. ‘I’m so happy that you’re here, I can’t believe it’s true.’

‘Anna, it would be nice to get away from here for a whole day and go somewhere down the coast for a change of climate.’

With moist eyes she forced herself to show a gay smile. I kissed her again on her anxious demanding lips.

She pushed my hand away from her breast and closed her dressing gown. ‘Wait. I won’t be more than ten minutes.’

She came back dressed in white pants and a black-and-yellow striped shirt fastened at the hips. She carried a wicker basket.

‘Ready.’

‘Got your swimming things?’

‘And towels.’

‘Listen, Anna, I was thinking that it’s not very discreet of me

to turn up unexpectedly, leave the car outside your house and . . .

'*Señorita*,'—the maid was leaning in the frame of the kitchen door—'they've brought the electricity bill.'

'Did you pay it?'

'How could I, I haven't any money. They said they'd come back later.'

'If you like . . .'

'Of course not.' Anna went up the stairs. 'Wait a little.'

'Don't worry about me.'

The girl leaning against the door watched me with feigned indifference. I opened the door on to the garden. A woman was driving five pigs along the road in a cloud of dust. Inside, the voices of Anna and the girl discussed a pair of sunglasses.

'Please forgive me. Things like this always happen at the worst possible moment.'

'It doesn't matter.' I opened the car door. Anna put the basket and a roll of towels on the back seat before getting into the front seat. 'Quick, then you'll be alone with me.'

She stopped opening the window and put her hand on mine. Once on the road, she leaned against my shoulder and closed her eyes. The sun was already high.

'We have to find a place where I can wait for you. It's wrong of me to leave the car outside your door.'

'Wrong,' she said without moving. 'For which of us?'

'For you, of course.'

'We'll meet in a bar, if you insist.' She sighed. 'But stop talking about it now. I don't care two hoots whether people know about us or not. Anybody can know as far as I'm concerned.'

On both sides of the road orange trees formed dark pockets of shade. After a flat stretch the road improved. The distant sea was a mass of sparks and towards the horizon it dissolved into a hazy stain.

'Does this mean you had a quarrel?'

Anna half opened her eyes.

HORTELANO

‘What?’

‘Your saying that you don’t care if people do know about us. Did you quarrel this weekend?’

‘I never quarrel with him.’

‘Then why?’

‘I’m sick of it.’

‘I understand.’

‘I like doing what I want to now and then.’

‘That’s why I’m with you now, for the same reason.’

‘Are you fed up, too?’

‘With a lot of things, but mostly with myself.’

‘I love you very much.’

‘Early this morning I nearly drove off in the car in my pyjamas. To come and tell you how fed up I was.’

‘Tell me all about it.’

Anna raised her head from my shoulder. The sun gilded the fine down on the arm she rested on the window. We had to stop at a crossroads because a big truck was driving out of a petrol station and was blocking traffic.

‘I don’t like the villages here,’ Anna said, ‘people stare. Do you have any idea where to go?’

‘We’ll be there soon. If you don’t like the spot, or if it reminds you of something unpleasant, we’ll go somewhere else.’

‘Now you can go on, but we’ll have to drive slower.’

‘You like speed?’

‘I love it.’

The wind bore gusts of strong scents through the open windows and filled the car. Anna sang one song after another. She only stopped to light cigarettes for me. For a few miles I forgot that she was there, in spite of her singing, because I was intent on the traffic and because I was afraid of missing the turn to the beach. On the walls of isolated houses were posters of hotels, camp sites and restaurants, giving the distances. In front of me the first rugged chains of the Sierra rose against the blue sky.

‘I’m dying to go into the water. You’re sweating too. I’ve got a new bathing suit with me, I wanted to wear it for the first

time when I was with you. It's white, one of those modern ones with a bare back.'

'Have I told you that you're lovely?'

'You've told me nothing.'

'It should be here somewhere.'

Anna looked out the window. 'You can cross, there are no cars behind us. Let's hope there aren't too many people.'

On the sunny terrace the chairs were placed upside down on the tables. A cable with blue and white pennants was slung from one of the pillars of the pergola to the restaurant roof. When the dirt road ended we drove along a long stretch of pebbles. I stopped near the beach. Anna ran towards the water.

I undressed in the car. There were no more than six or seven people on the beach and a station wagon and a scooter. Some others had settled in the small sand dunes half way between the restaurant and the shore. I spread some towels in the shade of the car and took out Anna's basket, the pack of tobacco and matches.

'I'm going for some drink.'

On the beach a girl was taking a sun bath, her legs spread, a handkerchief over her face. The waiter took a long time to find a corkscrew and Anna, already changed, sat clasping one of her legs. We drank a little and then went to the water hand in hand.

'It looks great.'

'You sound as if you wanted to eat it,' said Anna.

The small waves, whose crests enclosed the entrance to the little bay dwindled before they reached the beach. Anna floated near the shore. I swam slowly to one of the rocky points that marked one end of the semicircle of the beach. I was tired and let the soft swell rock me, my head full of shifting lights and shrill colours. My muscles felt distended by the heat. I swam back using the easiest strokes, mostly the crawl.

'I'm getting old.'

I dropped on to the pebbly sand near Anna who was letting the sun tan her legs. She had put on a brilliant green sun hat.

'Do you want some sun oil?' I shook my head. 'You aren't old. You were over an hour in the water.'

HORTELANO

My chin propped on my hands I stared at Anna's thigh, the hem of her bathing suit and the strip of adhesive tape near her groin.

'Doesn't that sore get better?'

'Does the plaster look ugly?'

'Nothing looks ugly on you.'

The voices and laughter of the other people had a transparent quality. The curve of sand seemed to stretch as far as the white blur on the horizon, across the calm sea.

'It's really hot,' I said.

'But it's good to be here. What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing. You.'

'It's nice here.' She stretched her arms behind her back, with her hands in the sand. 'People say the police were at the Colony yesterday.'

'Yes, yesterday afternoon. They asked a few routine questions and had a snack. I didn't see them.'

'So you don't have any news?'

'No. Have they bothered you again?'

'No.' A plane passed noisily overhead. Anna's skin had a dark harshness about it. 'I'm much calmer, you know, I can think of Margot much more calmly.'

I kissed her fingers. Her body smelt good, acid and tangy. She was humming softly as I felt myself falling asleep.

'Listen,' Anna called.

I turned over on my back, blinded by the sudden glare. The young waiter, in a white jacket, black trousers and a black tie, came waddling across the sand.

'Good morning.' He let the brass tray dangle along his leg.

'Can you bring us something to eat?'

'Of course, madam.'

'What do you have?'

'I'm going for a swim. Ask for whatever you feel like, Anna.'

'We've got cold roast beef, and ham and . . .'

Even in the water I felt stuffy and swam only a few yards. On the empty beach the shadows of the station wagon and motor-cycle had changed shape. The other people were lying

somewhere in the sand dunes. I wondered if the sun would blister the paint on my car. As I walked ashore the water evaporated from my skin and clothes.

The waiter and Anna spread the towels in the shade. When I reached them they were composing the menu for our lunch. The cigarette Anna had in her mouth laid a slanting bar of smoke across her face. Her eyes half closed, her cheeks contracted, she was busy opening cans. The waiter went away. I uncorked a bottle of wine and filled two plastic cups.

'It's marvellous having a meal like this.'

I kissed her lips lightly and she put her hand on my neck and pressed her mouth to mine. I put my arm around her shoulders.

'We're sweating like pigs.'

'Now we'll eat, silly.'

'But since nobody can see us . . .'

'Javier, you're vulgar. We'll eat now and if you don't like it, it's your own fault for going swimming just when it was time to order.' We kissed again. 'Is the wine cool enough?'

'Yes. And it's good. Drink up quickly before it gets too warm.'

'I love eating out like this. When he takes me to a beach he always insists on a restaurant and I have to dress up. The puddings are the worst. Sometimes I've had as many as six cups of coffee.'

'What's his name?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'Curiosity.'

'I'll give you some *foie-gras*. And try the mussels, they're delicious. He's just an ordinary man.'

'Did you talk to him about Margot?'

'We hardly ever talk. He knew Margot. He saw her occasionally in the bars of the Gran Via. I introduced her to him and afterwards he told me she wasn't his type. But it's the sort of thing he says because he believes it's the right thing to say. A kind of obligation, you know?'

'Yes.'

'So that I don't feel put out. Six years ago, when we started, I

thought it wouldn't last long. I used to believe in a lot of things that one later learns don't even exist. In a special type of man who would turn me into a decent woman. And sometimes in another special type who'd turn me into a worse whore, but a high-class one . . . Well, I stayed with him after all, we got used to each other, he treats me well and isn't tight with his money. But there's nothing to talk about and as he grows older he gets on better with his wife and children. He still likes me because I'm discreet. If he became a widower he wouldn't marry me though, that's quite obvious. But he'd never leave me.'

'I'm sorry you never found your "special type".' I filled the glasses.

'I don't look for him any more. Things aren't as one imagines, are they? I know what those special types are like. They're like you, for instance.'

'Is that a compliment or an insult?'

'It simply means I like you.'

'Now come on and eat.'

'I do nothing but talk. The wine's very good.'

'It's getting warm.'

'So am I.' Anna laughed. 'While you were asleep I looked at you and remembered our night together. To think that it's only been five days since we spent our first night together.'

'Five days? Today's Tuesday.'

'Yes, of course, and it was last Friday. Well, the night from Thursday to Friday. Every time I look at you I'm surprised at the short time we've known each other.'

'Because we meet so rarely.'

'Well, it's up to you.' Anna drank some wine and I lit a cigarette. 'You were fast asleep. Don't you sleep well at night?'

'Yes, I sleep a lot,' I said.

'The more you sleep the more you want to sleep. So you didn't see the police?'

'No, I told you. Why?'

'I can't help thinking they know something and then I wonder. Perhaps they'll never find out what happened to Margot. Come on, finish the veal, it's very tender.'

'I've had enough. They'll find out. The police always find out these things.'

'He said the same thing on Sunday. I asked him if he thought the police would find out everything and he said the same as you. But I'm not so sure.'

'What's his business?'

'He's in the building trade. Houses and public works. He's clever and hard-working. Before I knew him he was involved in the Labour Unions and became one of the big leaders. Apparently he behaved well during the war. I saw a photo of him with all sorts of stars and decorations on his uniform. But then he did something wrong and they threw him out of the Union. Something to do with trucks. He told me he had a thin time but it didn't last long. He's all right, you know. He knows important people and in Madrid there are nights when he can't take me out because he might run into somebody who knows him. Last winter he bought me a television set so I wouldn't get bored staying home.'

'Give me your glass.'

'Have we drunk the whole bottle? There's some food left.'

'The waiter will clear it away.'

'No, let's keep it for this afternoon. I'm getting fatter.'

Anna collected the plates and silver and what was left of the meal. She buried the empty cans and shook out the towels. Then she took off her hat. The silence seemed to crackle with heat.

'Are you sleepy, Anna?'

'Yes, my love.' She said 'my love' in English.

'I am too.'

'We've had a lot to drink.'

The sand was hard under my chest. Anna was perspiring slightly. The whole horizon was a blur of dazzling, moving light.

'How are you getting on with your English?'

'I haven't done any work for days. What's the good? Look what Margot got out of knowing French.'

'You said she was called Maruja, didn't you?'

'Hmm.'

Her open mouth pressed against mine let me taste her breath.

HORTELANO

It smelt of earth, of towels, of oily cream and of sweat. When she was almost asleep, Anna moved and I awoke with a start. The sun was burning me from the waist down. Without waking Anna I managed to move the car forward a few yards so that its shadow fell on the towels. Near the edge of the water some children were swimming; a woman, wearing a skirt over her bathing suit, laughed in the dunes. Anna's breath came evenly, but with a small rasping sound almost like a moan. I put an arm round her shoulders. I didn't so much dream as have vague pictures in my mind, punctuated by sounds. On my eyelids I felt a sensation of peace, of a pale, refreshing colour. The woman in the skirt shouted something and waved her arm. Anna grunted. I turned on my side to watch several people climbing over the rocks but I didn't bother to count them. They shouted too and their voices reduced the distance. I went on wondering why I felt so well and then turning my head, met Anna's wide-open eyes and her drowsy smile.

'Oh I've slept so well, my love.'

'So have I.'

Anna clung to my shoulders and stroked me slowly, with little gurgling sounds. Suddenly the children ran from the water towards the dunes, and Anna stopped. She sat up, laughing, and lit a cigarette. One of her shoulder straps had slipped down over her arm.

'Anna, tell me, who told you that the police came to the Colony yesterday?'

'I heard it in the cafeteria. What makes you think of that now?'

'I don't know. I just wondered.'

'It was in the cafeteria last night and the young man who works for the magistrate told us.'

'Are people in the village talking about the affair?'

Anna pushed up her shoulder strap.

'Of course they are.'

'What about'—I jumped to my feet—'going to another beach? There must be one with fewer people.'

Anna started to pack up at once. On her knees, laughing,

happy and in a hurry. She looked younger to me. Her body gave me a strong sensation of helplessness, as though she were fragile or under-developed.

‘Better not put on clothes.’

‘I agree. It’s six already. How quickly time passes . . .’

The air inside the car was scorching. I paid our bill at the restaurant. The people in the dunes stared at us.

‘Put the window down as far as it will go, Anna. If we get up to sixty this oven will cool a little’. Anna snuggled up to me. ‘But take care not to get cold.’

‘Me, cold? They fleeced us I’m sure. It’s always the same in those restaurants—if they smell an affair they make the couple pay through the nose.’

‘Are we having an affair, Anna?’

‘Yes whether you like it or not. Oh well, if you prefer it, we’re sweethearts. It makes me laugh to think of us as sweethearts. I haven’t had one for ages. Margot said she had one in France. She was a bit of a storyteller. She loved to talk about France and tell the men she was French. She wasn’t, of course, but her parents left Spain at the beginning of the war.’

‘Anna, how old were you when the war started?’

‘Three or four. Why?’

‘It’s funny, you were four, and I was stuck in a trench with mud up to my ears.’

‘Which side were you on?’

‘With the nationalists of course.’

‘I was in Bilbao during the war but I can’t remember much of it. I remember one day when my mother took me out and the streets were full of people singing and flags everywhere.’

The main road swerved away from the coast; I took a side road that followed a winding course between olive trees and orange groves. Anna leaned against the window. Her crossed legs were soft and smooth.

‘You look good without make-up.’

‘I must look ridiculous. Do you feel less fed up this afternoon?’

‘I feel fine, Anna. Thank you.’

HORTELANO

'I imagine you've got worries. Come and see me whenever you're in a black mood, we get along fine together.'

'Yes, Anna, I will. It isn't so much worries as stupid little things. You know what people are like. The other day I had a fight with a friend, and now we aren't on speaking terms. He's an idiot, with plenty of children and plenty of prejudices. It doesn't matter to me, but it has poisoned the atmosphere.'

'Why were you friends?'

'Well, he lives in the Colony . . . we've known each other for years . . . we have friends in common . . .'

'And your wife?'

In the village, which was linked to the mainland by a narrow strip of sand, the old walls led down to the cliffs. A castle rose over the ochre and white houses. The light of the setting sun glittered in the small inlet.

'Have you been here before, Anna?'

'Yes.' She turned her eyes away, 'Once I climbed up to the castle and it made me dizzy.'

In the lower part of the village the road ran parallel with the coast. We stopped at a kiosk on the outskirts to buy a few bottles. To the left there was a camp site dotted with orange-coloured tents. The straight line of the beach faded into the distance.

'This is a bad road.'

'Let's stop here.'

'All right.' I parked the car. 'There don't seem to be many people?'

'There's nobody.' Before we got out of the car Anna kissed me. 'And when you start talking tell the whole story, do you hear?'

'But . . .'

'The whole story or nothing. Come on, let's go into the water.'

In the fine sand I found two machine gun nests and several gun emplacements in the shape of a pentagon, half buried and open towards the land with the long slits in the walls facing the sea. I stopped there until Anna called me.

I started to swim quickly. To the right, the stones of the castle glowed in the late sun. Anna, up to her waist in the water, was laughing to herself. Then we linked arms and swam together. Under water Anna's body was slippery and hard. When we came out the sun was very low. I ran along the beach while Anna got towels from the car. We sat down with our backs against one of the gun emplacements. Now and then the sea threw out a wave without any spray.

'There's nothing special the matter between me and my wife . . .'

'Listen, I don't want to know anything. Forget what I said.'

'You see, Anna, I think my marriage was the greatest mistake of my life.'

'That's enough.'

'I mean, she turned out to be a completely different person. That became clear years and years ago. I've never been more mistaken in anybody.'

Huddling in my arm, Anna said nothing. From time to time we kissed and smiled. The evening had blurred the outline of the village. In the silence I felt motionless and calm. There wasn't a breath of air but a few clouds swam in the far distance.

'What are you thinking?' I asked.

'About us. If it hadn't been for Margot we wouldn't be here now.'

'You never know.'

'I don't tell you everything either.' Anna moved away. 'I saw her two days before she died.'

'Margot? Did you speak to her?'

'Yes. On Sunday. That night I went to the *boîte* where you and I met'—sand trickled slowly from her closed fist—'and I was dancing with someone when they came in. I saw Margot and she spotted me too, and we waved to each other.'

'Who was she with?'

'Some boys and girls. There were two other couples and the boy with Margot.'

Her hands opened and the sand poured down. 'Did you tell all this to the police?'

HORTELANO

‘Yes. I don’t know why I didn’t tell you. I really don’t know, Javier. Perhaps because . . .’

‘All right. Don’t let it worry you.’

‘. . . I think I’m nothing in your life. This thing between us will come to an end. Forgive me for being so silly. It’s as if I suddenly didn’t know how to behave. As if I’d forgotten. I feel very stupid. You do understand, don’t you?’

‘I understand all right. Let’s see now, there were six of them. Young people?’

‘Yes, three couples. Where are my cigarettes? Oh, thanks. Yes, young people. In their twenties. One of the girls was younger, maybe nineteen. They were pretty tight, Margot most of all, and they danced. I noticed she wanted to talk to me and we waved to each other. But I couldn’t get rid of the man I was with. Sometimes it looked as if Margot had forgotten about me. She was having a great time, playing the fool and kissing and setting. Anyway, they were living it up. In the end we both went to the powder room and talked. She told me she’d met them in Madrid and they were driving along the coast.’

‘Did she explain who they were?’

‘No, she only said they had lots of money and everything was marvellous. They were going to France. They picked her up in Madrid as a date for the boy who was alone. The two other girls weren’t whores, they were proper young ladies, but Margot said they got on very well. The girls asked her questions about her trade and the boys were good spenders. She told me she sometimes liked it with that boy. But I talked more than she liked. My friend hadn’t arrived, he hadn’t let me know, no message or anything, and I was furious. I told her I was angry and that I envied her. She simply said that she was having a wonderful time.’

‘Were they Spanish?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where did they live?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I mean, where did they stay that night?’

‘They went in two cars, so they could have stayed anywhere.’

I don't think they stopped long in any one spot. But I was talking about myself and learning nothing. But how could I have guessed? At the time I thought there was an element of boasting in what she told me. God, what a miserable life!' Anna's eyes were damp and glinted in the dusk. 'I was thinking of Margot as a boaster and the poor girl was dying! She suggested that I join them, but casually, only because she saw I was unhappy. And I can't help thinking that if I'd gone, it would . . .'

'Don't think about it,' I cut in.

'While we were in the washroom one of the other girls came in and the two of them stayed behind laughing.'

'Can't you remember anything else?'

'They were drunk. Margot couldn't stand up straight and I was getting tight too. Oh hell, I didn't even take in the registration numbers of the cars when I left. I know there were plenty of cars but I didn't look at a single licence plate.'

'Did the police ask you about it?'

'About this and a thousand other things. But that's all I know. What a damned fool I was to get so drunk!'

It was not yet dark, but some stars had appeared in the pale sky. Anna was slow to respond to my kisses. Stretched out in the sand I stripped her to the waist. Her features began to tauten. Suddenly she laughed.

'Not here, Javier.'

'Why? It was made for us.'

I went round the gun emplacement, followed by Anna, who held up her swim suit with both hands, and we fell on to the infinitely fine sand that filled the inside up to the embrasures.

'Javier, my love, what a splendid idea! This is great fun. Tell me,'—one of my hands slipped along her leg up to where the small bandage was—'did they fire at ships from here?'

'Presumably what they kept in here were three old Hotchkiss guns. On moonlit nights, the men would have smoked, shielding the glow of the cigarettes in their cupped hands, and talked about women.' Anna's teeth nibbled my arm. At a time when Andrés had not yet met Elena, I dragged him to the brothels as if it were important, indeed imperative. I did not want him to be

HORTELANO

a virgin if he died the following day. Through the slit of the embrasure, the sea showed, calm and faintly shimmering.

'Javier, I have been wanting this all day, but I never imagined it would be so good. Oh you brute!'

While Andrés and I were running about wild, Elena was at school. At home they prayed more and earned more money than ever. The men with the Hotchkiss must have fired away at night like madmen. The commander of the Moorish troops came out to see how we shot holes into the Telefónica and shouted. People in Salamanca had no idea what lice were like. They saw pictures of them on propaganda posters, but they probably thought a green louse was a sort of mosquito. Andrés caught crabs on the second or third occasion and we two bought a few bottles of what they called 'English oil'. Everybody rubbed themselves all over with English oil. And Elena was at school . . .

It left us exhausted, barely linked, listening to the ripple of the last waves on the sand.

'I'm going to love you and it will hurt.'

'But Anna . . .'

'Yes, I know, I'm going to love you all my life.'

I wanted nothing but to stay there in the warm sand with half-closed eyes, while Anna kissed me gently.

'I'm going for a dip.'

Through the embrasure, I saw her wading. Then she came back naked and dripping.

'I'll be dressed in a minute. Don't move, I'll bring you your clothes.'

Her white pants glimmered on the other side of the road next to the car.

'I feel too lazy even to lift my little finger.'

'Do you know how late it is?'

'No, I don't.'

'Well, it's eleven.'

'Are you hungry?'

'No, are you?'

'I'm not either.'

'Don't drink the beer, it's warm.'

'We'll have something cold on the way.' I switched on the headlights. 'We'd better go back the way we came. This road is impossible.'

'My poor love, and now you've got to drive. Have I made you happy?'

'Very happy, Anna.'

Above the lights of the village, the castle was lost in darkness. When we reached the main road, Anna stopped singing, leaned against me and shut her eyes. I felt the taste of salt, sand and fatigue in my throat. The fields smelled of orange blossom.

I wakened her when we arrived at her house.

'But why did you let me sleep? I wanted to tell you so many things . . . come in and have a drink.'

'If I come in I won't leave.'

'Good. Come in.'

'I must go.'

'Will you come tomorrow?'

'I don't know if I can.'

'Do your best to come, even if it's only for a moment.'

'I'll do my best. If I haven't come by four it's because . . .'

'I'll wait all day.'

'Don't forget your things.'

'Don't worry, I don't leave traces.' Anna slowly closed the garden gate. 'Till tomorrow, sweetheart.'

Near the Colony I was afraid of falling asleep. The insistent parallel beams of the headlights hypnotized me. At the foot of the cliffs, there were long whitish strips of foam.

The bell-tower of the chapel was lit. I left the car in the street and saw Rufi leaving a group of girls clustered round Rafael.

'Good evening, everybody. How are things, Rufi?'

'Good evening, sir.'

'Are the children in bed?'

'Yes. The Señora is at Señorita Asunción's. A while ago, Señorita Ernestina telephoned.'

'What did she want?'

'Nothing, only to ask if you had come back. Everybody's gone to Señorita Asunción's house.'

HORTELANO

'All right, Rufi.' I switched on the light in the entrance. 'Please bring me a glass of milk upstairs.'

When I came out of the shower, I heard Rufi knock on the bedroom door and put on my pyjamas. 'Come in.'

'I've brought your milk.'

'Thanks.'

'Sir, this afternoon the policemen were in the fishing village. They arrested four of the lads.'

I stopped drinking the milk. Rufi stood in the door with her arms crossed.

'In the local village?'

'Yes sir. Four young boys. People say they're fishermen.'

I lit a cigarette.

'Please call me early tomorrow morning.'

'At ten, sir?'

'Yes, at ten. Any other news?'

'No, sir, the children were on the beach all day.'

'Goodnight, Rufi.'

'Goodnight, sir. Sleep well.'

I sat at the foot of the bed, my hand on the telephone, while I tried to come to a decision, and noted that my saliva had a little aftertaste of Anna's mouth. I switched off the light and groped for the ash tray. Through the open window, between the half-closed curtains, I saw the reflection of the street light on the leaves of the trees. Later, I felt something strange and thought that it must be Dora going to bed.

21

‘WHEN DID she say she would be back?’

Ernestina passed the chamois leather over the glass of the reflector. I walked a few steps. Her blouse had slipped out of the waistband of her trousers and showed her naked waist, with the vertebrae marked sharply under her tanned skin. When Ernestina had finished wiping the glass she turned and smiled. I looked away, towards the veranda steps. Luisa was coming down.

‘I’ve told you umpteen times, she’s bound to come back.’

‘Hello,’ said Luisa.

‘I’m longing for it to be night—’

‘Hello.’

‘—so I can try them out.’ Ernestina clutched my hand and pulled herself to her feet. ‘Do you know that Santiago’s given me permission to make a gap in the garden wall?’

‘Santiago’s marvellous!’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Santiago doesn’t mind if we have the wall here broken down for a stretch so that the two gardens join, with a sort of path,’ Luisa explained.

‘And Amadeo?’

‘I don’t think Amadeo will have anything against it once Santiago’s said yes.’

‘Amadeo says he’ll come immediately, and we’re to measure the width in the meantime.’

‘All right . . . Luisa, do you know when Rafael will be back?’

‘Oh what a bore you are with your Rafael, darling!’

HORTELANO

'I don't think he'll take much longer,' said Luisa. 'He went for some things that have come with the morning train.'

'Things for the party,' Ernestina said. 'If you don't help us the least you can do is not to be a nuisance.'

The two girls crossed the lawn and stood contemplating the stone wall.

I went out into the street. Electricians were busy in Santiago's garden. Elena and Dora were chatting on the veranda. The sun was scorching the ground. I stopped at the corner of the last garden, and looked at the sea. A vague noise of unintelligible voices reached me even here, through the hot thick air. In the distance, a launch was approaching the fishing village.

I walked back slowly on the shady side of the street and found myself going towards Elena's house. Suddenly I heard Andrés calling me and when I looked up, I noticed Joaquín squatting on the side of the road. I went a few steps down the garden path. Andrés, in pyjamas, leaned out of a window on the second floor.

'What are you doing here at this time of day?'

'It's after twelve.'

'Come in for a chat.'

'I can't. I must find Rafael.'

'What's the general atmosphere? Has the gossip started already?'

'They are all busy getting ready for the party. Apparently it's to be the day after tomorrow.'

Andrés straightened up. 'Damn it, I'm going back to bed if you won't come in.'

'See you later.'

'If you come across my son, tell him I haven't seen him for three days.'

I went back to the street and sat down beside Joaquín. He grinned at me.

'Did you hear what your father said?'

'Yes.'

The asphalt, dappled by small discs of light and shade, lost its blackness in the gutter where it became dirt. I stared at an acacia leaf at the bottom of the gutter.

'It's well built, this place.'

'What?' asked Joaquín.

'Nothing. Why aren't you playing with the others?'

'Everybody's always telling me to go and play.'

'Your father wants to see you.'

'I heard him. Listen, I'd like to jump off the diving board. Do you remember how well I dived last year?'

'Yes, I remember.'

'Perhaps I've forgotten, perhaps I'll get scared and won't jump.'

'I didn't know you were scared.' I dropped my pretence at seriousness. 'Well, what I really wanted to say is, it's silly of you to be afraid because nobody forgets how to jump off the diving board. It's the same with swimming. It's more or less difficult to learn, but once you've learned you never forget.'

'Will you tell them to fill up the swimming pool?'

'All right.'

He got up, leaning on my shoulder.

'I'm going to look for Poker.'

Joaquín ran down the slope in the middle of the street. I felt lonely and ridiculous, sitting above the gutter. All I heard was the faint crackle of the dry earth in the glare and the distant murmur of the sea. I wondered whether I should go back home or continue my walk. Although I dreaded greetings and tiresome conversations, I felt incapable of waiting indoors for Rafael's return. Before turning the corner, I had a feeling that I would meet Elena in the next street.

'Good morning.'

'Hello, Claudette. Is it true that Santiago has given permission to that pair of crazy girls to make a breach in the garden wall?'

Claudette laughed and passed her canvas bag from one hand to the other. 'Oh, he's delighted by the idea of the party. You know how bored Santiago gets.'

'I don't understand it. In Santiago less than in anyone else. If you're going to the beach I'll come with you.'

Claudette's legs seemed more freckled this morning.

'It's quite simple. All year round he curses life in the city

HORTELANO

and says he would be happy in the country, would work better . . . and as soon as he comes here and stays in the villa he's incapable of working. The party is his salvation because he expects to see new faces. The faces he's fed up with in Barcelona all winter.'

'That's called restlessness.'

Claudette smiled. 'Exactly.'

'And so they're organizing a party on a grand scale?'

'About fifty guests to start with.'

'Where are they going to put so many people?'

'Everything's organized. Anyway it's only for one night—though one or two may stay longer.'

The wind had swept the beach last night. The reed thicket was half covered with sand. When I took my eyes off the sea Claudette was barefooted, about to take off her pants.

'It's hot,' I said.

We gazed at each other, till I thought I saw a look of surprise, almost of fright, in her eyes.

'Very hot.'

'Yes, Claudette.'

She pulled her shirt over her head. Her hands tidied the hair on her neck. Her breasts, where they were not covered by her brassiere, were round and fragile like a young girl's. When she stepped closer, I saw the little wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

'Javier, angel, what a hungry look!'

My cheeks were burning. I tried to compose a smile.

'Forgive me.'

'Never mind.' She winked. 'It may even be flattering.'

For a few seconds her hand lay on my arm. Before I could move, she had dashed into the water. I took off my shirt, threw myself face down and pressed my face into the backs of my hands. The sand had a warm smell, distinct from that of the sand in the emplacement. Anna had a beautiful, feminine body, strong and somehow different from the bodies of the women I knew. In the surf, I saw a mass of foam which must be Claudette. For a long time I was undecided whether to take the plunge or not, but I felt less and less like it. Even though she swam

faster than I, I could catch up with her. I pulled my shirt over my head and shoulders but the sweat immobilized me and I thought I might go to sleep. Anna was waiting for me with impatient longing. Claudette's legs, Elena's smile, Marta's back, turned into a tangle of fleeting visions, infinitely lucid and painful.

I drew myself up just as the sun started to burn my back. Before I had time to look at my watch, I heard voices and walked towards them pulling on my shirt.

'Good morning, Don Javier.'

'I knew you were here.' Joaquín said.

'You always know everything. Hello, Rafael. Are you going for a swim or back home?'

'Master Joaquín told me you were looking for me.'

'Yes, I was looking for you.' Joaquín tried to grab my hand. 'Now look here, Aunt Claudette is having a swim and when she comes out she will be quite alone. Wait for her here.'

'Don't you want me to come with you?'

Rafael smiled, patted Joaquín's head, and came after me. At the end of the path I waited for him.

'It's better to talk here.'

'As you please.'

'Listen. The other day, Vicente came to see me. Perhaps you know about it.'

'Yes, sir, I did.'

Rafael folded his arms. When I moved towards the field, he crossed to my left.

'He wanted to talk about business.'

'That's what I imagined. He's been wanting to open a shop here for some time.'

'Something of the sort, yes. But there was another thing he wanted.' The morning light picked out the stones in the walls of the houses. 'He wanted me to intervene if the police detained anyone from the village.'

Rafael stopped when I did. He stared at a point above my shoulder, his arms folded, his forehead in a frown, his expression unchanging.

HORTELANO

'But Vicente came to see you the day before yesterday, didn't he?'

'That's right, Monday.'

Again Rafael folded his arms and fixed his gaze on a spot behind my back. I waited for him to continue.

'So Vicente knew then that they were going to be arrested.'

'That's what I think,' I said, although I had doubted it till then. 'If twenty-four hours in advance he comes to . . .'

'If he knew, it means that people in the village had been warned.'

'Exactly. Now tell me what happened last night.'

Rafael took a long puff on his cigarette. My legs prickled with impatience.

'They came and collected four boys. This morning people were talking about it at the station. I asked who they were, but no one in the big village knew their names, they only knew they were fishermen. Some said it was stupid to suspect the boys, and others said it wasn't, but nobody knew them.'

'Suspect them of what? That they were mixed up in it or what?'

'That they killed the American woman for her dollars.'

'Is that what they said at the station?'

'You don't know those people, the court usher, the old men, the . . .'

'What did the court usher say?'

'That they beat her unconscious and hit too hard. But one can't trust those loafers at the station. They talk and talk and in the end they believe their own inventions.'

'Look here, if I go to the police to ask about them . . .'

'Are you going to the police?'

' . . . I want to know what's what before I butt in.'

'Yes, sir, I understand that. Well, that's what they said in the big village.'

'Will you take the station wagon this afternoon and drive to the fishing village.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Go straight to Vicente's shop and buy something, it doesn't

matter what, but talk to him. As soon as he has told you his version, make a note of the names and then go to a bar.'

'Yes, sir.'

'The bar where there are the most people.'

'It'll be best to drive down at about seven or eight just before the men take the boats out.'

'That's right, arrange it however you like, but be sure you hear what everybody's got to say. Even if it is rubbish.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And of course don't mention it to anyone in the Colony.'

'Right, sir. I've got it. When are you going to see the inspector, Don Javier?'

'That's my affair.'

'Well, if there isn't anything else . . .'

'See you later. And thanks, Rafael.'

I stepped on the cigarette butt. On the other side of the thicket, tired little waves lapped against the rocks. The froth, which barely carried to the border of black rocks, stayed there as though paralysed by the sun or encrusted on the stones. I stopped in the shade of the first tree. I was just going to sit on the dry leaves that covered the ground when I heard somebody coming.

'I've just remembered, Don Javier, that Señorita Marta told me to go this afternoon . . .'

'Rafael, do as I told you'—the boy nodded eagerly—'and don't worry about anything else.'

'Perhaps you could speak to the Señorita?'

'I will.'

'Thank you very much, sir. Aren't you going to eat?'

'Yes, I'm going now.'

After wiping my face and neck, I sat on the ground, which exhaled a mixture of sharp smells. At a few yards' distance, a solitary pine among the low shrubs bisected my view of the sea. Fat drops of resin on the tree trunk glittered in the sun. I closed my eyes. The humming of insects made my head ache.

On the way back to the Colony I tried to make my mind a blank. Near the path I heard the voices of the women and

HORTELANO

children returning from the beach. When I got home I was dripping with sweat.

I stayed for a while under the shower but the water was too tepid. Then I dressed rapidly and put on a tie, even though I didn't pull it tight. In the dining room, where I found Dora, Dorita announced that Enrique was staying at Elena's.

'Are you going out?' said Dora with a glance at my coat, which I hung over the back of a chair on coming in.

'Yes. I have to go to the village. I suppose I'll be back about mid-afternoon. Oh, by the way . . .'

'I don't want cold meat,' said Dorita.

'She's been eating olives.'

'Olives?' Dora cried.

'Yes, Olives.' Rufi finished offering the slices of meat to the little girl. 'And now she has no appetite.'

'But who gave you olives?'

'Leles.'

'Good gracious, child, don't you know that olives are bad for you?'

'But I like them.'

'Sir, will you have some fish?'

'Yes please, Rufi. As I was saying, Dora . . .'

'Oh yes, forgive me, Javier. You were saying . . .'

'This afternoon Rafael has to do several important errands for me. Apparently Marta wanted him to . . .'

'Rufi, please turn down the radio.'

' . . . do a few errands for her. Will you tell Marta that mine are important? I've no time now to phone her myself.'

'All right, I'll do it, but the party . . .'

'Leles says there'll be a thousand people.'

'Yes, I know, the party. But Rafael won't be away the whole afternoon.'

'Claudette told me you were on the beach.'

'I was there for a while but it was very hot.'

'Amadeo came to see you.'

'What did he want?' I tried to catch Rufi's eye.

'I don't know. He was on the veranda for a while with Elena.'

I was so busy that I couldn't look after him. You will be back by mid-afternoon, won't you?'

'Yes.' The glass trembled in my hands so I lifted it. 'That's enough. Thanks, Ruffi.'

'I hear that five or six people from the fishing village have been arrested.'

'I believe it's only three, Señora.'

'I don't suppose it's important.' At last I had swallowed my wine.

To judge by her expression, Dora had just said something.

'Forgive me Dora, I didn't hear what you said.'

'This afternoon we women will get together so as to . . .'

Ruffi, in a uniform that was tighter than usual, seemed determined to retain her ceremonious manner to the end of the meal.

22

THE MAN, a napkin slung over his shoulder, preceded almost crabwise down the long, narrow passage. He pushed the door, held it open and switched the light on. When the man stood aside to let us pass Anna stopped and looked at me.

‘Yes, it’s all right,’ I said.

A damp patch in one of the corners discoloured the dark green wallpaper. My mouth on Anna’s, my head lowered, I half shut my eyes against the naked light of the bulb.

‘I wish I knew why they don’t have lampshades.’

Anna began to shift the chairs and I helped move the table. We had just sat down when the man knocked.

‘I’ve brought you some *calamares* too, they’re fresh, and just out of the frying pan.’

‘I love *calamares*,’ Anna said.

‘If you want anything,’ he pointed with his thumb over his right shoulder, ‘just call.’

‘Thanks.’

As soon as he closed the door I rushed over to it. Her laughter made me smile.

‘Forgive me, Javier, but you were just too funny leaping to the door and finding no bolt!’

‘There is no bolt,’ I said.

‘Of course. That’s just it.’

I put my arm round her shoulders. We stayed there so long I forgot why Anna was laughing. Then, when she buried her

face in my neck, I felt the last spasms of her laughter like irregular heartbeats.

'Do you want a drink?'

The wine had an acid taste of the clay pitcher. We kissed until Anna remembered the *calamares*.

'They're delicious, don't you think? In this town they always have fresh fish. Is it true that you've never been here before?'

'Never. I've driven through a few times, but always without stopping.'

'It's quite big. They have a trolley line and factories. I'm so happy to be with you.'

'Me too.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

My cigarette was burning away in the ash tray. The round neck of Anna's blouse gaped. Perhaps Claudette had forgotten that I had blushed that morning. Suddenly I met Anna's gaze. Her mouth opened slightly with a little smile that was both mocking and inquisitive at the same time.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'Something's the matter.'

'I don't know. I'm nervous, like a schoolgirl.'

'Why are you ashamed of being nervous?' She stroked my chest deliberately and slowly.

'Yesterday they arrested some fishermen in the local village.'

Anna moved closer, the legs of her chair screeching on the waxed tiles. I noticed a faint smell of cats in the room.

'What had they done?'

'I don't even know for sure how many were arrested. But it may have something to do with Margot. The villagers expected some such move. It happened last night.'

'Do you believe they killed them?'

'Them? . . .'

'Margot and the others with her.'

I paced up and down in the narrow space between the chairs.

HORTELANO

Anna filled the glasses. With my hands in my pockets I stared at the coloured loops in the bakelite table top.

'I don't know anything, Anna. I feel lost. I feel that everybody is different from what I always thought. I'd never felt like this before, but lately . . . I'm wearing blinkers like a mule and they get narrower and narrower and I see less and less.'

'I think I know what you mean. It's strange, isn't it? An urge to get inside another person and see what's in his mind.'

'But it's never happened to me before.'

'You always knew what you wanted from others.'

'I didn't think about the sort of people I'm worrying about now.'

Anna smiled dimly and gulped down the rest of her wine.

'Something will have to be done,' she said.

'I'm tired of looking at things through my own eyes, of thinking according to a pattern I was taught many years ago. And it doesn't help me now, because I feel that it's false. Every time I start saying "I, I" something nags me and warns me that it's wrong. Then I try to think as the boys they arrested might think, or my chauffeur, or the maid, or the Civil Guard. Everything gets tangled up and I'm becoming neurotic. And what's the use? What has it to do with me?'

'It has to do with all of us one way or the other. She was my friend and you saw her when she was dead. And then you met me.'

'But the fact is that none of it matters to me.'

'That isn't true,' Anna said, not smiling, her cheeks taut and her eyes open wide.

'Look, each time I hit on something, on some kind of truth, I go on to another idea and another new truth. I don't know where I am.'

'Something has to be done.'

'To be done: I don't know. Words scare me as if I had lived on nothing but words up till now. Listen, Anna, you . . .'

Anna got up, walked round the table and fell into my arms. Her hands pressing my back calmed me. The damp patches on the wall, the naked bulb, the flickering light, the empty bottle,

the small white earthenware plates with the remnants of squids, ashes and matches, had a harsh reality that coincided with the growing contentment of touching her.

The man came down the corridor, wiping his hands in his black-and-green-striped apron. He understood before I had finished my explanation. A violent light came through the frosted glass of the upper half of the door to the bar.

The man gave me the key and explained where the room was. I called Anna. The passage on the second floor was covered with a blue, fairly new, carpet. The brass heads of the nails holding it down glistened in the half-light. The key turned easily in the lock. Anna opened the window and drew the net curtains. I sat on the edge of the white metal bed, smoking. I tossed the cigarette into the wash basin when Anna, half undressed, tumbled against me.

Afterwards I fell asleep with my heart beating evenly. I awoke when she moved. The room looked larger; scarcely any light came through the window. For a while I weighed the pros and cons of going to the police. Anna gave me a kiss when I pretended to wake up.

‘Are you feeling OK?’

‘Fine,’ I murmured in answer.

The net curtains were hanging inert and we perspired gently. Anna washed in the bidet. I turned round, the towel still in my hands, to find her already dressed and very beautiful.

‘Anna, I think I will do something. At least I’ll make inquiries. I suppose there are reasons for the arrest, but it’s more likely that the boys are innocent. Isn’t it silly to worry so much about people we don’t know? As soon as everything’s cleared up they’ll be released.’

‘Yes, Javier. Try to find out’—as she opened the door, Anna lowered her voice—‘whether they know how Margot died.’

We walked down the stairs without a word. In the bar, which was full of people, I signalled to the man. He left his place behind the counter and I paid him in the hall. He led us through another, shorter passage to a back door that gave on to a deserted alley, and told us the way to the main street.

Nightfall hadn't diminished the heat. The street lights fastened to the walls of houses had haloes of heat-vapour. Anna was singing softly. Through a side street where a few shop windows were lit up we came, not into the main street, but into a small flagged square with a fountain in the middle. Groups of people were dancing in a circle where the ground consisted of beaten earth instead of flagstones. There was too much light, there were too many people. Anna was very happy when she saw it.

'It's the feast of St Hilary, madam. It goes on till Monday.'

'Thanks,' Anna said to the old man who had answered her question.

We pushed through to the front. A wooden platform had been set up, more than half covering the basin of the fountain; on it a folk-music band was playing *coblas*.

'Listen,' said Anna.

They were dancing with hands linked, their arms nearly always raised high, a round dance with a skilful, intricate rhythm in which their feet made and unmade patterns. I shut my eyes. The air was fresher now, the little square smelled of lavender or thyme.

'How, I would like to know . . .'

A few steps from me Anna was edging towards the dancers, who for a moment stood motionless, their arms limp. One of the girls wore dazzling white espadrilles, with wide ribbons that were twined halfway up her legs. A cloud of fine dust drifted across to the bandstand. When they were finished we clapped. Then we drank a few coca colas in a bar in the square. We made our way back through the main street, where the sidewalks and the middle of the road were crowded with people, and found that it led us to a fairground. It smelt of frying batter, of petrol and of sweat. I threw my jacket over my shoulders and put my arm round Anna's waist. At one of the stalls I bought her a black chiffon headscarf. We ate greasy doughnuts and drank several glasses of cheap gin.

It was late when we returned to the car, which I had left in a near-by street. Once on the road I put on speed, and we listened to music on the radio, which Anna had switched on.

I parted from her near the village square, promising to come again soon. Before I reached the Colony I stopped the car and slowly smoked a cigarette. It was a starry night. Rafael was waiting for me to report on his investigation in the fishing village. Elena would have heard from Dora that I had said I would be back by mid-afternoon. They would have got together and carried on with the preparations for the party, and now after the evening meal they would be tired; Andrés might be tight. Irritably I accelerated. Soon the bluish light of White Sails appeared.

‘Here’s Javier,’ Marta said.

Joaquín came running out of the darkness. Elena held her skirt down over her knees.

‘Good evening, everybody,’ I said. ‘How’s things?’

23

FROM WHERE I was lying, with my chin on the gunwale, the sea looked like an immense sheet of copper catching the sun. You could only look at it through half closed eyes. Amadeo stepped over my legs, the sun gleaming on his blond hair. He sat down in the stern beside Santiago, who was steering.

'That's a better distribution of weight.'

'Am I in the way?' I asked.

'No, you can stay.'

'As I said before, Don Antonio, the market can't harm us, we've been at it so long that after all these years the market couldn't screw us.'

'My dear friend,' Don Antonio settled his dark glasses and shifted his canvas chair without letting go of the cable hanging from the mast, 'the fact remains that it's doing just that.'

'Not the market.'

'I understand what you mean. But you aren't right, or at least not completely right.'

'Claudette, keep away from the exhaust or you'll get your back scorched.'

I opened my eyes. Claudette had gone to the stern and was rubbing a white, greasy cream into her skin. Andrés was lying on the boards in the bow. I turned round, tired of the sea and the sun. My skin was itching. The wind had a strong salty smell.

'How can you imagine that they're going to leave us in the lurch? They'll look like poor idiots?'

'Amadeo, let's assume you're right,' Santiago said.

'That's exactly what will happen,' confirmed Don Antonio.

'I agree, since you both say so. But then why the hell are they talking about that blessed new law?'

'Santiago, when I came to Madrid in 1939 I'd never seen bricklaying even though I was with the engineers all through the war. You know I started with a real estate business which I still carry on even though it isn't my main business interest. In those days we had to learn what was what once and for all. We learnt our lesson.'

Don Antonio's white slacks fell loosely over his sandals. Now and then a crest of foam rose on the water and disappeared. Andrés, in yellow trunks, lay motionless, his legs wide apart. Claudette was moving her hips to offset the swaying of the boat.

'I don't say you're wrong, Don Antonio. But why do they have to make a law or an Act or whatever it is? Just to ruin us?'

'I know what!' shouted Amadeo. 'Let me buy your share in that company of yours and you stop spreading rumours.'

'This is boring for you, Claudette.'

'Oh no, I like shop talk.'

'You wait and see whether I'll be ruined. Don't you understand that it can't happen? They may make it obligatory to rent, but it will be possible to rent furnished property, or to rent only for two years, with periodic revisions, or raise the rent, or some damn thing. Anyway, it will work out!'

'Amadeo!'

'Forgive me, love. Do you understand, Santiago, or don't you?'

'Yes, but I can't see any reason for the whole messy procedure.'

'My dear friend,' Don Antonio slid his hand upwards on the cable, 'what reason was there for the whole Economic Plan? They said we couldn't go on as before—the young people said it. Let's not talk about it. They want a plan, so there is a plan. They've had more education than I had and they know about economics from books, they are know-alls. Let them get on with it. Fortunately'—Don Antonio's voice grew mellifluous—'we can trust them because they are honest people and not stupid. What can they do without us?'

'I don't get it,' said Amadeo. 'Now it's my turn not to understand.'

'I bet Javier understands me.' I propped myself up on my elbows and looked at Don Antonio, who had taken off his glasses. 'Now let's see. How could they do anything without us? We are the river and they are the river bed. They can carry us in a direction that isn't very pleasant, but if they intend to take us where we don't want to go they risk being left high and dry without any current.' Don Antonio laughed. 'It's the current that makes the river, isn't that so, Javier?'

'Yes, Don Antonio.'

'It's the same with housing. People need that sort of a measure from time to time, something that's demagogical, because people are crude and primitive. One has to save them in spite of themselves, if need be. You know the type who always complains about lack of culture, bad schools and what have you. They've got to obey those who know more than they do. And those who know a little more have to learn from us, because we pay the piper and call the tune.'

'Don Antonio ought to be a Minister.'

'I'm a reader, my friend, I'm a great reader. Menéndez y Pelayo is my bedside book.'

'Oh, Amadeo,' said Claudette, 'I've finished the novel.'

'Is it better than *Bonjour tristesse*?'

'I liked it better in a way.'

'But is it as indecent?'

'My dear, I don't care.'

'I'll let you have a good novel,' said Don Antonio and got up, still hanging on to the cable. 'A pre-war novel. Not that I read them myself. I only read serious works and a few detective stories for a change. But the other day they sent me the complete works of Ramiro de Maeztu, you know who he was . . . ?'

'He was very important, I believe.'

'Very important. He was killed by the Reds. Well, at the same time they sent me some murder mysteries bound in leather like someone's complete works. Now they're bringing out detective stories in expensive editions.'

'I'll let you have the Sagan novel, Amadeo.'

'Thanks, Claudette. Shall we have some beer? That one over there does nothing but sleep.'

'Let him. Don't wake him up.'

Amadeo had steered us in a half circle. In a moment the fishing village would become visible on the blurred coastline. When nobody was speaking the motor sounded as though the propeller stopped sometimes and sometimes was revolving in a void. Claudette and Santiago had wakened Andrés, who was rubbing his eyes and talking about his hangover and his ruined liver. Don Antonio was reading the paper. Amadeo was frowning and staring vaguely in front of him.

'Want a cigarette?' Claudette asked.

'No, thanks. My mouth is too dry to smoke.'

'I'll get a coca cola.'

'Hey, there, if you don't change bearings you'll land us at Castellón.'

'Do you want something to drink, Don Antonio?'

'Yes, my dear.' He lowered the paper to his knee. 'I suppose everything's ready for the fiesta. It'll be a great success.'

'You have no idea how many little things there are left to do. But I think it will be a success.'

'Now you're on the right course,' said Andrés. 'Claudette, my sweet, put a little gin in it for me.'

The sun had filled the sky with a slight haze. I drank a sip. On the other side of the gunwale some gulls were wheeling and diving and I felt detached and without worries or at least without thoughts or memories.

'Have you fallen asleep?'

I got up, completely disorientated. The launch lay quiet. On the beach I could see the children running, even though their voices were faint and unintelligible. A fish, recently taken from the hook, was flapping on the deck. When I raised my eyes I saw Claudette standing on tiptoe on the gunwale.

'They want to know if you're staying here or coming along to the fishing village.'

'I'll stay here.'

HORTELANO

'What about you, Javier?' said Andrés. 'Let's eat at the village at five. What do you say?'

'No, count me out.'

'We'll have a game of cards.'

'I'll see you later.'

'It's a marvellous idea of yours, Amadeo. Fried fish, wine and a game of cards. Javier, tell them we don't know when we'll be back.'

Andrés ran towards me with his hands out. Before he could push me, I jumped into the water. Coming to the surface I heard him laugh and a few moments later the rattle of the motor. Claudette, swimming alongside, stopped.

'Are you getting tired?'

'No,' I said.

'It's only four or five minutes swim.'

The sun made me close my eyes, it warmed my body and turned my muscles to rubber. Without the oily cream, Claudette's smooth wet skin must have smelled good.

'How are things with Dora?'

'Bad.'

'You could help her.'

'Because I don't talk enough?'

'Because you aren't interested in anything.'

Ernestina and Luisa were paddling in a rubber dinghy pushed by Enrique and José. Emilio, in the water to his waist, shouted something. They jumped on us and we had a tussle with Emilio offering advice. Dora ran down from the beach tents. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by a violent dislike of Emilio.

'Javier,' said Claudette.

I heard nothing. Emilio, who had stopped shouting, must have grasped the situation because he got out of the water.

I was running when I tripped in a hole in the sandy bottom, near Emilio's legs and his ridiculous bathing trunks, which came half-way down his thighs. They were all staring at me as I got to my feet. Between the awnings and the gaudy swim-suits, Asunción stood holding a huge plastic pail. Though my ankle hurt I managed not to limp.

'Did you hurt yourself?'

'No.'

'You aren't intending to walk back like this without dressing?'

'Yes, I am, Dora and I don't want anyone to shout at me.'

Half-way up the path I stopped to rub my ankle, then I walked slowly home. The concrete pavement burnt the soles of my feet.

While I was in the shower the pain grew sharper. Rufi told me that neither Dora nor the children would be home for lunch. When I had finished eating I settled myself in a hammock in the garden, in the shade.

'The Señora wants to know how your ankle feels, sir.'

'Tell her it doesn't hurt.'

The shooting pain affected my knee. I drank a little brandy. Leoncio was working on the irrigating channels. Inside the house it was dark and cool and I lay a long time in the darkened bedroom making up my mind to telephone. As soon as Elena answered I heard the noise of conversation in the background.

'I don't care if you're busy but can you get away?'

'I meant to call you.'

'It's five now. At half past five?'

'I can't stay long, only a moment. Wait for me in the pine wood.'

'Right. At six.'

'Yes, that's better.'

Elena's voice sounded tired. I whistled while I dressed and drank a whisky and soda. Rufi was picking parsley near the swimming pool, which was still empty. As I was about to go out, a young boy rang the bell at the garden gate. I heard him ask for Dora and saw him give Rufi a flat box wrapped in tissue paper.

'Who sent you?' I asked.

He only saw me when Rufi stepped aside, and was startled.

'Señor Vicente, sir. He told me to leave these boxes.'

'All right. Are you from the village?'

Rufi lingered, the box under her arm.

'They're chocolates. Señor Vicente told me to ask for the ladies

HORTELANO

by name. Yes, I live in the village. It's free, you know. You don't have to pay anything.'

Smiling, Rufi closed the gate. The boy blushed.

'Rufi, tell anybody who asks for me that I've gone for a walk.'

The boy bent to pick up two other identical boxes from the pavement where he had left them. When he had them I handed him some money.

'No, sir. They're free.'

'I know. That's so you can go to the movies.'

'But . . .' He frowned. 'Well, thank you, sir.'

'So you live in the village.' I was walking up the street. 'How old are you?'

'Twelve.'

The boy followed me. At the corner, where another street led to Asunción's, I stopped.

'The second villa on the left is one of those you're looking for.'

'But I didn't tell you . . .'

'It's easy to guess where you're going. Number twelve. Do you know the men the police took away the other day?'

'Yes, sir. One's my cousin. José Flix. He was taking me out in his boat so I could learn the trade.'

'Have they done anything wrong?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Why? What do your parents say?'

'My mother says they must've done something if they were arrested. And the priest says they wouldn't have taken them away if they'd been good. But José hadn't done anything.'

The boy had gone up on to the sidewalk and moved restlessly towards the tree-lined side street.

'I hope they'll soon . . . I mean I'm sure he's innocent . . .'

The boy smiled. 'Adiós.'

'Adiós, sir. And many thanks for the money.'

I heard him running as I walked away. On the slope leading to the pine wood my ankle started to ache again. I was sweating, panting, and exhausted when I reached the spring. I sat down on a tree trunk. You could smell the heat; the branches made

sharp patterns of light and shade. I smelt the resin and the dry soil covered with pine needles.

At half past six I stood up. At the first step my leg gave and I walked up and down in the small clearing and tried to forget about my sudden fury with Emilio.

In this shady pine wood, the sunset and the night sounds, which would come much later out in the open were already apparent. I smoked a cigarette and sat down again, with my arms on my knees. I decided to wait another quarter of an hour. I noticed when the time ran beyond my deadline but felt at ease, quiet and self-forgetful, with my imagination running free.

‘Javier!’

Elena’s voice startled me and we kissed perfunctorily. The climb had frozen her face in a smile.

‘You’ll have to forgive me, Javier. It was terribly difficult to get away and I was worried because you were waiting here.’

‘Don’t bother, Elena. I don’t even know what the time is.’

We both sat down on the trunk, which was half buried in dry leaves, and I took out the cigarettes.

‘You weren’t too impatient?’

‘No. Or at least not as you meant it.’ My ideas acquired a strange lucidity. ‘Small things, the bothersome consequences of the situation, begin to matter less and less to me. Though one day . . .’

Elena’s hands found mine. In the uncertain evening light her face looked almost flat.

‘One day?’

‘You look younger.’

‘No,’ she laughed. ‘Answer my question.’

I twirled the cigarette between my fingers, waited for the pressure of her hand to slacken and told myself that everything was quite clear.

‘One day our affair will end.’

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her arms and her left foot which was tapping the ground.

‘Why?’

'Because I accept things less every day.'

'Things you have accepted in the past few years?'

'Don't shout at me, Elena.'

'I shout because you're malicious. Because I'm the one who's fed up with hearing you say that you're fed up. Fed up with what with? With me? Tell me that once and for all in so many words. Say: "I'm fed up with your body and your kisses and your love-making, because we men . . ."'

'Be quiet, Elena.'

" . . . need a change from time to time." But say it without silly phrases and frills. Without making me angry.'

'I'm not fed up with your body, as you suggest.'

'Do you want to leave me?'

'Will you listen?'

'I won't listen to stupid whims. This summer you're bored and you're making a mess of the thing between us. What is it you miss?'

'I miss you.'

'But, Javier, for three days . . .'

'I don't want to miss you for a single moment.'

'Don't be . . .'

'I want to have what's mine and you're mine. Will you get that into your head and stop confusing me with your old-womanish fears?'

I hardly moved and had her, all of her, in a desperate clasp. I kissed her furiously, still talking trying to tell her the truths I had kept to myself until then. But together with my confidence that she would understand I had the feeling it would be useless. When we let go we were out of breath.

'My love, I must go now.'

'Not yet, Elena.'

'Yes, my love. They're bound to be looking for me. Everything's behind schedule. The first guests arrive tonight.'

'Nobody who's of any interest to you.'

'I mind more than you.' She started to walk. 'On Sunday I promise you a whole happy afternoon.'

We hurried downhill and near the road we kissed again.

‘Don’t go on thinking of yourself as misunderstood. See you later, Javier, I must run. We’ll meet tonight, darling.’

I stayed with her scent within me with no other scent and no other taste in my quivering mouth. Later I imagined a dialogue without shouts or absurd recriminations, which would lead us a long way.

I stretched out on the ground. Stars showed through the branches of the pines. I was no longer perspiring. From time to time a rustle went through the wood. I let myself drift into inertia and comforting sadness. Suddenly, as I lay there with closed eyes, aware of my aching leg, I was startled by a flash of light.

On the other side of the road a semicircle of light had filled the sky, lending a phantasmagoric air to the countryside. When I reached the edge of the pine wood I understood. I descended towards the colony, where they were testing the lights for the fiesta.

24

THE SOLE of my shoe slipped from the foot-rest and I had to hold on to the bar. I looked into the mirror, adjusted my tie and put my empty glass down next to the little dishes of almonds and peanuts when Raimundo returned.

‘Finish your whisky and we’ll ask for another round.’

Raimundo buttoned his fly. The ice in my glass had melted. Raimundo had long hair on the back of his hands. I ordered two whiskies; I felt better after the first sip.

‘My stomach is settling down.’

‘Whisky, that’s what suits me best.’ Raimundo belched and put his hand over his mouth. ‘If it weren’t so expensive . . .’

‘And if they didn’t adulterate it.’

‘Who does?’

‘I don’t know. Do you realize that we never know who really does things?’

Raimundo thought for a few seconds and then shook his head. His bald patch was glistening with perspiration.

‘You know, when I think over what you say, Don Javier, I come to the conclusion that we are nothing.’ He drank slowly, rolling his eyes. ‘Jack Evers. This is a good brand.’

‘I have a few bottles of Johnny Walker which . . . Listen, Raimundo, one day I’ll take a couple of bottles of Johnny Walker and we’ll drink them between us.’

‘You bring the whisky and I’ll bring the cognac. Do you like cognac?’

‘Very much. It’s one of God’s blessings.’

'What?'

'Cognac is a divine blessing. And don't you worry about the Ministry.'

'I won't worry now you're involved. I'll bring the bottle I brought from France during Holy Week. It's Courvoisier. So you see, Don Javier, how things are.'

'What?'

'Things.'

'At the Ministry?'

'No sir. I mean that I go to France during Holy Week.'

'Oh yes. France is a very wicked country.'

'If I weren't a bachelor, which I am, I couldn't go to France either. I want to say I go to France because that's my pleasure. And because I can bring back cognac. Do you like cognac?'

'Cognac is a blessing from Heaven. Thanks, Raimundo.'

'Have a cigar in honour of the cognac?'

'I've just had a cigarette.'

'I'm going to give you a cigar.'

'Many thanks . . . light yours. Many thanks, Raimundo.'

'Thank you, Don Javier.' He put his lighter on the bar upside down in precarious equilibrium. 'Well, in my opinion they can go to hell. What do they matter to a man like you?'

'You mean it's all right if they stay in hell. Your friend the policeman has gone to Barcelona and the boys are locked up here. José Flix and the other three.'

'Don Julio and I were going out with two sisters. Then he came here more often. I used to stand him drinks here at this bar, and he wasn't a slow drinker either. Now he's going south because he says the fishing isn't good here. I think that he has a woman in Alicante.'

'Fishing is bad.'

'As soon as my partner comes the three of us will go to the shop and you can have a look at the new casts that have just come in. And then a few lures with little mirrors that have come in from Portugal.'

'Who is that girl?'

'Which one?'

HORTELANO

'That one.'

'The girl who has just come in?'

Raimundo swivelled round on his stool. The cafeteria smelt of cream, pine-scented air freshener, and coffee. A few neon tubes scattered an uncertain, flickering light. The sultry night air came through the windows and mixed with the thick fog in the room. The girl sat down at a table with some other women.

'She's not bad.'

'Not bad at all.' I fumbled for a saucer on which to put out my cigarette. 'In this place you have some women who are very attractive indeed, Raimundo.'

'Yes, sir. It's different in winter.'

We stopped talking when the waiter arrived smiling and familiar. Raimundo jerked his head upwards as though tossing his horns; the waiter laughed.

'What can I bring you, sir?'

He filled our glasses, removed the empty saucers and put down others filled with almonds, peanuts and anchovy canapes.

'Yes it's always different in winter. I'm glad it's summer now, even if we are sweating like pigs.'

Raimundo ran his hand over his bald head from his neck to his eyebrows. 'That's what I say, Don Javier, summer is better because a man is more hot-blooded.'

'That girl has sculptured hips.'

'That's why this village is so nice in summer, you know. Later we'll go to the shop and when you've seen the lures, we'll run over to the camp site. It's marvellous at night. We can have a few drinks with two German girls I know, two girls from Heidelberg who are learning to be secretaries and who are nice to look at. A little flat in front, but very nice, to look at. Did you say something?'

'No.'

'You'll still be in time for your party. Anyway, it's only eight or so and my partner won't be long now. Ramirez, what time is it?'

'Exactly a quarter to ten, Don Raimundo.'

'You see.'

'Yes, I see.'

The radio had been turned down and the sound of voices grew louder. The men waved their arms and the sweaty patches under their arms showed more than with the women. I straightened my tie before getting off the bar stool and stepping on to the dirty floor that was covered with cigarette butts, paper napkins and sawdust.

'I have to go somewhere.'

'Down the steps and turn right at the bottom.'

'Thanks.'

'I'll keep your seat for you.'

At the bottom of the pink-stone stairs, there were two black doors, with a man's face on one and a woman's on the other. I stayed there quite a while, leaning against the white tiles and trying not to mind the smell of disinfectant. I washed my hands and in front of the mirror examined my grey hair and the wrinkles on my forehead. The soap smelled bad and the towel was damp, so I dried myself with my handkerchief. Even there I heard the muffled noise from the cafeteria. As I went up the stairs, I checked to see if my fly was buttoned. I tightened the knot of my tie, and when I reached the bar Raimundo's partner got off my stool. Raimundo introduced him and the young man remained standing between us.

'What did you say his name was?'

'Agustín Riva.'

'Well, have a drink.'

'I'm sorry I was so late. The boy came for me at the workshop and I had to go home to put on something decent. So you'll have to forgive me.'

'We've had a good time, haven't we, Raimundo?'

'Of course we have. I told you, Agustín, Don Javier is a real gentleman, but he's easy to deal with. Haven't I told you that?'

Agustín nodded without taking his hands out of his pockets.

'Are you a bachelor too?'

'No sir, no, I got married in the spring.'

'And his wife is already like a balloon.'

Agustín smiled coyly.

'Have another whisky.'

'No thanks. I'll have the usual, Ramírez.'

'Sherry . . . a glass of Fino La Ina for the gentleman.'

'You want trucks to transport fish.'

'No, sir,' said Agustín, 'for haulage.'

'Give me a note with all the details and I'll see to the rest.'

'Yes, sir. Now, in the summer, there won't be many people in Madrid. And as we've been waiting for the permit for so long already, twenty-three months, it can wait till September if you think it is better.'

'No complications now, just give Don Javier the facts and he'll know what's best.'

'I only said it because it's summer.'

'Don Javier, don't listen to this scared rabbit. Do you have some paper?'

Agustín took out his pen and asked for a sheet of paper. He started writing slowly, on the bar, behind Raimundo, who was ordering another round of whisky. The cafeteria was getting more and more crowded. At any moment Anna might come in.

'The nicer one knows a little Spanish.'

'All right, Raimundo, one of these days I'll come and have a look at your two German girls.'

'Well, if it weren't for that party of yours, I'd say we should go now. The girls are OK and they're young, you know. That's how it is in summer.' Raimundo threw a remark to Agustín over his shoulder. 'Don't forget anything, Don Javier won't be able to come back for it later. I intend to go to Madrid in October. That's what I like about Madrid—business till eight or nine o'clock and then the fun starts. Two or three weeks of fun and games.'

'So, Raimundo, you don't think I ought to go to the police station?'

'Don't go near it. What I say is what has a man like yourself to do with those boys?'

'Well, the people in the village . . .'

'Do you know what they did? What if they did kill her?'

'Why should they have killed her?'

'You know better than I do, Don Javier, but my advice to you is don't do anything.'

'No, there isn't any reason to, really.'

'That's what I've been saying. Next week come down here one morning, look at the goods in the store, we'll have a meal together and then we'll take those two girls to some beach. The uglier one knows a little Spanish. Do you speak German?'

'*Nein. Ich habe in Heidelberg verloren.* No, that's wrong. *Ich hab' mein Herz in Heidelberg verloren. Ich hab' einen Kameraden.*'

'I only know four sentences of English. I can get on with the French girls because Catalan and French are first cousins. But not a word of German. You can talk, and I'll go into action.' Raimundo was chuckling until Agustín pushed between our two stools, the sheet of paper in his hand. 'Have you put down everything?'

'Read it.'

'How should I know what to put down? I'm only the capitalist partner after all. Have another sherry.'

'No, later it goes to my head. I think all the details are there.'

'OK, don't worry.' I put the note into my wallet. 'I'll see you on Monday or Tuesday. Waiter, how much do I owe you?'

'Don't bother, they won't take your money,' said Agustín.

In the street we were a long time saying goodbye. I left the village in second gear, ignoring the lights. In front of the barracks I accelerated but on the main road I slowed down because I was afraid. The headlights of a truck took me by surprise. My right front wheel scraped the side of the road with a sharp noise. I put on the brake and smoked a cigarette. A few miles further on I stopped again. Not even the highest branches of the trees moved in the still clear night. I put on my parking lights and undressed. There was a small, pebbly cove where the water lapped softly. I almost forgot to take off my watch. When I dived in, my head was spinning.

I swam under water, keeping close to the shore. The small waves were warm on my body, like Anna's breasts. When I came out, I dropped on to the sand and found a comfortable

position. I intended going back in because the whisky was again raging in my brain, but for some reason I suddenly saw before me the face of the dead girl, her square mouth and the light of dawn falling through the windows of the hut that morning. I stayed there very quietly, spellbound.

My clothes were full of sand. When I dressed I was cold and shut the car windows. In my headlights, shapes and distances had regained their consistency. I was thirsty, my throat was parched from alcohol and salt. I drove faster but kept thinking that I was moving away from Anna. Soon I got to the brightly-lit Colony.

The streets were full with cars parked on both sides.

A minibus stood in front of our house. The nervous rhythm of the party penetrated the house as an irregular hum coming through the trees and villas. In the bedroom, I saw my dinner jacket laid out on the bed.

After I had changed, I leaned for a while against the window sill. The centre of the party was between Amadeo's and Santiago's houses. The colours of the women's dresses and the white patches of dress shirts were clearly visible. The noise and music swelled and ebbed, although there was no wind. I wondered where they had left the children when I felt somebody behind me.

'Forgive me, sir. I saw the light and came to see if we were disturbing you, or if you needed anything.'

'Thanks, Rufi. Why would anything disturb me?'

'We're downstairs, sir. The chauffeurs and some of the servants who came with the guests. We're dancing.'

Rufi smoothed out the wrinkles in the bedspread.

'Are you having a good time?'

'A very good time, sir.'

'That hair-do makes you prettier, Rufi.'

'Did you notice it, sir? It's a beautiful party. There's a group of flamenco dancers and two bands. Like a cabaret. And lots of people. Beg your pardon, sir, I feel so happy because I have had five or six glasses of wine.'

'I'm glad, Rufi. Go on drinking till you drop.'

'Oh, sir!'

'Till you fall flat on your face. That's my advice. Later on I'll come to your fiesta downstairs and by that time I want to see you already tight.' Rufi laughed. 'Do you hear me?'

'You're the best person in the world.'

Santiago met me at the garden entrance. It was a while before I got a whisky. By the time I took the first sip, my right hand was clammy and my jaws ached from smiling. People were dancing everywhere, even on the tennis courts.

'The flamenco dancers are over there with Claudette,' Amadeo said.

'Dora was looking for you. D'you know how late it is?'

'I couldn't come any earlier.'

'The worst of a party is that there are so many characters who . . .'

'It's a quarter to one, Asunción.'

' . . . get soaked in whisky.'

'I knew the time.'

'He says he's from Iceland. Iceland, not Ireland.'

'Are you going?'

'Just a minute, Asun. I want to have a look round.'

Sitting on the lawn in the dark, her evening dress pulled above her knees, Ernestina called me.

'What are you doing here?'

'This fiesta stinks.'

I squatted down. Her red hair was tousled.

'Careful with your neckline.'

'Do you know Polo Orduña? After ten minutes he made a pass at me because he thought I was drunk.'

'Did he get far?'

'One can't have a fiesta, even a stinking garden party like this, without someone trying to maul you after only ten minutes! People have lost their manners. Luisa is having a crazy time.'

'Come with me if you like.'

'Wonderful, I'll meet you later on.'

On the wooden platform an ash-blond gipsy girl raised a cloud of dust at the end of a frenzied *sevillana*. During the

HORTELANO

applause I managed to exchange my empty glass for a full one. Claudette raised her head when I sat down opposite her canvas chair.

'At last a peaceful corner. Why are there more people in your house than in Marta's?'

'It's like the tide. They come and go.'

'You look lovely in your blue strawcloth dress, or whatever it is. This is an island of peace.'

'And there's a bottle of whisky under your chair. I haven't got any ice. Did you just arrive?'

'Yes. What are you doing?'

Claudette lifted her hands and went on plaiting the strips of red and white cellophane which she had taken from a pack of cigarettes and carefully folded.

The people fell silent. The gipsy girl, the guitar player and the flamenco singer started their act on the platform.

'Have you been to the village?'

*Quisiera verte y no verte,
quisiera hablarte y no hablarte . . .*

I want to see you and not to see you,

I want to speak to you and not to speak to you . . .

'Yes, I went because of those boys from the fishing village.'

*. . . quisiera encontrarte a solas
y no quisiera encontrarte*

I want to meet you alone

And I don't want to meet you

'Which boys?'

'The ones they arrested.'

'What had they done?'

La pena y lo que no es pena

Sorrow and what is no sorrow

'I don't know.'

'Why did you go then?'

'I don't know that either. The inspector in charge wasn't there.'

'It's an ugly story.' Her hands continued their measured movements but when I met her eyes she smiled. 'I don't like it at all.'

'You're marvellous.'

'Because it's true that there's a bottle under your chair?'

'Because of it'—I caught the cork between my teeth—'and because of everything. This boy sings well.' I poured myself half a glass. 'This turns out to be a charming party.'

'What did you expect? The quickest people get the most fun out of fiestas. Go away, be sociable and look after your own business.'

'I don't feel like business.'

*Tengo una pena, una pena,
que casi puedo decir
que yo no tengo la pena:
la pena me tiene a mi.*

I've got a sorrow, a sorrow
That I could almost say
I no longer have a sorrow:
The sorrow has got me.

She left the strips of cellophane on her lap. A few beads of sweat made cracks in the makeup on her temples.

'Find yourself a woman.'

'My wife?'

'Or another. What's the matter with you?'

'What's the matter with you?'

'My husband's leaping from group to group, wearing out his shoes dancing with flirts.'

'Claudette, you're jealous.'

'Afterwards he'll be tired and more in love with me than before, but he will have less strength to prove it to me.'

'Claudette, if you talk like this I'll go off with Ernestina, who is also drunk.'

'She has her problems, I suppose, though she'd rather have

HORTELANO

mine. Why don't you play your part as the typical Spanish male?'

'Dear Claudette, how did you come to settle in this country?'

'All countries are the same.'

'If I weren't so fond of Santiago, I'd like to be your lover.'

'Find yourself a woman. Your wife or someone else. Don't stay here with me because I've got the blues. A mature man needs an affair.'

'I'm worried about those boys.'

'They're having fun.'

'Right now they're in jail smelling the dampness.'

'Which boys do you mean?'

'Have you seen Elena?'

'Haven't you seen her? She looks wonderful!'

A group of people came running through the breach in the stone wall. I went over and saw that they were clustered round Amadeo and the gipsy dancer who was pirouetting face to face with him. I discovered that Amadeo was wearing a woman's dress and a long rope of beads over his dinner jacket. I went slowly back to Claudette, who was weaving a new shape out of the cellophane strips.

'When we've finished this drink, you and I will have a dance.'

'Fine.' Claudette crossed her legs and I leaned back in the chair. 'A woman should be happy at a party.'

In Marta's garden, the band alternated between Italian songs and calypsos. I finished my drink and fell asleep.

It was daylight, though the sun had not yet come up. Claudette, who was very pale, had put her feet on a corner of my seat. A few fleecy clouds were swimming in the watery blue sky. The air felt warm and dry.

'You'll find you're aching all over.'

I got up and stretched my arms and flexed my shoulders. As I leaned down, she looked at me smiling. She shut her eyes. And I kissed her between the eyebrows.

'Won't you go to bed?'

'What about one last drink?'

'I couldn't.'

SUMMER STORM

On the dance floor three couples were moving to the slow beat of the band. Ernestina's head was against Polo Orduña's neck. Andrés and Santiago were leading a procession of six or seven people, the last of whom was Marta, who was sprinkling the rose trees with gin. They were singing boisterously. I heard them in the street, and the early morning seemed to me vaster and more lonely.

25

A VERY bright light came in through the blinds and I got up for a drink of water. My tongue was heavy and stuck to my parched palate; my lips were burning and felt raw. Though I wasn't sleepy, I didn't have the energy to move. I remembered Claudette's cheeks as they had been a few hours before at dawn.

'He's been sleeping,' said Rufi.

'Well, wake him up. If he's arranged something with Rafael wake him up, because he'd be angry if we didn't call him.'

'Yes, Señora.'

Slowly the door opened. For a moment, until I felt the light shine more brightly through my eyelids, I didn't know what Rufi was doing in the bedroom.

'Sir, it's after twelve.'

'All right.'

It took me a long time to get up, take a shower, and dress. My fatigue had almost blotted out my memory. Dora came in to tell me that people had been asking for me.

'I don't feel like seeing anyone. I spoke to all and sundry at the party.'

'Javier, people . . .'

'Dora, I don't feel like seeing anyone. If we lose all our friends so much the better.'

Dora slammed the door. The telephone rang and I quickly picked up the receiver.

'What's the matter with you?' asked Andrés.

'Nothing. Why?'

'You sound so gentle. Have you already had the usual morning quarrel?'

'How are you?'

'Dead. At some stage we started watering the garden with gin but Claudette came and chased us with a broom. Did you have fun?'

'I was bored stiff.'

'I didn't think it was too bad. She really made us gallop. I was drunk and running and you know that I'm not up to it. Are you dressed? Amadeo wants you to come over here.'

'I can't now.'

'He says you must go to the beach because he's arranged with that fellow for you to sell him the sites.'

'He can sell what he likes. I can't go to the beach or anywhere else. I've got things to do.'

'Wait a moment.' Andrés had moved away from the telephone and was asking something in a loud voice.

'Javier . . .'

'Yes?'

'Come on, you can't spoil the deal like this.'

'I tell you he can do what he likes and you too. You belong to the company as well. Why is it always me who's supposed to pull the chestnuts out of the fire?'

'All right, forget it. See you later.'

He left me with something on the tip of my tongue, stupidly holding the receiver. Before I had put on my shoes the telephone rang again.

'It's Amadeo.'

'I know. What's up?'

'Andrés says you're not coming.'

'No, I'm not.'

'Don't you remember that we agreed to see Jubachs, the real estate man?'

'Yes, I remember that three or four days ago you were all agog at the thought that he was coming. You can sell him as many houses as you like. I've got other things to do.'

'Let's be reasonable, Javier. Jubachs isn't as important as

HORTELANO

you are and he knows it. It will please him to play at being a big investor over a drink and with five or six women in bathing suits around him. He wants to buy the blocks of houses which are beginning to look like hardy perennials. I'm sure of it.'

'I won't come so why pester me?'

'In all our interests.'

'You and Andrés can do it with those four or five pretty women about. Tell them not to forget to bend over and show their teats. If he puts up a million pesetas, make the girls kiss him.'

'Javier!'

'No, Amadeo, I won't come.'

'But what are you doing?'

'Anything rather than put up with that old wretch.'

'I've never known you act like this. Look if you don't want to sell, nothing will be sold, but it isn't right to act like this for no reason. It isn't right!'

'Which article in our agreement authorizes you to give me advice?'

'If that's the way you want it.'

Before he cut short our conversation, I slammed the receiver down. I put on a shirt and tie and got out a freshly ironed summer jacket. From the window, I saw Dora with Luisa who was wearing a bathing suit. The light made her dark, tanned, skin look hard. The children were running along a path towards the street. The pine trees on the mountain stood out, a dazzling green against the blue sky.

The children were staying alone in the garden until someone—presumably Asunción—came to take them to the beach. Leoncio would soon come out to work in the flower-beds, and María would be busy in the kitchen, preparing lunch, and Rufi would sing song after song.

'Rafael!'

The children looked up at the same time as Rafael.

'Uncle Javier, are you coming down soon?'

'I'm coming.'

In the hall, Joaquín jumped into my arms.

'It's too hot to carry you. Is the station wagon ready?'

Rafael nodded and the kids ran after us into the street.

'If you don't get out of the way I'll run over you,' Rafael threatened, but they laughed and jumped in front of the car until Rafael got cross. Their voices faded away behind us in the sunny morning. At the first curve we saw the sea.

'Do you like children?'

'Yes.'

'Then you should get married.'

'There's still time.'

The pine wood to the left was full of tempting shady spots where it would have been good to lie down with a bottle of something cool.

'Is it Saturday or Sunday today?'

'Saturday.'

'Have you been to the village?'

'I was there till half past nine.'

'Anything new?'

'No, nothing.'

'Will you be going tomorrow?'

'Yes, I've got to pick up the mail and take someone to late Mass.'

'Yes, that's better. Maybe you'll hear something . . .'

Rafael slowed down at the curves and went uphill at the right speed. I was thinking that he drove better than I, when suddenly he said something that startled me out of my daydream.

'What was it you said?'

'That it isn't for me to give you advice, but . . .'

'Speak up.'

He looked sideways for a second and smiled. 'Maybe you trust those people a little too much, Don Javier. I mean, they're going to tell you stories that aren't quite true.'

'They're going to exaggerate, is that it?'

'Yes. It's difficult to understand people.'

'Why do you think it difficult?'

'I don't say it's their fault and of course it isn't yours. Each one's got his own way of living, and that's why everyone's

HORTELANO

different. But people have to understand one another, and that's what's impossible at times.' The wheels rolled from the pavement on to the sand, where Rafael stopped in the shade of the first house. 'But who am I to give you advice?'

'I don't see why you'd want me to make a mistake either.'

'They're wary because they're used to the big stick, and it doesn't enter their heads that you could interest yourself in them.'

Juan walked up followed by a boy. We shook hands and went over to the table and chairs under the thatched roof.

'If you don't need me I'll do the shopping,' said Rafael.

'Yes, you can go.'

'Take the boy along if you like,' Juan suggested.

'Is your son better?'

'His fever's gone, but he isn't well. Thanks for asking.'

Between the grounded boats the sea was calm and smooth, glinting with reflected light. A long border of dirty scum fringed the beach down to the jetty where the big launches clustered. The boy sat on the sand near us. The owner brought us a bottle of white wine and a plate of fried fish and lemon for me. Juan's skin was dry with a fine film of salt in the deep folds of his cheeks.

'So you don't know why they've been arrested.'

'There must be a reason, Don Javier?'

'You think so?'

'The day before yesterday the gentlemen were here,' the boy said suddenly. 'In the afternoon Señor Karl came too.'

'That's right. They had a meal here.'

Vicente came hurrying up the street.

'Good morning, Don Javier.'

'Hello, Vicente. Sit down and have a glass of wine.'

Juan, who had got up when Vicente arrived, changed his seat to leave me in the middle.

'Have you heard anything?'

'Not yet, Vicente. I had a lot to do these past few days. The other evening I came down here but the inspector had gone to

Madrid. I'll have another try tomorrow. We'll see what those boys are supposed to have done if they've done anything.'

'If the Civil Guard took them away it must have been because of something they'd done,' said Juan.

'How do you know?'

'What are their names?'

'José Flix, Juan Caballs, Feliciano Tormillo and José Hervás. Juan's the oldest, he's twenty-three.'

'All right. Where did they work?' Vicente licked the sticky part of the cigarette paper before rolling it. 'They were fishermen, weren't they?'

'Don Javier,' said Vicente, 'it's a hard life in this village. Sometimes they buy things.'

'That's not the reason,' said Juan. 'They were arrested because of the lady who turned up on the beach at White Sails.'

By now we were surrounded by a dozen men who were listening, motionless, to our conversation, their eyes like slits. Vicente filled the three glasses with wine. The boy who'd been sitting in the sand joined the men.

'Did they search their houses?'

'Yes,' Juan answered quickly. 'Even if they didn't kill her they might have stolen everything she had on her. Those foreign women always have dollars or things that are worth a lot.'

'Who says she was a foreign woman?'

The circle opened to let in a black-haired man of about forty who held out his hand.

'He's Miguel, the President of the Fraternity,' said Vicente.

'Glad to meet you, Don Javier.'

'It's a pleasure. Sit down.'

The boy brought a chair and went for another glass. Miguel glanced at the men around us and after drinking smiled at me.

'It's the women who suffer most,' Juan said. 'They can't get used to the life those boys lead nowadays. They imagine things are still as they were in the old days.'

'Listen, Juan,' said someone in the group, 'do you know for sure that the boys killed the lady?'

'What do you think? We want your opinion.'

HORTELANO

'Listen,' said Vicente, 'Juan said that because it's not right to make accusations.'

'Come on, Juan, tell the gentleman that the boys killed her.'

'Goddammit, who asked you to speak?'

'Shut up,' Miguel said. 'You see, sir, it's like this. We think the boys either smuggled goods or did something at the camping place or were mixed up in that affair of the foreign woman.'

'Who said she was a foreigner?'

'You saw her?'

'Yes.'

'Then you'll have seen that she was a foreigner. A tall, beautiful woman, with fine skin and firm breasts.'

'Miguel,' one of the men shouted, 'don't be vulgar.'

The men laughed and Miguel grinned, waiting for them to be quiet.

'One of the Civil Guards said the same thing. An English-woman or a Swede. Who knows? Vicente told us you were worrying about the boys, Don Javier. We're grateful to you, we thank you with all our hearts, because they're good boys, even if they're wild and they've got no one to defend them. If you look into it they'll be well treated because you're a gentleman who's done a lot for this district, with the Colony and all. You're respected here, Don Javier.'

'That's what I told the gentleman,' said Vicente.

'You're very kind. I'll do what I can. First I wanted to hear what you had to say and what you thought about the affair.'

'If they've done anything they'll have to pay for it.'

'Shut up, Juan.'

'The camping area attracted them, you know what I mean, sir. The women have their fun with the boys, forgive my saying so.' Vicente laughed gruffly. 'But as we said before, it's a matter of youth.'

'Youth, what the hell. They're getting used to Virginia tobacco and good drinks like brandy and wearing silk scarves. And what about going out in the boat? One day there won't be a single man left in this village who can cope with a spar or cast a fishing line.'

'Juan, the gentleman has come here to find out about these boys.'

'And I'm grateful to him for it, and he knows it.'

'Yes, I know, Juan.'

'But they must be punished.'

The sun shone through the wine in the bottle as I got up. The men stepped back from the shade.

'If you'd like to see your launch . . .'

'No, thanks, Juan.'

'Stay and eat,' Vicente proposed.

'No, I have to go home.' We walked to the station wagon. 'I won't forget about your affair, Vicente. As soon as there's anything new I'll let you know.'

'Many thanks, Don Javier. May Our Lady reward you for all you do for us poor people.'

Rafael, leaning on the steering wheel, was gazing at the row of fishermen who, one by one, mumbled something as they shook hands with me, as though they were at a funeral.

'In ten minutes we'll be back in the Colony.'

'Yes,' Rafael said. 'It's a quarter past three.'

When I got out I saw Andrés lying on his back in the grass, his hands round his drawn-up knees, laughing at Emilio. Ernestina, Marta and Amadeo, in bathing suits, were on the veranda with the children.

'Those lecherous swine, those bastards!'

'Calm down, Emilio,' said Asunción, tugging at his arm.

He stared at me from reddened eyes, his face and neck covered with sweat.

'And your wife was there too!'

I didn't say anything.

'You've missed something.'

'The kids discovered a few of the boys who came here yesterday sitting at the top of a tree and peeping in at the solarium!'

'And your wife—you may as well know—was there, stark naked!'

I walked towards the veranda steps.

'Emilio, don't involve me in a melodrama with my wife.'

HORTELANO

I heard Dora's sobs at the same time as his shouts.

'They were in the tree,' Amadeo continued, 'and those silly women on the roof terrace had no idea.'

'But how could we have guessed?'

I went into the study, followed by Andrés and Amadeo, who were elated by the deal they had concluded with Jubachs. Dora interrupted her tears and recriminations as soon as it was time to go to lunch at Elena's, with twenty others. I ate with Enrique and then sent Rufi to get Joaquín. The three of us shut ourselves in the living room for a game of chess, the two of them against me. I kept thinking that now Anna would be waiting for her lover.

26

THERE WERE lights out to sea. The fishing boats had gone out an hour before, shortly after I came to the cliff path. I was thinking of Anna's letter which Rafael had handed me at noon, when I heard a rustling noise and Elena's white pants showed clearly in the dark and the skin of her arms and face shone more dully.

'Sorry. Have you been waiting long?'

'A while. Shall we go for a walk?'

'Let's go to the cove. It's incredible weather, don't you think?'

She kissed me on the mouth. 'I was just ready to go out when Ursula turned up. They're still discussing yesterday morning's incident.'

'Who were the idiots who climbed the tree?'

'Nobody knows. They ran away when the children arrived. Are you pleased?'

'I want to talk to you, Elena.'

'All right.'

The path led down through the pine trees and cliffs. Beyond the line of the beach the night was faintly luminous, without moon or stars. Elena's perfume bothered me. For a few moments I hesitated but she was so enticing I decided to submit my proposal.

'If you like,' she said with a smile, 'we can go for a swim.'

'Since we can't go to the cottage . . . But it would ruin your makeup and your beautiful hair-do.'

'Do you like it? Claudette says it makes me look ten years younger.'

HORTELANO

'Claudette's kind.'

'Don't you think the curls make me look younger?'

'Yes, you look lovely.'

In the cove, sitting on the sand, we kissed again, then smoked in silence. I got up when I thought I heard footsteps but Elena stared out to sea, her lips slightly parted in a vague smile.

'Listen, I want to tell you something important.'

'Ah, yes, forgive me.' She turned towards me and propped her arms on my knees.

'I'd like to talk it over quietly, without a scene. In the last twenty-four hours I've had to put up with Dora's scenes every ten minutes and it's getting me down.'

'She wants you to make it up with Emilio, go to Mass, come to the luncheons I give'—she laughed—'and to work on your papers. Why not sleep with her for one night? I think that's what she needs.'

'Don't judge her by yourself. I hate scenes.'

She blinked and attempted a smile. 'Begin if you like.'

The sand was finer than on the Colony beach; the stones were flat like coins. I rubbed my hands, not knowing how to begin.

'I want us to go away.'

'Where to?'

'I don't know where, it's all the same to me. Somewhere abroad: Italy, for instance, or Majorca. It makes no difference. What matters is for us to live together. For ever.'

For a long time she was silent and I thought she had understood from the inflection of my voice. I kissed her shoulder, round and slightly acid like a quince.

'Why?' she asked suddenly.

'I don't know why. Because of everything. It would take me a long time to explain.'

'Explain it to me.'

'Because . . . because of everything.'

She put her chin on her knees but looked up. I walked to the edge of the water where the waves had deposited some battered seaweed. I remembered that sea water destroyed leather and my sandals were getting wet and that Elena would still be in the

same position. I turned back and Elena smiled without moving.

'It's marvellous to hear such things after so many years. I've been imagining that we were sweethearts and that you had finally decided to propose.'

'Yes, it's marvellous. You and I didn't have enough money to get married . . .' I stopped short when I saw her parted lips moving towards me. 'Listen, Elena, no romantic nonsense. I mean what I say seriously.'

She looked down at my hand on her shoulder. Her smile faded and she suddenly threw herself backwards. Near the hairline her skin contracted in long furrows from temple to temple, which made her forehead look narrower.

'You're right, we're too old to be lovers.'

'I wish we were.'

'All right, Javier, finish what you want to say.'

'Another time.'

'What?'

I cleared my throat before repeating:

'Another time.'

I propped myself on my elbows. The blood was hammering in my chest and my fingers. Whatever happened, within an hour I would have a double whisky with plenty of ice. Elena leaned against me.

'Finish telling me. I'd rather have a discussion than see you like this.'

'I have already said it. I want to go away with you. I know that it isn't easy and that there are disadvantages, but if we want to enough all the obstacles can be overcome. Look, I'm able to make money anywhere in the world. I said Italy because I've got business contacts there, as you know. The same is true of France. It doesn't matter, we can talk all this over later on. It's one of the countless things we've got to agree on. Money's no problem. We can take enough with us to go on living on the same scale as now.'

'Are you in financial difficulties?'

'No, you know I'm not.'

'I was afraid you were?'

HORTELANO

'No, it isn't that. We have to go away because our whole life is false, Elena, full of lies that may be convenient at times but turn against us in the end. I can't go on feeling guilty about our relationship. People aren't all like this, you know, there are people living differently in the world.'

'I know.'

'You don't know. You think you understand, but you really don't because you've never thought about it. We think of other people in clichés. I found that out only a short time ago myself. There are people who aren't afraid.'

'Are you sure?'

'If they are afraid they dominate their fear. I'm not afraid of anything now, Elena, except the prospect of going on like this to the end of my days.' I withdrew my hand on which her damp cheek was resting. 'Why shouldn't you and I live in freedom and happiness?'

'Dora, Andrés, your two children, my boy.'

'What of it? Sooner or later there's bound to be an explosion. Let's make sure that the explosion comes in the best possible form.'

While I lit a cigarette she smoothed her hair and the collar of her shirt.

'But there's no need for an explosion.'

'Oh yes there is, and you know it. How can I explain it to you? One day we'll get sick of not sleeping together or of your sleeping with your husband or they'll find out about us.'

'So you want us to go away?'

'Yes.'

'You want us to leave our families and cause a scandal.'

'I don't give a damn about the scandal. Anyhow that sort of thing's soon forgotten. You know any number of people in Madrid who are living together without being married. Sirman, for instance. She's married to somebody else and he has an important job.'

'You at forty-six and I at forty . . .'

'Thirty-seven, Elena.'

'It's all the same, Javier.'

'Yes, it's the same, because age has nothing to do with this. We know very well that we can live together.'

'How long would it last?'

'Don't be unfair.'

'Remember that it's not an affair but a sort of marriage.'

'To me you're not an affair.'

'Oh yes I am, Javier, and a boring one, as I've recently discovered. If it weren't an affair you wouldn't dare suggest such a thing to me.'

'Are you insulted?'

'Of course.'

'In what way?'

'Myself, and my honour. How could I look people in the face if I'd run away with you?'

I rubbed my face roughly, pinching my cheeks and lips. She looked at me expectantly, with a small triumphant smile.

'You don't understand. You wouldn't have to look anybody in the face afterwards. Not anybody you know. We'd leave the old life behind and start over again, you and I together. Start from the beginning.'

'You don't have to talk to me as if you were chewing every word.'

'Elena . . .'

'Yes, yes, yes. You're sick of it all, I know.'

'Sick to death—you don't know how sick. Sick, tired, exhausted, shattered, bored to death. Of hearing the same nonsense, inventing the same cock-and-bull stories, sick of your husband, of Amadeo, of Emilio, even of Claudette who knows that the whole thing's a lie and puts up with it. I won't put up with it. All my life I've got what I wanted, and now I'm not going to do without what I want. The last twenty years weren't bad. We fought the war, we won, and we started quadrupling the money our families had before the war. But that's enough. Quadrupling money, having children, going to dinners and parties, acquiring mistresses and putting up with fools to wangle import licences and contracts at eighty per cent—I've lost sight of other things.'

HORTELANO

'Such as living in France with a mistress.'

'Please, Elena, you aren't my mistress.'

'Yes, I am, Javier. But tell me, why are you sick of it all?'

'Because I'm afraid that I'll finish with a heart attack and drop dead on the beach like that poor girl, or in an armchair at some damned meeting of a Board of Directors. And I'm afraid of dying with lies inside me and such a thirst for a clean life. When I tell you this, don't start talking about your honour.'

'Because I haven't any, you mean.'

'Not the sort you meant. Only the honour you may feel within you.'

'I don't understand.'

'The honour you know you have in you.'

'Do you think I'm not ashamed of our relationship?'

We were pacing up and down the narrow strip of beach. I noticed it suddenly, stopped and seized her fiercely in my arms.

'Let me go.'

'No. You'll have to hear me out.'

'Let me go!'

She pushed me aside and ran towards the rocks. I stood for a long while quiet and self-absorbed, without seeing her. Then I sat down on the same spot, staring at the tracks in the sand. When I sensed her near, I wanted to strangle her, to leave her naked like Margot, until her mouth turned square, icy and rigid. In a flash I guessed that she'd speak to me in soft, conciliatory tones. She did.

'We're behaving like children.'

'Forget it, Elena. Go home.'

'Not like this, Javier.'

'Do you love me?' I murmured.

'Very much. It's because I love you so much that I know it's a passing phase, a sort of sickness. You're worried and upset. You shout at Emilio, at Dora, at the children, at Andrés, at Amadeo. You rush off or shut yourself up. And you insult people as you've just insulted me by your proposal, or as you did when you talked badly of the poor woman they killed on the

beach. You weren't like this before, Javier, and it will pass, because you aren't really like this.'

'No doubt.'

'What's happening to you? What are you looking for among those peculiar people, the fishermen, the villagers . . .? Do you want a change? Everybody wants it . . .'

'The day I met Ernestina at the station I saw a look in the eyes of the man who opened the car door. We went to the hotel to wake up your husband, who was as drunk as a pig. And I remembered the look on that man's face and wondered what his life must be like.'

'And this is why you want to break up everything?' She laughed, quite sincerely, holding me close as if she were trying to excite me. 'You're terrific, fantastic and wonderful. You'd open car doors in the Via Veneto and I'd scrub stairs and office floors. Javier, twenty is the right age for such dreams.'

'At that age I was beating up the rabble in the streets of Madrid—bastards who later come to open doors for me and stare at me.'

'Can you really see me scrubbing stairs?'

'Do you really not want to understand?'

She knelt in the sand and kissed me on the cheek. She whispered, her mouth close to my eyes:

'I understand very well and I love you more than anyone in this world, more than myself even, and you're the only one that matters to me. I'll go on showing it to you all my life. There are good times and bad times, you know, and we're passing through a bad time. But I love you and therefore I don't mind.'

'Elena,'—I managed a neutral tone—'it may be rather late.'

'Yes,' and she stroked my lips, 'very late indeed. I'll go back first but don't linger. We're invited to supper at the Hofsens'. There'll be dancing. Let's stick it out till late.'

She had not yet left the beach when I ran after her.

'Thanks,' she said.

'Listen, shall we go away together? Yes or no. Simply yes or no.'

Her face contracted, as though a pain was tearing at her

entrails, as though they were searing her loins with an iron rod or as though she saw her son hanging from a tree top. I realized that she delayed her answer dramatically and assumed that she would say no. She opened and closed her eyes. I felt my cheeks trembling.

‘Javier, I love you very much.’

As she walked away my desire to follow her and slap her face was so strong that I tore off my clothes and dived into the water. I went on swimming till my arms ached. I got out, lit a cigarette and lay down in the sand under the moon that had risen, round and yellow. Anna had said in her letter that her old boy wouldn’t be there this weekend. It was astonishing, and I did not know whether to laugh or to cry because understanding was impossible with the woman who had been my mistress for years, the woman who had received and given—but only in theory, as I saw too clearly now—the true core of life during that time. It was astonishing that sincerity was impossible and yet so manifest in another sense. My body served me well, it did not slip from my control. In my head, however, the whirl of ideas and sharp sensations went on.

When I had finished dressing I felt almost happy. I whistled a tune as I walked up the path and thought of my firm decision to leave them, all of them—including Elena. On my way back home, during dinner and after dinner, during the talk, the dancing, the furtive contact of our bodies, I thought of it from time to time. And grief blocked my throat like a spinning ball.

27

BY MID-AFTERNOON—it must have been mid-afternoon—the machine had stopped. The silence was punctuated by a dripping bath tap. Light came through the Venetian blinds on the big window. I passed my hand over my stubbly cheeks.

‘Enrique,’ Rufi cried from somewhere, probably the veranda.

I had a vision of Anna bending down from the bed to find her slippers. Before I raised my hand to the night table to where the tray with the glass of orange juice was, I drifted back to sleep.

I woke up very slowly, and kept falling back into a weary half-sleep. Stars glittered in the rectangle of the window. They had not only opened the curtains but also removed the tray. I lay motionless, sweating, with a bitter taste in my mouth. I was probably as sick as I had claimed to be in the morning. There were lots of small glittering stars. After lighting a cigarette I took my temperature. Lying on pillows, sluggish from the heat, I let the time slip by. Dora was talking to somebody in the garden. Rufi was carrying wicker chairs, easy chairs and iron chairs to the pergola, which meant that people were coming. I moved and the thermometer slid out. By the light of a match I saw that my temperature was 99.4. Joaquín was calling Enrique from the street. Reflections from the street-lamps and shadows from the branches dappled the window.

I hoped that a breeze, or at least a breath of air, would reach the bed. I got up for a drink of water and when I came back I saw there was an empty glass and a full one on the night table, next to the pitcher of lemonade.

HORTELANO

The dry clarity of the night was full of small sounds, echoes and murmurs. The furniture, the outlines of the walls, the dark patch of the counterpane on Dora's bed gradually became visible. I still had a bitter taste in my mouth. If I got up to wash out my mouth I knew I would end up in the pergola, shaved, and with a glass of gin in my hand.

'I'm coming, Señora.'

'Yes, yes,' said Enrique.

'He'll come back, Señora. He says he'll be back before dinner.'

Anna had short legs but well shaped, with smooth, marvellously firm skin. That tiny plaster near her groin, protecting the chafed place, showed how short a time we had known each other: I had never seen her without it. I began to work it out. A month or so. The short duration of a sore due to chafing. I lit another cigarette and drank a glass of lemonade that left a metallic taste.

'Dora.'

Shadows and glints of light touched the ceiling.

'Dora!'

I thought I heard steps on the gravel path.

'Are they coming?'

'No. I was testing the Vespa. They went to get Asunción and are having drinks there.'

'Oh, tell them not to stand me up, please.'

'How's Javier?'

'Still asleep. Tell them anyway, Ernestina. Tell them not to go on drinking at Emilio's.'

At this hour they'd be giving the boys a meal in the Civil Guard barracks. Anna would be sitting at the bar of the cafeteria with her second *Cuba Libre*, thinking of me or of Margot who had come to a bad end. Or of her friend, or the boys in the jail, or simply of her childhood. Andrés finished his high school exams about 1936, three years later than normal. The war hadn't made him grow up like the rest of us and the post-war period hadn't aged him. He had Elena in bondage as I had Anna. Unnamed lover—I—Anna, I—Andrés—Elena. Without the war business

wouldn't have been nearly so good. If you wanted to visualize what the present would have been like without the war, you could remember how my mother and the rest of the family used to live. In 1980 Enrique and Joaquín would have a yacht and be able to spend six months of the year in the Aegean. Anna's legs ended, like the tight skin of a drum, at the plaster.

I thought I should have beaten Elena; that I must make her understand, even if I had to do it by force. Suddenly I heard their voices; an indistinct, muddled noise.

I sat up in bed. My heart beat weakly but rapidly just under my skin. It frightened me to think that I might have fallen asleep again since I hadn't heard them arrive. Without putting on the light I went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth and let cold water run over my head for several minutes.

With the towel in my hands I leant against the door frame, next to Dora's dressing table. Light glittered on the silver jars and was swallowed by the mirror. I sat on the round blue velvet stool in front of the window. The still air breathed heat. Near the fishing village a few thin strands of distant clouds flecked the sky.

'Yes, there's more, Rufi.'

'The worst about bicarbonate is that it's habit forming.'

'What are you whispering?'

'Yes, Señora, right away.'

'Oh, dear, our usual things.'

'Clothes?'

'I knew somebody . . . Well, Santiago, you knew him too.'

'Who? . . . Sorry, I didn't hear you.'

'Martínez. The manager of Bresós Textiles.'

'Ah, yes.'

'The paper says tomorrow.'

'And can you see it from here?'

'He always carried a pocket flask filled with bicarbonate. He used to shake it, take a swig and go on talking. He couldn't do without it.'

'Will you stop drinking?'

'Let's go down to the beach.'

HORTELANO

'What a wonderful night!'

'Yes, tomorrow. About ten-fifteen, from north-west to south-east. It was in the papers.'

'It would be fun for the children. But will it be visible?'

'Dora, won't we wake up Javier by talking so loud?'

'Oh, no. He was still asleep a moment ago. He's probably got a higher temperature.'

'Javier, we're going down to the beach to drink . . .'

'Be quiet, Andrés.'

'Well, you see, fruit salts are better for me, they don't upset my stomach. Every time I eat something strong I get diarrhoea at once.'

'Something strong?'

'Antonio, please, what a conversation!'

'But it's true. For instance, if I have tripe for dinner, the next day . . .'

'Do you have tripe for dinner, then?'

'Oh yes, old as I am I still eat tripe for dinner. But the next day I've a stomach upset. Fruit salts are another story.'

'And then she said she wouldn't forgive it him ever.'

'Women always forgive in the end.'

'Quiet, Amadeo. I told her, if you don't forgive him he'll go away and then it will be more difficult to settle things. Anyway, she couldn't go back to her parents.'

'Before the war fruit salts were more effective.'

'So what did she do?'

'What could she do? She'd put herself in a false position.'

I placed the little box on the glass top of the dressing table.

Back in bed I tried not to listen to them. I conjured up a cruise in the Mediterranean. Now and then I was afraid that someone concerned about my health might come up. It was pleasant to sail in sunny weather, with a good strong breeze in your face.

Later they left. I stayed awake for a long time and the silence was almost complete. I drank two glasses of lemonade before I went to sleep again. I thought I heard them coming back, through the shrill chirping of the crickets.

Dora's hand touched my sweaty forehead. Reflections from the street-lamps still dappled the window. I mumbled something and turned on my side. It was very early when I woke. Lying still between the sheets I watched dawn break. Dora was breathing loudly in her sleep. The thermometer showed that my temperature was normal. I felt content. Last night's conversations and my own thoughts seemed senseless and very remote. The lemonade had lost its tart taste and was lukewarm. The birds were singing. Rafael switched off the street-lighting in the Colony. I planned a drive to the village after breakfast. Everything would be easy.

'Daddy—'

Dorita, perched on her mother's bed, leaned over to kiss me.

'How are you, my girl?'

'I'm fine. We're going to bathe. Mummy's changed the furniture round. Are you well again?'

'Yes.'

Enrique came running in behind Rufi. The two children smelled of toilet water. As soon as Dora entered the room they left.

'I'm very well. Rufi's going to bring my breakfast.'

'You should stay in bed. You've had a very restless night.'

'How was the evening?'

'Oh, very pleasant. I'm changing the furniture in the living room, as it is we don't make the best use of the light.'

Rufi came back with a tray which she put on the small table with collapsible legs.

'I've brought you the post and the papers, sir.'

'Thanks, Rufi.'

Dora shut the wardrobe.

'You shouldn't eat plum cake, it won't agree with you.'

'I'm hungry.'

'Do you want the telephone plugged in here?'

'No, Rufi. What sort of a day is it?'

'Very hot.'

I ploughed conscientiously through the papers while I drank cold tea. There were several letters, bills, a note from Vicente

in further explanation of his proposal, a fat envelope from the Madrid office with Emilia's customary report. Behind the white curtains the morning shone in the green of the trees. Now and then a louder voice or noise attracted my attention for a moment.

'Elena and Claudette are coming to see you.'

'Have you finished turning your living room upside down?'

Dora stood staring at me in stupefaction.

'No. It will take at least three days.'

'Ah.'

'Are you feeling better?'

'Yes, very well. I'll get up now.'

I was making notes of some figures when Rufi came to bring my lunch.

'The Señora says she isn't coming up here if you don't need her. She's very tired.'

'Tell her not to bother.'

As Rufi leaned over to collect my dressing gown from the floor, part of her leg showed. A strand of hair fell over her damp brow. She put my papers in order and made Dora's bed.

'Do you like the fish?'

'It's perfect. What's news, Rufi?'

'Nothing special, sir. The swimming pool's filling up. María said she'll come up later to see you, sir.'

'Tell her not to bother. You look pretty today, Rufi.'

'Oh, on a day like this . . . Do you want anything else?'

'No, thanks. Are the children back?'

'Not yet. Señorita Luisa's staying, she's having lunch with the Señora.'

Rufi drew the curtains. Before falling asleep I left the half-smoked cigarette in the ash tray.

When I woke I thought at first it was night, but on getting up I found that it was late afternoon at its hottest. I wound up my watch, without changing the hour at which it had stopped. A shower and some shaving lotion revived me.

The house seemed empty as I came down. The living room, still untidy, smelled of dust. I drank a glass of tomato juice on the porch and then went to the swimming pool.

Near the road Ernestina caught up with me.

'Hello, it's high time you showed yourself. So you aren't dead. Come on, I'll take you to the village.'

'How can I turn up like this?' I mounted the pillion, with one hand on Ernestina's shoulder. 'Let me off a mile or so further on.'

'Agreed. Andrés, Marta and Amadeo're waiting for me. Now hold tight, I'm starting.'

The air made me feel better. Under her green blouse the straps of Ernestina's brassière bit into her back.

'You smell marvellous.'

'What?' She scarcely turned her head.

'You smell nice. And you drive better than last year. Stop before we get to the pine wood.'

After I'd stepped off she didn't re-start the motor.

'Let them wait. I'm going to smoke a cigarette here with you.' We sat on the kerb. 'So you've got over your colic?'

'Yes. Tell me the news.'

'There is no news. Down there they're repairing ruts in the road. Will you give me a light?'

'Oh, I beg your pardon.' Her lips were wet with spittle and red with lipstick. 'Are you still bored?'

'Listen, last night I had a serious talk with Santiago and Amadeo. Luisa and Andrés were there too, but they'd been drinking a lot and were talking nonsense.'

'A serious talk?'

'Yes, I was all mixed up, I don't know why. Amadeo and Santiago insisted that what I needed was to get married; they said if Luisa and I went to a doctor he'd tell us that we ought both to get married. It upset me very much. Men always say the same thing. What do you think?'

'Sometimes one goes through a bad patch.'

'That's what I believe.' She jumped up. Her trousers bulged at the knees. 'Everything will be different in October when we're back in Madrid. But do you think it would be good for me to get married?'

'If it's a good marriage . . .'

HORTELANO

'What then?'

'Yes, my dear.'

'Thanks, Javier.' She tousled my hair. 'I'm not giving you a kiss, because we're alone.'

'Are you afraid I might assault you?'

'You never know how a convalescent man will react. We'll meet tonight. 'Bye.'

She kicked the starter several times before opening the throttle.

'Don't go in for racing your machine when you come back.'

'Don't worry, dad.'

She raised her left hand in salute. The road was deserted. I amused myself by noting the unevenness of the asphalt, the black soil edging the ruts, the undulations that looked like bubbles or blisters. It had been my intention to walk across the fields to the sea, but I only remembered this when I was already deep in the pine wood. Without getting tired I climbed the slope, to a high crest. I smoked a number of cigarettes the stubs of which I buried meticulously under the blanket of pine needles. The smell of resin had thickened with nightfall. The moon shone on the road, outlining shapes and deepening shadows. Before walking back towards the Colony I stopped to tie my shoelaces.

Amadeo's car stood in front of our villa. Rufi told me that everybody was in Elena's garden, and that she herself would be going there soon to cut sandwiches.

'Be quick, sir,' she jumped up the veranda steps, making the skirt of her black maid's uniform sway, 'or you'll be too late for the satellite.'

She pushed open the swing-door of the corridor to the kitchen and I switched off the lights in the hall. Everything in my study was in its place. There was nobody in the kitchen, which smelt of warm melted butter. I walked about the garden and found myself out in the street, willy-nilly. At the Hofsens' they had left on the living room lights. Suddenly I decided that I would go to the village that night.

In the middle of the street where there were no trees to

obscure the view, canvas and wicker chairs were set out and waiting. The children ran towards me. Rufi and the other housemaids were handing round canapés, soft drinks and whisky; trays and bottles stood on the top of Andrés' garden wall.

'How are you feeling? Come and sit next to me.'

'Good afternoon, Don Antonio. And Doña Pura?'

'Here I am.' She greeted me from one of the chairs in the circle.

'I think it's forty thousand pounds.'

'Oh, Andrés, you treat it as a joke.'

Andrés gave me an empty glass.

'I can't get it into my head either,' said Karl.

A thick pelt of salt-and-pepper hair showed at the base of Don Antonio's throat, below his open-necked shirt. Claudette waved to me from the edge of the pavement where she was sitting with Ernestina, Amadeo and Dora.

'Well, my friends, you will have to get it into your heads. These are the conquests of science and modern technology. Later let them say,' he moved round, leaning against my chair, 'that America is degenerate. Here we have that degeneration.'

When the children saw Don Amadeo's arm pointing skyward and heard his exclamation they began to shout. They all rose to their feet, craning their necks. Then, either tired of scanning the horizon or realizing they were wrong, they sat down again. With a nervous smile Rufi hustled round carrying a plastic pail crammed with bottles and chunks of ice.

'But it isn't a quarter past ten yet. But, ladies, it isn't a quarter past ten.'

'Oh dear, Antonio, we heard you the first time. Anyway it was you who said it was coming.'

'I did not say the satellite was coming, because I know very well it will not come past before ten-fifteen.'

'What satellite?'

Andrés started to laugh. For a few seconds Don Antonio and I were staring at one another, completely silent. At once Andrés repeated my question to the others.

'Haven't you read the paper?'

'Yes. Yes, of course. I had forgotten. I mean I'd forgotten what we were waiting for.'

'Don't laugh, Andrés. People like Javier rule our world.'

'I . . .'

'Yes, my dear Javier. Pura, put on your shawl, it's getting chilly. Life produces two classes of men, those who create things, and simple mortals who look at them. No doubt your mind was busy with a deal, or some great financial operation which one day will bear beautiful fruit for our country. Because of it you forgot what we were waiting for. Don't laugh, friends. Men like Javier, who work every moment there is, have achieved the miracle of launching that wondrous thing into the sky.'

'What's Don Antonio saying? I can't hear him,' said Santiago.

'That Javier'—Luisa's words were choked with laughter—'invented the satellite.'

Being the centre of attention I realised that I was expected to carry on with my howler, like a clown; even Don Antonio needed my co-operation to make the number a success. Elena, who had come out of the garden, sat by Marta's side. She wore shorts and heelless silver shoes, more suitable to a cheap tart.

'No, no, no,'—in soothing tones Don Antonio attempted to make himself heard through the din—'that's not what I said.'

Joaquín sauntered up and perched himself on one of my legs.

'Are you sleepy?'

'If it's getting chilly for me, it's getting chilly for you too. Put on your coat.'

'And you take your shawl.'

'No. I'm a bit tired.'

'Why don't you go to bed?'

'What I said was . . .'

'I want to see the satellite,' Joaquín mumbled.

' . . . that we oughtn't to laugh at Javier.'

'Of course not,' said Amadeo. 'Particularly not if he invented the satellite.'

'And he told us he had an attack of colic! Building satellites, that's what he's been doing.'

Elena's knees shimmered in the dusk like two smooth,

glittering globes. I tried to catch her eyes, without success. Anna would be by her window—provided she'd read the papers—or in the middle of the market place, also scanning the sky. I could get up and it would not take me more than five minutes to drive my car along the highway.

'North-west to south-east is the direction . . .'

'Don Antonio,' said Asunción, 'if you don't explain it to us more clearly . . .'

'You men always use difficult words that make my head spin,' Dora interrupted.

'Dear ladies, the heavenly machine will fly, let us say from Montserrat to Majorca.' He let his arm drop to his head, after swinging it from side to side.

'Ah.'

'And now in all seriousness, gentlemen. I'm an old man, or at least I'm older than anyone else here, but tonight I feel as young and strong as the youngest of you.'

'Three cheers for Don Antonio,' cried Ernestina.

'rah . . . 'rah . . . 'rah . . .'

'Because tonight we shall get rid of some nasty thorns, painful thorns that had been stuck in our hearts for the last few years, ever since Suez to be exact.'

'A whisky, please, Manolita.'

'Why Suez?'

'It is not that tonight so and so many pounds, or machines, or wonders are flying across God's sky. It's not that, although those miraculous things too are flying. Tonight the gallantry, the intelligence and the integrity of a whole nation is going to pass over our bewildered heads.'

'Have you brought the field glasses?'

'But when will it arrive?'

'In three minutes' time, my girl.'

'No, I haven't.' Leaning over Joaquín I saw Elena, a cigarette in her mouth; she was whispering to Claudette. 'I don't know where they are.'

'I could let you have mine for a while, they're mummy's theatre glasses.'

'Right.'

'They belonged to granny, you know.'

'Thanks, Rufi.' I swallowed the whisky in a single big gulp, and when I'd finished it I got up.

'Perhaps it will be late.'

'It's like waiting for a train, isn't it?'

They hardly said anything, all of them were on their feet facing the pine wood. One after the other their field glasses went up in front of their eyes. I bumped into Elena.

'Sorry.'

She dropped her hands. 'Are you better?'

'Yes, thanks.'

The children were in the front row, behind them the grown-ups, and a few yards back the servants, Leoncio, Rafael and the Hofsens' gardener, a man in corduroy trousers with a black kerchief on his head. Rufi craned her neck and shielded her eyes with both hands.

'There, there.'

'Where?'

'But where?'

'Uncle Amadeo, is it one of the ones that go to the moon?'

'Quiet, children.'

'I can't see anything.'

'Yes, dear, yes. Look, it's throwing sparks.'

'But, Uncle Amadeo, can this one go to the moon?'

I made the last few yards running. On my knees, in the darkness, close to the thicket, I pushed three fingers down my throat.

When I had finished I stayed quiet, my whole trembling body in a cold sweat. I heard them approaching and tried to get to my feet. Andrés' arms held me under the armpits while Claudette took me round the waist.

'I can manage . . . ' I whispered.

'Come, we'll walk a little. What an idea to drink after an attack of colic!'

'It wasn't that.'

'Are you better?' asked Claudette.

'I'm going home.'

I broke away from them. The street-lamps shone with a steady, unwavering, hard light.

'Don't be so pig-headed. Surely you aren't going to bed now?'

'I know perfectly well what I ought to do.'

'What did you say?'

Far, far away they were shouting. Claudette ran and caught up with me.

'That I know what I'm going to do.'

Andrés held her back while I walked on, stumbling and almost crying with rage because I wasn't able to make my legs obey me.

'Don't be silly, let him go. Every one knows how to lick his own wounds best.'

28

THE OLD woman was sitting under a big yellow sunshade which also covered her basket of dried fruit. I crossed the street.

'Isn't anybody here?' I asked, one foot on the threshold.

'Yes, but they're sleeping. Is it urgent?'

A ray of sun brightened the colours of the tobacco and chewing gum wrappers. The old woman stopped peeling fruit.

'It isn't urgent.'

'In any case you can knock. First door on the left.'

Above the woman and her awning was a window covered by a venetian blind, cracked in the middle and with its green tape frayed by the sun and rain.

'Thanks. I'll go in and see.'

'They're there, but they're sleeping.'

Before I knocked on the panelled door I waited to get used to the darkness under the vaulted entrance.

'Good afternoon.'

The boy lifted his head. 'What do you want?'

'I'd like to see the inspector.'

'Which inspector? If you have something to report tell it to me.'

'Are you the corporal?'

'No.'

I decided to introduce myself.

'So you're the owner of White Sails? I'm so sorry, sir, I didn't recognize you. What can I do for you? The sergeant is here.'

'Perhaps he'll see me.'

'Excuse me for a moment.'

After a few seconds he came back, buckling his belt.

'Follow me and be careful, it's dark in the hall.'

Everything smelt musty. On the upper floor the boy preceded me down a hall that led to a large room. The last stretch of passage had a few steps and a window with dirty panes looking on to a courtyard. I came into a room lined with shelves. There were heaps of files, several desks and several typewriters.

'Wait here a minute, it's cool.'

'Yes, it's nice.'

'The sergeant's busy, but he won't be long.'

'I'm in no hurry.'

The boy shifted papers on the table beneath the window. I started to calculate the amount of paper on the shelves. Suddenly the boy came to attention and clicked his heels. The sergeant walked up to me with his right hand pointing towards my chest.

His hair was damp and slicked down.

'How are you, sir? Excuse me, I didn't expect you.'

'It's of no importance. I decided this morning to come here.'

'If you've no orders for me, Sergeant . . .'

He stared in surprise at the boy and waved him away. Then he offered me a shabby leather armchair. The boy smiled at me and left the room.

'I hope there's nothing wrong at White Sails.' He held out his tobacco pouch.

'It's a quiet place as you know.' Holding the pouch in my hand, I hesitated. 'Nothing ever happened except that affair of the dead girl. The dead girl on the beach, I mean.'

'Oh, yes.'

'I thought I'd find the inspector in charge of the case. I met him at the Colony. He's a friend of Raimundo, the shop keeper . . .'

'Well, Don Julio isn't here, but if I can help you . . .'

'You see I feel I have certain obligations as a neighbour. People from the fishing village have been to see me.'

'The boys are all right.'

HORTELANO

His fingers rolled a cigarette slowly, in contrast to the dry staccato of his last words.

'That's what I thought. I couldn't imagine anything else. But may I know why they were arrested?'

'It's a summary procedure and I'm not in a position to tell you. But you're a person of standing. I understand that you want to know what sort of people you've got in the fishing village, so I can tell you that those boys are involved in the affair of the woman who was found on White Sails beach.'

'How far are they involved?'

'I'm sorry, I really am. Don Julio will be here tomorrow. Why don't you speak to him?'

'Tomorrow? Yes, I'll come back tomorrow. They're young boys, decent boys, as you know better than I. It's hard to believe that they would have done anything serious. I mean that they might have killed the woman.'

He met my stare with an attentive, ironical and almost inquisitive expression. I rose and he followed suit, soberly.

'Don Julio's in charge of the case. As far as I'm concerned I'd let you see them. They're all right. If you bring them anything—tobacco, food or papers—let me have the package and they'll get it immediately. But that's all I can do, believe me, I'm sorry.'

'I haven't brought anything. I don't even know them. I may have seen them but I don't take much notice of people. I'll be back tomorrow.'

'Don't be too impressed'—in the dark passage I heard the sergeant's asthmatic panting—'with what their families say.'

'It's natural that they should be worried.'

'Yes, it's natural. But don't let them impress you. You're too kind, so they come to you with their complaints.'

I stopped at the foot of the staircase, on the damp, uneven pebble floor. The boy raised his hand to his three-cornered hat as we passed in front of him. The sergeant and I said goodbye at the entrance. Before turning the corner I looked back: the sergeant was talking to the old woman under the yellow sunshade. In the next street I took off my jacket.

The cafeteria was nearly empty. I sat in a corner and drank a

gin with plenty of ice. The waiters kept up a weary conversation with the waitress, who was wearing a starched lace cap on her black hair. Drops of sweat trickled down her neck.

The street was in shadow as I came out of the cafeteria. I crossed the market square. Walking through deserted alleys I battled with a restless welter of thoughts.

Anna opened the door. In the hall she started to question me, but she left the back room immediately to get me something to drink.

‘As long as it’s cold, Anna.’

The light was reflected by the black and red paint of Anna’s scooter. The oleander blossoms were a deep red. I leaned my head on the back of the armchair.

‘Are you awake?’ Anna smiled in the darkness, then kissed me.

‘What time is it?’

‘Half past eight.’

‘Impossible!’

‘Absolutely possible.’ She kissed me on the cheeks. ‘Fatigue, food, the heat . . . I let you sleep. But a gun-shot wouldn’t have waked you. Would you like something?’

‘I wouldn’t mind a cup of tea.’

‘I don’t know what will become of us with this weather.’ She jumped down off my knees. I followed her into the kitchen, which was lit by the fluorescent lights.

‘You told me you didn’t see those boys or the policeman either.’

‘The inspector will be there tomorrow.’

‘Will you go and see him?’

‘Yes.’

‘How was the sergeant?’

‘Very friendly. Really very friendly.’ I lit a cigarette. Anna put an ash tray on the table. ‘But told me nothing at all. Excuses and evasive phrases. I believe he suspected me.’

‘You? It’s a horrible place.’

‘Suspect isn’t quite the word. He was sorry for me and slightly reproachful, with little pats on the back. “But how can a

HORTELANO

gentleman like you let himself be deceived?" "What interest can you have in those poor devils we've locked up?"

'You should have answered him . . . Well, it's best to shut up with those people. Of course you're interested in them. Because you're a gentleman, and if the gentlemen don't look after the poor nobody else will.'

'Anna, you're marvellous.'

'Why?'

'You amuse me when you talk so seriously about the rich and the poor and then your arms are so lovely'—she put them round my waist—'and the colour of your skin . . .'

'Yes, a nice colour in this light! Come to the sitting room, I'll take the tea there, it's cold by now.'

'Put a slice of lemon in, please, and I'll drink it here.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Wait, I'll give you some sugar.'

She folded her hands and watched me drink. 'I can't imagine what those boys could have done,' I said.

'Why didn't he let you see them?'

'He said no before I asked him. Where shall I put the cup?'

'Here in the sink.'

'I'll have a shower.'

'I'll go up with you to see everything's in order.'

Wrapped in the towel, with my clothes and shoes under my arm, I came into the bedroom. Anna, without her pants or shirt, was lying on the bed. I switched off the light before I smothered her impatient body.

Later I smoked a cigarette, peacefully. The stars rode high in the blue night sky. Anna was singing in the shower. Her skin was fresh and aromatic when we embraced.

'You sleep a lot these days without seeming to be aware of it. Are you sick?'

'No but I feel odd. It must be that. Anna, what were you like when you were ten?'

'The things you think of! Like other children I suppose. I don't remember.'

'Did you have toys?'

'Of course.' Her hands on my cheeks forced me to look at her.

'All children have toys. I had a stuffed bear till a short while ago. One day I threw it away because it was very old.'

'I'd like to know a lot about your childhood.'

'They had a hard time at home. When I was very small they taught me that everything costs money and that my parents didn't have money.'

'I've always had lots of toys, Anna. The best electric train there was to be had in Germany and four or five building sets, and a camera and air guns. Lots of toys.'

'I don't understand you.'

'Of course not, my love. I've just realized that you've never had a fine piece of jewellery the sort my wife and her friends have.'

'No, never.'

'I'm going to buy you a jewel. Many jewels.'

'That's just like the song: Do you want a dress? Size fourteen. And a necklace? Of diamonds.'

'Do you want a diamond necklace, Anna?'

'You're terrific!' She laughed in my arms. 'Very nice, my friend. But do you realize that I'm going to make you pay for it?'

'One day you'll be old, and you'll need some savings.'

'Oh to hell with you! Of course I'll be old many years from now. So what? Are you going to invest your money to provide for my old age?'

'Don't mind me, Anna. You see, I wanted to do something for you . . . to show you . . . Never mind. I must still be asleep.'

'You think too much. You should take a trip. It would do you good. Sometimes I'm not well, so I leave Madrid and go to the Sierra.'

'Does it help?'

'No.'

'It would be great to take a trip. To France or Majorca.'

'Palma's very beautiful. Margot said Paris was nice but not all that wonderful. That's the way it is with things people praise too highly. Then you go and it doesn't meet your expectations. It happens all the time in the movies. So I don't let people tell

HORTELANO

me about films . . . God Almighty, I talk too much, I must be boring you.'

'What? No, no, no.'

'Listen, I'll make some sandwiches and bring them up here.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'You must have something before you leave. You'll get home late and you'll have a cold supper.'

'The car's in the garage.'

'So what? Or are you going to stay all night?'

'Come on.' I pushed her out of bed. 'Not too much lettuce.'

I stretched out again, my head clear as though everything was resolved. It was only when I thought of Elena that I had to suppress a nervous laugh.

Anna put the tray on the mattress.

'My mother used to say that only pigs eat where they sleep.'

'I don't intend to sleep at all tonight, Anna.'

'Are you really going to stay?'

'Don't turn on the light.'

'Much better. Downstairs it's like an oven.'

'Anna,' I began. 'I want to live with you. To stay here and live with you, because it's idiotic not to be with someone I love and who loves me now that I've found her.'

'Javier.'

'We'll find a place somewhere. At a certain age'—I took a sandwich—'one gets clearer and more practical ideas about love even if one doesn't believe in them. If you want to you and I can make a fresh start together.'

The fork clattered on the plate. Her fingernails scratched my neck. I dropped the sandwich and restrained myself so that my kiss would not seem too passionate.

29

'It's NOT so hot on the terrace of one of the bars,' Julio said.

'Whatever you say.'

When we left the dark entrance to the barracks building the air was like a sticky fluid that scorched the skin. Raimundo's shop was closed. Only two tables were free on the terrace.

'Is the beer cold, boy?'

'Ice cold, Don Julio. Would you like some shellfish?'

'No,' I said.

'Have you got any mussels? Yes? Bring me a plate. And hurry with the beer.'

'The crayfish are nice.'

'I don't eat anything before lunch as a rule.'

Julio unbuttoned his collar and loosened his tie. He smoothed the creases of his trousers, crossed his legs and pushed his glasses up his nose.

'Do those boys really worry you? I can't understand why.'

'It's simple. Nobody bothers about them.'

'Their relatives are there every day pestering the sergeant.'

'Have you talked to them?'

'No.'

'I have. Someone who can talk to you has to do something. The boys have been locked up for ten days. Since last Tuesday, to be exact. It isn't fair.'

'Why isn't it fair? Do you know the reason—what they did?'

HORTELANO

'Of course I don't.' The waiter started setting the table. 'But it's unfair because they've been in prison ten days without having been brought for trial.'

'How do you know they haven't?'

'If they had, there would have been a lawyer and he would have got them out on bail.'

'They haven't any money for lawyers and anyway, we don't want legal twists in this affair.'

'Forgive me, but it's unfair.'

He shrugged his shoulders with a sort of silent laughter that made him close his eyes. I drank more than half the glass of beer in one long draught. The handkerchief smelt of eau-de-cologne. He waited till I had wiped my forehead, neck and hands. He had stopped laughing.

'Look here, it doesn't do to judge hastily. At present it's convenient to keep those boys locked up. They're well looked after, they have everything they need . . .'

'Except freedom.'

'Oh please, it's only for a short time.'

'Then they haven't done anything?'

'Possibly not they.'

'I can see that you don't want to enlighten me.'

'I do want to and I'm going to tell you more than I ought, so that you can relax and stop upsetting the village by your philanthropic urges.'

I glanced at him and felt the blood pounding in my wrists. I would have liked to drag the man through the dust of the market place. Suddenly I noticed that his left cheek quivered every five or six seconds. He looked down at the shiny tips of his black-and-white shoes. Now that I had discovered his nervous tic I felt safe.

'Excuse me,' he said. 'I didn't mean to offend you with my remarks about philanthropy.'

'It's not important.'

I finished my beer and ordered two more.

'You didn't tell me you knew the dead woman.'

'I learned who she was after you'd asked me.'

'That's not the point. You know who she was and I hope that you didn't spread it around.'

'I haven't said a thing.'

'I believe you. As a rule it isn't convenient to give out news. It messes things up.'

In spite of his normal tone of voice I was afraid of a sort of blackmail through my connection with Anna. The beer glass cooled my hands for a moment. Julio's Adam's apple moved up and down as he swallowed his beer.

'You realize that the girl came through here in company.'

'Yes, I know. And I know where she went later.'

'And with whom.'

'Exactly. At this moment I know almost the whole story. That's why I'm keeping the boys under arrest.'

'I don't get it. They didn't kill her . . .'

'Listen: who ever said she was killed?'

'Did those characters who were with her do it then?'

'I hope to answer your questions very soon.'

'Why don't you let those boys out?'

'I tell you, they're all right. Probably—I say no more than probably—they've got nothing to do with what I'm after. You may have more to do with it. Understand me, please,'—he hastened to explain—'I meant that it's quite possible they did nothing to the dead woman. But before I let them go I've got to find out who did.'

'Did what?'

'Listen, Don Javier, you'll have to trust me. If you don't, go to the Judge. Well, the Judge has gone on a two weeks' leave, but you can get hold of him . . . but you won't get half of what I told you out of him.'

My head ached. I made a meaningless gesture with my hand, as though in dismay or despondency, but the inspector seemed to take it for assent, for he smiled.

'All right, I'm sorry to have wasted your time.'

'No bother if it comes from you, Don Javier.' He leaned back. 'Have you seen Raimundo? I think he was preparing a great seafood banquet for tonight. I've got to go back to Barcelona.'

HORTELANO

'Thanks for everything. Waiter!'

'Don't . . . No, no, this gentleman pays for nothing, do you hear?'

'Right, Don Julio.'

'I don't come here often but what I say goes. I'll leave a message for the sergeant to let you see the boys whenever you feel like it.'

'Thanks again.'

'No reason for thanks. I'll keep you informed.'

His fingers were slippery. He went into the bar. The mussels remained in their dish, black and shrivelled.

The maid, who was spreading the tablecloth in the back room, told me that Anna was getting ready. Before going upstairs I smoked a cigarette.

Water was running over the white tiles of the bathroom.

'May I come in?' The bed was still unmade.

Anna turned round, strangely startled. I noticed not so much her nakedness as the deep blush on her face.

'Hello.'

'Did I startle you? I'm sorry.'

'No, no. Well, a little bit.' She went hurriedly to the built-in cupboard, seeming to cringe. 'How did it go?'

'Quite well. What's the matter with you?'

'Nothing.'

The wrapper from a piece of plaster lay on the bedside table, torn and crumpled. Anna, who had followed my glance, stood for a moment with her mouth open.

'Anna, what is this?'

She clung to me, sobbing. I managed to lift her on to the bed, then prised open her closed fist, which held the gauze and the adhesive itself, reddened with some chemical.

'I don't like hearing you cry like this.' I kissed her on the mouth. 'Nobody ought to be so much afraid or hurt. Nothing's worth so many tears.' Gently, my mouth against her ear, I shook her shoulders. 'And least of all now when we've got to put up with each other. What frightened you?' She shook her head.

'You must get used to having no secrets between us. It's difficult, isn't it, Anna? I've never managed to trust anybody completely. I found out only recently that I'd never been truly united with any woman. And you, Anna, have you ever loved anyone enough not to keep anything from him?' Lying on my chest, her cheeks wet with tears, she shook her head again. 'Everything will have to be different from now on.'

She didn't move as I bent over her groin. High up on the thigh, on a very white patch of skin the size of a large coin, the letters B.G. had been tattooed.

'Anna, do you always wear a plaster to cover those initials?'

She hunched spasmodically and clutched her legs as soon as I straightened up. A thread of saliva ran from the corner of her mouth. She was like a bundle of tremulous flesh. I touched her shoulder and she stiffened at once.

'Are these his initials?'

'Yes.'

'You see, only a few days ago I was thinking of your sore.'

'I was very young and let him do it. Like branding cattle.'

'Come, come, Anna, don't talk nonsense.'

'Yes, like an animal. The way they brand calves or lambs in my native village. He said . . .'

'Forget about it, Anna. Let's go to a beach and I'll tell you about my conversation with the policeman. Then we'll make plans about making a fresh start together. Are you listening, Anna? Nothing else . . .'

The maid shouted shrilly:

'Señorita, the meal is ready!'

Anna hiccuped, her words stuck in her throat.

'Now we'll go down,' I laughed. 'There are quite a lot of good and happy things and I don't want you to cry.'

The sun-scorched fields fused into a single dazzling surface inside the window frame. I turned round as Anna finished putting on the garnet-red dressing gown. On the stairs she wiped her eyes. 'Let's hope she won't see that you've been crying, or she'll think I've been treating you badly.'

'I'm an idiot, Javier.'

HORTELANO

'Five hours in the water. Or six. Till the stars are out. We'll find a restaurant with . . . '

'You're dripping with sweat. And tired.' She took my chin between her fingers.

'No. I feel better than ever before.'

In the back room the steaming soup tureen was set out on the yellow table cloth. Fortunately the room lay in restful shadow.

30

‘PEOPLE SAY you were with the police yesterday, because you had to explain various things to them.’

‘What things?’

‘Things.’

‘Who says that?’

‘You know. They were talking about it at the market this morning. And in the shop where you bought the shirts and socks, when I went to fetch the parcel.’

The girl was wearing a green dress with a black lace edge round the square neck and blue shoes. I looked up and all I saw were her lips.

‘What else do people say?’

‘Well, that you’d gone to the village for that, because without you the police didn’t have a clue.’

‘And what did they say about the boys under arrest?’

‘That they’ll be sentenced, and . . .’

‘Will you switch on the light, please?’

She pushed open the window on to the courtyard and stood there, quiet, thoughtful and uncertain. Her reddened, freckled hands were folded over her stomach.

‘If there’s nothing else you want, sir, I’m going.’

‘That’s all, thanks.’

‘Will you be going out again tomorrow? I ask because of the food. Yesterday half the meal was left and today all of it.’

‘If we go out early we’ll leave you a note.’

The garden gate clicked. Anna was pottering about upstairs.

HORTELANO

I sat on the scooter in the yard and smoked a cigarette. A strip of light from the back room fell on to the cement floor. A puddle of stagnant water was evaporating in the gutter, blocked by leaves from the oleander bush. The walls still retained the heat of the day. I climbed the stairs and began to sweat again. I waited for her in the dark bedroom.

‘Do you want the light on?’

‘No. It’s a clear night.’

‘And hot as hell.’

Anna dropped her towel and slumped down on the bed. I sat on the edge and pushed my hand under her shoulder.

‘Are your shoulders still sore?’

‘No, your cream’s done the trick,’ I said.

Anna sighed and stretched. A radio was playing somewhere and I had sand in my sandals.

‘I’ll get up now.’

‘Do you feel like dressing?’

‘What time is it?’

‘Nearly nine. You’re tired, my dear.’

‘I’ll put on a dress and we’ll go for a walk. I feel like it, after those days on a beach.’

‘I can do the shopping.’ Anna rolled over and kissed my arm.

‘You’re half asleep.’

‘Yes.’

‘So go to sleep.’

When I removed my hand Anna shifted to another position. I softly closed the bedroom door and had a coca cola in the kitchen before switching off the light in the back room.

Walking from the deserted alleys to the more crowded streets of the centre of the village I felt light and happy. I bought four boxes of cigarettes and some matches at the tobacco shop and two boxes of sweets at the candy shop. I took a long time selecting some magazines, adventure stories and illustrated novels at the kiosk in the square, and the salesgirl made a single package, wrapping it in an old Madrid newspaper and tying it with a rough piece of string.

Raimundo was talking to some friends at the door of the bar. The shops in the main street were closing. Cars drove past, honking to scatter people from the middle of the street on to the pavement. Girls in groups of four or five were strolling in gaudy dresses. As I entered the bar I heard Elena's voice, clear and shrill, above the noise of conversation and the hiss of the coffee machine.

'Do you intend to ignore me?' She smiled at me from a table next to the glass cupboard.

'I didn't see you.' I put my bundle on a chair and sat down opposite her. The plastic slats of the venetian blind rustled and clicked. 'Are you alone?'

'What about you? Isn't your sweetheart waiting for you? And poor Dora, thinking you're in Barcelona on business . . . You look well. Very tanned.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Drinking tomato juice.'

'Do you have a sweetheart in the town too?'

She turned off her smile and seemed unable to meet my stare. Her hair was brushed in an upward sweep. I'd never seen her in this tight-fitting dark blue dress.

'Javier.' She raised her eyebrows to remind me that the waitress was waiting.

'Oh yes. A whisky, please. Straight.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You look well, I must say, with your mouth so well made up. To judge by your appearance you've just come from the Colony.'

'I've no friends in this village.'

'I said it to annoy you.'

'Does it amuse you annoying me?'

'Yes.'

'Oh well, have a cigarette.' Our hands touched. 'At least you're honest.'

'Last Sunday you sent me packing and three minutes ago you started talking of poor Dora and my great loves. When you were one of them you didn't feel especially sorry for my wife. No, I

prefer honesty. I'm starting on something too decisive to indulge in lies.'

'I didn't send you packing.'

'You did. On Sunday. Five days ago. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and today's Friday. That's not long enough for you to have forgotten.'

'Especially since you're here to remind me of everything unpleasant.' Elena peered through the slats of the blind into the street. The waitress brought my whisky. 'I came because of you.'

'Well, you've found me by chance.'

'I trusted to chance.'

'You mean you wanted to pry into what I was doing?'

'Yes.'

'And what did you find?' I ought to leave. 'Provided you're willing to be as outspoken as you were last Sunday.'

'But what have I done to you, Javier?'

'Not so loud, please. We aren't in the cove now playing our great scene.'

'You're hurt I know but I never expected that you'd be crazy enough to start an affair with a whore, forty miles from your own home and children. To be talked about by everybody.'

'Is this what you found out from the bars and shops here?'

'Yes, I asked questions.' Her anger propelled her face towards me, her hands clenched at her temples. 'And I spoke to your friend Raimundo. The gentleman's living with a whore. The gentleman spends his days talking to the Civil Guard and the police. The gentleman is in it up to the neck in a sordid affair.'

'What do people say?'

'All kinds of nonsense.'

'Such as?'

'That the unfortunate woman was the mistress of someone in the Colony, that you bribed the fishermen so they wouldn't tell the police what you or one of your friends had done, that your wife is mixed up in it.'

'All that? Amazing, the so-called popular imagination. Would you like another tomato juice or would you prefer whisky?'

'Popular imagination be damned. I don't want anything! How

can you live with that kind of person? You, a normal, serious, intelligent human being. With all your qualities and self-assurance that's always stood you in good stead and . . .'

'*Requiescant in pace.* Now I'm living with a whore. And listen, Elena'—I crossed my arms on the table and dug my fingernails into my muscles—'don't call her a whore again. I won't stand for it.'

'Javier . . . Forgive me, my dear. I see it's difficult . . .'

'Very difficult.'

'Let me speak.'

'Very difficult. You must know it because you know what I'm like. My will's strong enough for this and a lot more, and I'll go through with it. I'll free myself of your frivolities and falsehoods and live honestly. If you want to you can shout it from the rooftops, in my house and every other house in the Colony.'

'Well . . . Order a whisky for me, please. I hope you live happily ever after with her. Isn't that the right thing to say?'

I sat back in my chair, finished my whisky, and managed to find a tone of voice that calmed me.

'Maybe it won't last for ever. You know from our own experience that the danger with affairs is they turn into habits.'

The cafeteria was nearly empty and so was the street, which now seemed wider and better lit. Elena drank in nervous gulps, her eyes full of tears that looked like the crystals on the chandelier in Andrés' mother's dining room.

'You'll cause more gossip with your moans.'

'Javier'—she said as if she hadn't heard me—'is it final?'

'That's what I asked you last Sunday but you wouldn't believe me.'

'Come to the car with me, please.'

She leaned on my arm. I walked with my hands in my pockets and felt like whistling a tune I had in my head. On her high heels, Elena walked with short quick steps. She opened the car door. When she sat down I saw her thighs. She switched on the dashboard light and looked at me.

'You forgot your package.'

'I'll pick it up in a minute. Go back home, Elena.' I pushed

HORTELANO

the door shut. You must have spent the afternoon forgetting about your honour.' The door clicked. '*Adiós.*'

I crossed in front of the headlights, waving my hand. I heard the motor start.

The waitress had kept the parcel for me. I sat down on a stool at the bar. I drank, whistled under my breath and smoked. Later the room filled with men and married couples who ordered coffee: black, white, with cream, without cream, with one lump of sugar, with two, without sugar. The whisky did me good.

With the parcel under my arm I dawdled in the deserted sidestreets. In some of them there were street-lamps, in others the light bulbs were hanging from S-shaped iron bars. Though I was perspiring I felt less hot. Near Anna's house I stumbled on a rut. And then I started to run, without any particular effort. Propped against the railing I recovered my breath. I left the parcel in the kitchen and cooled my face under the tap in the sink. Slowly, fumblingly I went upstairs. I undressed with infinite precaution. Anna was a large pallid shape. The sheet was warm. I bit into the pillow to stifle the laughter that rose in me as I recalled the expression on Elena's face at the steering wheel. I was happy with suppressed laughter I could not share.

I woke up because my throat was parched and my nose blocked. Anna's eyes were shining as she looked at me. I leaned on one elbow. The sky was full of stars.

'How are you?' she murmured. 'You must have had a bad dream.'

'No, why?'

'You were sleeping quietly and then you jumped as if someone had stuck a pin into you.'

'I'm going for a drink of water. Do you want anything?'

I fumbled for my pyjama pants. Anna was smoking when I came back. She slowly stroked my temples and neck. The pressure of her fingers on my vertebrae was soothing. Not far away a cock crowed.

'Do you know it's half past five? Almost dawn.'

'Aren't you sleepy?'

'No.'

'Tonight our hours for sleeping have gone wrong. I bought some things for the boys, but I can't remember where I left the package. I drank a lot of whisky and it went to my head. It was very nice out and not so hot. Within five minutes I'll be asleep like a log. What are you thinking about?'

'I was listening to you. Are you all right, really?'

'I'm fine.'

I stopped stroking her skin and sank into a placid sleep. Then Anna moved. Immediately afterwards I felt her body, her teeth, her mouth.

'You're going to drive me crazy.'

'Anna, my love . . .' I yawned.

'You don't understand.'

'What should I understand now?'

'How much I love you.'

'I know it.'

'You're asleep and you don't know. You'll never know.'

'In time I will. We've got a lot of time before us.'

She sat on the armchair and took my hands. I half opened my eyes.

'It makes me angry when you sleep.'

'Me too, but I'm very sleepy.'

After a short while I lit a cigarette.

'You know, when you first told me I thought it was a lie, but now I realize you told me the truth.'

'What is this all about?'

'I'm nervous.'

'Why?'

'I woke up and began to think about what we've been saying these last three days. About you and me.'

'Things always seem different at night.'

'We can't live together.'

'Anna, please . . . It's almost daylight.'

'So what? You won't put up with me for six months. We're too different . . . I'm not the woman for you. You're used to

HORTELANO

different standards of education, another way of life. I'm not educated, you see.'

'Anna, stop talking nonsense.'

'It doesn't matter whether I say it or not, the fact is, you'll get tired of a woman like me.'

'An inferiority complex or fear?'

'Both,' she laughed.

'Or do you want to get rid of me?'

'No, not that. If you left it would hurt me, although I've got to be prepared.' I shook my head. 'Yes. Because you won't be able to put up with me, not even for six months.'

'If you won't let me sleep, not even for six days.'

'But who wants to sleep when I'm talking about love?'

She threw herself at me. Stultified by sleep, my eyes on her tense face or on the light of dawn in the window, I took her once more, then I collapsed exhausted.

31

ANNA HELPED me to find the sleeves of my dressing-gown.

'All he said was that it was urgent?'

'That's all.'

'Give me the cigarettes and matches.'

'There are no matches left. Take my lighter.'

Rafael was looking out of the window of the back room. He turned round when I came in.'

'Good morning, sir. Señora Elena told me . . .'

'Has anything happened, Rafael?'

'The police inspector's at the Colony.'

'Right. And what else?'

'Señora Elena sent me to tell you, sir. The inspector wanted to ask the children some questions.'

Rafael's red shirt had a grease stain along the row of buttons. He sneezed. My nerves were on edge.

'The children. No.'

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'Why ask the children?'

'The boys they detained must've said something. Or the villagers.'

I stopped in my tracks. Rafael put his handkerchief in his pocket.

'Tell Señora Elena that I'm coming right away.' I lit a cigarette. 'And tell them not to leave the children alone with that man.'

'I've come in the station wagon.'

HORTELANO

'You drive straight home. I'll take my own car.'

She rose when I came into the bedroom but didn't come near me.

'Do you have to go?'

'Yes, the inspector's there.'

When I left the shower Anna had already packed my things. She got my razor and toothbrush from the bathroom and closed the suitcase. While I was dressing I quickly went over what I would have to do when I arrived, but every time Anna handed me a piece of clothing or went across the room I also thought that I ought to say something to her, that it wasn't right to leave in silence.

Suddenly I found myself at the garden gate which Anna held ajar.

'Don't worry, it can't be anything serious. I'll be back soon.' She closed her eyes and nodded. 'Really, I'll be back soon. Maybe tonight or tomorrow morning. Nothing has changed between us.'

'Go,' she said. 'Don't waste time.'

On the road, with the sunlight blazing through the windshield, I felt the desperate force of Anna's last kiss. But I quickly put it out of my mind. I accelerated, driving fast except on the corners. I expected to overtake the station wagon any moment.

A few chickens fluttered in the middle of the street. The Hofsens' dog barked at Poker. At the corner stood a group of people. Before I had reached the end of the gravel path Dora and Ernestina appeared on the veranda.

'Where's the inspector?'

'Javier, how did you know? I'm so glad you're back.'

'Hi, Javier,' said Ernestina. 'That man has gone to Andrés' house. It seems he also wants to interrogate Joaquín.'

'Where are the kids?'

'Upstairs with Rufi. I never left him alone with them.'

'Well done, Dora.'

'We're frightened, Javier.'

'Dora . . .' said Ernestina.

'Dora, don't let them go out. I met Rafael in the village . . .'

'My God, what a stroke of luck!'

'... Stay here and don't let the children go out for anything.'

The others arrived. Asunción let go of Emilio's arm and kissed me.

'At Andrés,' said Santiago.

'We haven't let him cross-examine the children,' said Emilio.

'We shut them up.'

'Yes, thanks, Emilio. They told me. What did he want to know?'

'He questioned everyone in the street,' Marta said.

Amadeo began to explain. 'It must've been about ten or half past ten when he turned up. He started with Rafael and some of the maids. He kept hanging around the path to the beach, probably to catch us all one after the other as we went down.' I walked slowly, one hand on Amadeo's shoulder, with the others following behind. 'He asked me who had found her, and when and how. I told him I'd reported the whole thing already, but he insisted on hearing it again. It was more or less the same with the others. All very politely.'

'Apologizing the whole time,' said Marta.

'Be quiet,' said Asunción.

'The fact is,' Amadeo lowered his voice when we came to the corner, 'he met your boy and José on the path. Leles came down to the beach in tears. When we went up we found him interrogating the boys. Of course they were frightened, and we...'

'What did the children say?'

'Nothing, apparently. They were too surprised.'

'And what did he ask them?'

'Enrique told me,' said Claudette, 'that he started asking them in the friendliest way to help him, because their collaboration was important. He put the matter to them as if it were a game. But he didn't put any concrete questions.'

'When we arrived,' Amadeo added, 'he started making excuses.'

'Then I refused to play,' said Emilio. 'I told him I would not allow him to abuse his authority either with my own children or with my friends' children.'

HORTELANO

'What are you going to do, Javier?' asked Marta.

At the bottom of the slope I turned to face them. They were clustered round a tree which cast a net of light and shade over them. Only Emilio stood in the sun, his face attentive and serious.

'Don't worry, I know how to deal with him.'

Asunción called out behind my back: 'Javier, make him understand that we're decent people.'

'He's been in there for more than half an hour,' said Luisa, who was sitting on the lawn in a bathing suit and beach jacket.

'And Joaquín?'

'At Emilio's. If you need me, call.'

When I pulled back the sliding doors they stopped talking. Andrés stood with a nearly empty glass of whisky in his hand. Julio half rose from the sofa. Elena smiled at me from the rocking chair by the window.

'Good morning. Forgive me for interrupting.'

'Hello, Javier,' said Elena.

'It doesn't matter. We had nearly finished.'

'Want a whisky?'

'Yes, please, Andrés.'

I tried not to hurry to the armchair opposite Julio's. I sat down, shifted an ash tray on the marble top of the table between us, and looked up.

'I learned by chance that you'd come here this morning.'

'I'm glad you've come. The moment you opened the door I heaved a sigh of relief. Unfortunately my presence here has caused considerable distress. I hope that, with your greater knowledge of the matter, you'll tell your wife and your friends that I . . .'

'Just a second. You told me you were going away.'

'And I wasn't lying. I meant to leave, but I changed my mind.'

'After interrogating the arrested boys again, perhaps.'

'They only reiterated their original statements.'

'And added something against my children?'

'No! . . . Excuse me, I didn't mean to shout. The boys made no accusations of any kind against your children. They didn't even mention them though you may not believe it.'

'No, I don't believe it.'

'And yet you believed in me the day before yesterday. And in the boys.'

'Javier . . .'

'Don't, Elena. Shall I pour out the whisky?'

Surprised, the inspector turned his head towards Andrés.

'Thank you, yes. I'll take some now.'

'And you, Javier?'

'Not any longer. If they want to fix the responsibility on the children it means that they themselves are guilty of something.'

'I'm not so sure. The fishermen say they don't know anything at all.'

'And so do the children,' Elena said.

'Señora, you didn't let me talk to them and that's the problem.'

'But we assure you that the children have nothing whatsoever to do with the whole affair.'

'It's true that you assure me . . .'

'Listen.' I drank a little, put the glass on the table and went on: 'In '36, I was twenty-three and went to the front the first day and stayed there. I earned two decorations and three medals. I started as an acting second lieutenant and finished a captain. In '39 I started to work . . .'

'Please, Don Javier, I'm familiar with your record as an honourable man.'

'I started to work like a slave and I've achieved something, something of importance, in the reconstruction of our country. I've given work to hundreds of people, I've created industries, I've imported and exported raw materials, I've added to the national wealth.'

'I can only repeat that I've always considered you a gentleman. But please, listen to me. The boys said nothing against your or your friends' children. Possibly because it never occurred to them. I served during the war as an officer too and I too have worked ever since our victory. It was my own idea to interrogate the children. I thought of it last night, not as a whim but because it's necessary. Don't forget that I've got a duty to fulfil.'

HORTELANO

'Tell us what you want to know and . . .'

'Do you want some more ice?'

'I can't. No thanks, no more ice.'

'But what are they supposed to have done?'

'Elena, leave Javier alone. Or don't stay if it makes you nervous.'

I heard the rocking chair creak behind me. I offered him a cigarette and was slow in lighting mine—with Anna's lighter—because I was searching for a new tactical approach to ascertain his intentions.

'You know, I'm sure the law doesn't oblige minors, mere children, to . . .'

He took a few steps towards the door. Andrés, a full glass in his hand, leant against the chimney-piece.

'I didn't come here on a legal errand. I know they're minors and I know you've parental authority and I can't question them unless you all agree. All this I know but I've no intention of harming the children, I merely want to clear up certain final points. And they ought to answer honestly, spontaneously and without being prompted. All I want is their help, because it was they who discovered the body.'

'Everything that happened . . .'

'Yes. But if everyone sticks to their original statement, there's something out of joint. That means somebody lied or kept part of the truth to himself.'

'Have you questioned the three young men and the two girls who were with Margot that night?'

He sat down again. With his elbows on his knees he rubbed his fingertips along both sides of his nose.

'Who's Margot?'

'Please don't drink, Andrés,' said Elena.

'I interrogated them as soon as I traced them, which was not very difficult. You probably know them, or at least their parents or their names; they come from good families.' He leaned back. 'I'll explain to you how the case stands, and you authorize me to speak to the children for five minutes.'

'No. It's only fair to warn you . . .'

'This isn't a business deal. I hope that you understand, once and for all,'—Julio glanced for a moment at Andrés who sat down on the sofa—'that the girl was a prostitute. The others went on a joy ride lacking one girl, and picked up Margot in Madrid. They were young, had too much money in their pockets and arrived drunk at the fishing village. At four in the morning they rented a motor boat and took it to sea. Next day the launch was in dock but nobody had seen them come back. Of course only five did come back: the wretched girl was left on your private beach. They were so frightened when they were arrested that they told us everything.'

'Did they kill her?'

'According to the police surgeon nobody killed her. She had drunk too much and had a heart attack, a thrombosis or something. In short, she died. They didn't really know her, didn't want complications and put her out on the beach down here. Then they ran like hit-and-run drivers.'

'Yes.'

'But there is something that neither they nor the fishermen nor you people here have explained: something the children may know about.'

'Why the children?'

'Because if everything I told you is true and I believe it is, your children are bound to know what I want to ask them.'

'What is it?'

He got up with an unexpectedly abrupt movement and Andrés drew in his legs to let him pass. In the doorway he turned round.

'I'm sorry, believe me, but I must ask for a summons.' He managed a smile. 'Good day, ladies and gentlemen.'

Everything had returned to the old groove. Elena's fingers were on my wrist. I was destined to the double effort of lying and succeeding for ever. I put Anna's lighter in my pocket.

Arm in arm, Andrés and Luisa came back from the garden

HORTELANO

gate where they had gone with the inspector. In a few minutes everybody would be here. There would be talk during supper, during the evening and until late at night. I looked at Elena's lips before they moved to say:

'We must arrange to meet tonight.'

32

AFTER MASS Don José María's black cassock stood out from among the gaudy dresses of the women around him. I was about to join their group when Emilio stopped me.

'Don't you think we should have a session with the children?'

It took us more than half an hour to round them up. I waited in my study until Emilio arrived with them as though shepherding a flock. Enrique, José and Martita sat on the sofa; Asun and Leles, who came in hand in hand, sat next to their father. Dorita began to hop around on one leg.

'And Joaquín?'

'We don't know,' said Enrique.

'When did you see him last?'

'Yesterday he stuffed paper into holes and lit it.' Asun laughed shrilly. 'But he didn't catch a single mole.'

'Quiet, there.'

'Dorita's got a lame leg.'

'You know the policeman was here yesterday.'

'Aunt Ernestina,' said Martita, 'said to Mama that they'd put us in prison.'

'In prison do people have to have a bath every day, daddy?'

'Now let's see. José and Enrique, you're the oldest. When . . .'

'I'm old too,' said Asun.

' . . . when you came to the beach and found that woman, what happened?'

'We got there and found the dead woman and ran up here to tell,' said Enrique.

HORTELANO

'How did you know she was dead, José?'

'I touched her foot.'

'Did anyone else touch her?'

They were silent.

'Did one of the others touch her?' Emilio looked for an ash tray.

'Say'—we all turned toward Leles—'will they put us all together in prison?'

'Quiet.'

'We're too small to be put in prison.'

'Uncle Javier, the girls didn't see the dead woman. They don't know anything.'

'Nothing, nothing, nothing,' said Asun very quickly.

'And you?'

'We saw her. Maybe there were tracks but we walked on them. We didn't mean to.'

'I don't want to go to prison,' said Dorita.

'Nobody goes to prison if they tell the truth.'

'We didn't walk on the tracks because we meant to.'

'She was beautiful, wasn't she? Like mummy, Joaquín said.'

'Leles!' Emilio opened the door. 'Off with you. To the beach or . . . to the devil.'

After all their voices the silence was all the heavier. Emilio wore a pale blue tie with white dots.

'Impossible to cope with them,' I said.

'They're innocent. But I'd be happier if they weren't so frightened. Well, I'm going.'

'I'll come with you.'

Asunción and Dora were drinking lemonade on the veranda. We joined them and for a long time nobody said a word. Emilio looked straight in front of him, upright in his chair.

'Javier, things haven't been as they should be between us lately.'

'I also wanted to put an end to those silly troubles between us.' I swallowed smoke. 'We mustn't go on like this.'

'You know anyway, Javier, if I did something . . .'

'It was I who . . .'

'I think,' said Dora, 'everything's forgotten now. You've always been such good friends . . .'

We got up to shake hands but instead put our arms round each other's shoulders. I saw Asunción wiping the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief.

'Believe me, Javier, I've been praying for this to happen.'

'Emilio,' Dora moaned, 'don't talk like this or I'll burst into tears. You must stay and lunch with us.'

'I'll fetch the whisky. This calls for a celebration.'

I had a strange sense of oppression in the pit of my stomach. Outside the birds were singing under the fiery sun, in the deep blue sky, in the still, sticky heat.

We drank and talked and I kept my smile fixed like the noonday heat. Finally Emilio decided to go down to the beach. Dora, who went upstairs to put on her bathing suit, sang on the stairs, in the passage and in the hall. Before she left she gave me a triumphant kiss.

It was Sunday. Anna would be with B.G. I would have preferred to think of other things but nothing else occurred to me, I could still taste Anna's lips on mine.

'I want to hear your version of the great truce.' Andrés sat down in front of me. 'Like the surrender of Breda. Who was the victor?'

'Have a whisky. The ice has melted.'

'Dora told me. I don't want ice because it makes me hotter. Is it true that you kissed all round?'

'I'm afraid it is.'

'How bee-yutiful. Peace has broken out, everybody's down at the beach and I don't know how late it is.'

'It's . . .'

'Don't tell me. I like lying on a veranda drinking, not knowing the time and feeling that the Colony's deserted.'

'Have you seen Joaquín?'

'I can't remember having seen my son at all in the past two years. No! I'm lying, we met on the beach the other morning. Ah, it's lovely here.'

I lay down again. Andrés smiled with closed eyes.

'When you were small you loved being alone.'

'Do you remember?' A gust of hot air drifted in. 'I don't think it's serious about the children, do you?'

'No.'

'I hate to see the kids mixed up in this. Our grandmother said that children should only play and that's how we were brought up. It didn't turn out too badly. Your whisky's fabulous.'

'Do you believe it turned out well?'

'Yes, I do.'

'The inspector won't do what he threatened to.'

'Let's suppose the others killed her.'

'No, I knew all along it wasn't murder. In some way things got out of hand.'

'The children . . .' He left the word floating in the air like a cobweb.

'Nobody's willing to let the children be implicated.'

'Of course.' After a long while he added, 'I'm glad you're here.'

We dozed in the chairs, what with the heat, the whisky and the silence. At about three Amadeo arrived; the women were staying down on the beach. After lunch we played cards but not for very long. I slept a bit in a chair in the living room.

Voices in the hall woke me. Drunk with sleep I reeled towards Emilio who waved a paper in his hand, an official-looking paper.

'Look, he hasn't wasted much time.'

Amadeo was reading another printed form.

'Well, he's going ahead.'

'He said he'd do it.' Through the half-open door I saw a man coming up the garden path. 'I won't allow it.'

The man had dusty shoes, a tight corduroy jacket and a dirty striped shirt. He called my name as he came up the stairs.

'Yes, here I am.' I took the folded paper.

'You've got to sign.' His grin revealed enormous red gums with uneven yellow teeth. 'Here, please.'

With the man's own pen I signed the duplicate of the summons.

'Goodbye, sir.'

Only then did it dawn on me that it wasn't his fault. I turned on the threshold and shouted: '*Adiós!*'

The man shuffled away down the gravel path.

Marta had an attack of hysteria, Elena and Luisa tried to calm her down. I stood there with the folded paper in my fingers till Emilio shook my arm. We went into my study. Amadeo came after us.

'I don't know what you two intend to do, but my daughter will not go before a Judge.'

'Sit down and don't get carried away. Javier, we have to act very quickly.'

'Yes.'

'I don't know this Judge but someone in Barcelona no doubt will. We can call in a lawyer. And I know the President of . . .'

'That's it. I'll go to Barcelona now. We'll take care of him!'

'Wait a minute,' Emilio said.'

'I don't think'—I had a bad taste in my mouth—'it's necessary for us all to go to Barcelona. Emilio is the one who knows the most people there and I've got some influential friends, though right now I don't quite know who would be of use to us. And then, in Madrid . . .'

'Let's go,' said Emilio.

'I must have a shower, wait for me.'

The chaos in the hall was worse. Dorita was crying in Ernestina's arms. The shower made me feel fine. I was dressing when I heard a noise. At first I didn't know what it was. Then I rushed to roll up the Venetian blind. A hot, dusty wind swept the garden. I breathed deeply and threw back my shoulders. Rufi finished packing my small suitcase.

Somebody had taken out the car. Andrés was discussing something with Amadeo. Sitting on the lawn, Santiago was laughing and wrestling with the kids. Emilio came across the street with a huge leather briefcase, its edges stitched with yellow twine; he was wearing a hat, which made him look different. The women, too, with their sweaters thrown over their shoulders, had an unfamiliar look. We took a long time over our farewells.

HORTELANO

During the first few miles neither of us spoke. Round, purplish, very low clouds were crowding the sky. Emilio, ceaselessly smoking, looked up addresses and telephone numbers in his notebook.

‘Will it be dark when we get there?’

‘We can’t be there before eleven.’

‘It doesn’t matter whether you drive fast or slow there. We can’t see anybody before tomorrow morning anyway. The trouble is that many will be away in the country. It’s going to rain.’

‘Let’s hope so.’

When we passed the village a bugle call sounded from the barracks, a strong note followed by modulations. It took me some time to identify the signal. Emilio shoved his notebook back into his pocket.

‘Tomorrow we’ll start’—he put his hat on—‘quite early.’

‘The best will be to make few calls. Two or three. People that really count. If the wind bothers you I’ll shut the window.’

‘It doesn’t bother me. I agree: a few calls, but effective ones.’

He began to list the names of his friends. On the main road, a few miles from the village, I stepped on the gas. We agreed on three names. It reminded me of people I hadn’t seen for years, old incidents, business deals, and journeys. I switched on the headlights. The traffic on the road grew denser, like the clouds which by now formed a single curtain reaching down to the horizon.

‘I suppose we’ll find a room in a hotel.’

He made a movement in the half-darkness.

‘Oh yes,’ he said.

‘At this time of the year nearly all the hotels in Barcelona are full.’

‘Hotel? We can go to my place. We don’t need a hotel.’

A reddish glow was growing larger in front of us. I was plagued by thirst. We sped past restaurants in increasing numbers.

‘But your flat’s locked up, and the furniture stowed away.’

'It's still the best solution. But if you like. . . don't do it for my sake. I promised Asun that I'd have a look at the flat.'

In the first streets of the city my spirits rose on seeing street-lights, crowded pavements and trams.

'You know, to be honest, I think I'll try to get into a hotel.'

'Of course, just as you like.'

In the Plaza de Catalunya I took the wrong turning and had to drive along the Ramblas.

'I'll turn back here and take you home.'

'Nothing doing. We must get you a room first.'

'Well, let's try here.'

I parked the car in a sidestreet. As soon as I had booked a room I gave the car keys to the clerk so they could take it to the hotel garage.

'Not bad,' was Emilio's opinion of the room.

'It's foolish of you to go home now. And in a taxi at that.'

'Asun may ring.' He read the notice stuck on the door.

'Rather expensive you know. All right, I'll be back tomorrow morning at eight. Have a good rest.'

'See you tomorrow, Emilio.'

'Try to think whether you know somebody still more important.'

I changed socks, washed my hands, opened the balcony door. The porter brought me my suitcase and a slip saying that I had been fined for parking in a prohibited zone.

Before going out I had a whisky at the bar of the hotel. People were strolling on the pavement and on the central track. The newspaper kiosks of the Ramblas were closed. I wondered whether to sit down on one of the chairs, but walked as far as the harbour. It was deserted and the wind rocked the light bulbs. A fresh boisterous breeze was blowing, scent-laden. As I walked back it started to rain.

At first the drops fell slowly like grains of sand. Suddenly thunder began to roll ceaselessly, and the rain turned into a heavy downpour that emptied the streets of people. Sprinting from doorway to doorway I reached the hotel drenched to the skin.

HORTELANO

Once I had undressed I switched off the light. From the balcony I watched the water running down and lapping over the kerb, frothy and black. I was so tired that I stretched out on the bed without folding back the upper sheet. Everything smelled of dampness and coal-dust from the railway. Lightning and thunderclaps receded into the distance, but the rain grew fiercer, made more noise, carried a cleaner breath of air to my sweaty skin.

I woke up shivering with cold. It was a dark night and the rain had stopped. Wrapped in a coverlet I sat near the balcony, smoked a cigarette and looked at the street, at its emptiness, at the glints on its wet surface, at the shadows of the trees. Anna would not even dream of my being here.

Emilio hadn't yet arrived at the florist's shop. I decided to wait for him on the terrace of a nearby bar. In spite of the cloudless sky it was less hot. In half an hour the shops would close. I entertained myself by watching the people strolling along the Paseo de Gracia, the cars, the trams, the unlit lettering of the neon advertisements. After a lemonade I ordered a gin.

In the shop a blonde woman in a smart black dress stared at me provocatively. In here the perfumes were heady. The blonde finished her conversation with a smallish man whose baldness was accentuated by his few lank hairs.

'I'd like to order flowers for a centre-piece. I don't know the address yet but I'll let you have it for certain early this afternoon.'

'That's quite all right, sir. What about camellias?'

'Yes.'

Her skin was so exquisitely groomed that it made up for her tightly constricted fatness. I was staring at her hips while she walked to the back of the shop. Foz and Emilio turned up just as she was showing me a bowl full of camellias.

'My apologies, Javier. Of course you remember Alberto Foz.'

'How are you? Of course I do.'

'My dear Javier. . . How many years since I last saw you . . .'
He put his arm round my shoulders. 'Apparently you never

come to our town, or if you do you don't let me know. What do I have to do to be treated as a friend? Good morning, Paulita.'

'Good morning, Don Alberto.'

'Every time I do come here you're abroad.'

'My dear boy, I'm not at all surprised. Do you think I look much older? But what can you say—I'm seventy-three now.'

'Impossible. You don't look a day over fifty.'

'Paulita, these gentlemen are kindly going to send my wife some flowers.'

'Oh, excellent. It's to S'Agaró, then.'

Emilio now saw the bald little man who was nosing about in the shop, supervising the manufacture of an enormous sheaf to which he added from time to time another kind of flower. He acknowledged Emilio's nod with a wink.

'Ah, my dear friend.'

Gently, Foz pushed me aside and walked forward with his most engaging smile.

'Director . . . '

'Oh, my dear friends!'

'How are you, sir?' asked Emilio.

'You know the address, don't you?'

Paulita, enveloped in bloneness and a highly personal scent, waggled her right forefinger with a coquettish gesture.

'If you'd told me from the beginning that it was destined for Señor and Señora de Foz, what with my high esteem for Don Alberto. . . You see, he's the Director of . . . ' Her voice became very low.

'What?'

'He's a great personage, you know.'

Foz broke into a series of little laughs, in counterpoint to Emilio's uncertain smiles and shuffling feet. The Director's waistcoat was edged with white piqué. Paulita was distraught when she took the banknotes.

'But you never rest.'

'Oh, rest . . . '

Paulita went to and fro. In the end we all clustered round the Director's bouquet.

HORTELANO

'It's wonderful.'

'Ah, flowers, there's nothing like flowers.'

'Yes, sir. I've read that your journey through Andalusia was a complete triumph.'

'Ineffable, gentlemen.'

'You're neglecting us, though.'

'Gentlemen, my work keeps me from so many pleasures . . . One day I shall cast off this chain.'

'For your sake we would be delighted. But for the good of the country may God preserve you in your post for a long time.'

'Oh, the country . . . Believe me, Catalonia is ever in my heart.'

Paulita was whispering into the telephone. A small boy in a long grey apron put a 'Closed' sign on the glass door.

'And you in ours.'

'I know it, I know it, friends.' He made a sign with his fingers; Paulita came up in a hurry. 'My dear, I've complete confidence in you. Gentlemen, it has been an honour.'

The door opened, fell shut again, and the little group dispersed.

'As soon as you want——' I said.

'I didn't introduce you because you know what those bigwigs are like,' said Emilio.

'It irks him if people are presented to him, you know,' Foz said almost pompously, in the Director's very accents. 'As he's an important figure he always thinks he'll be asked to do something. What wouldn't I give to find out from Paulita where those flowers were going!'

'Don Alberto, Don Alberto, how would you like it if I gave away your secrets to these gentlemen?'

'Aaaah, our Paulita's a dreadful woman.'

'We're going to lunch with Foz,' Emilio said. 'He's escaped early from his office to come with us.'

'Very well.'

Foz, who left the shop looking back at the smiling Paulita, bumped into two girls who walked arm in arm along the pavement.

'See you soon, Don Alberto. Goodbye, gentlemen, many thanks.'

The chauffeur closed the car door, walked round the bonnet and, with his cap in place again, sat at the steering wheel.

'She's a marvel, that woman. And handsome, you know. Still capable of arousing passions.'

'What a nice man the Director is, isn't he?'

'Extremely nice. And he's very simple, very straightforward. It's useful to be a customer of Paulita's. I told you so, Emilio.'

'That's all right for you big bankers. I hardly know anybody. I'm just a humble manufacturer.'

'Listen to this, Javier?' He slapped my thigh. 'What a phoney . . . A few months ago when the question of credits came up our Board thought of turning to you. A humble manufacturer!—He's very nice, the Director. No, thanks, I don't smoke before lunch. Dyspepsia. I didn't introduce you because he always suspects he may be asked to do a favour.'

'Never mind, it doesn't matter.'

'Anyway, in Madrid, with all the Ministries at hand . . . You see, Emilio, they are the lucky ones.'

'Oh, they . . .' he laughed. 'Well, he did remember me. And who did he send the flowers to?'

'If only Paulita—but she really is discreet. She never gives away anything and never asks a question. She's a widow.'

'A widow?'

'Yes, the widow of some Republican top brass, it seems. She was young, he deceived her and took her with him on the retreat in '38, and she had a terribly hard time in Mexico. Later she was widowed and came back here. Poor woman, she hadn't done anything wrong. A sad case. But she's efficient and a good businesswoman . . . Of course she's had help.'

We arrived at the slope of Tibidabo. I waited until we were seated on a terrace from which the city became a wide expanse of colours and irregular shapes. Emilio ordered the meal.

'All right. I suppose he has told you about——'

'Everything's settled. Foz took up his telephone, and within two minutes he settled the whole thing.'

'But of course.'

'I tell you, it was miraculous.'

'Thanks, Alberto. Emilio will have explained the unpleasantness of the affair.'

'Don't say a word more, for God's sake. It's monstrous. Those poor little creatures involved in a sensational crime story . . . And because of nothing more than the foolish stubbornness of that man. Thank you'— He studied the wine list— 'Châteauneuf du Pape. What do you think?'

'Excellent,' said Emilio.

'You will not be bothered again, and naturally the summons will lapse. But it's all so senseless. As I understand it the case is cleared up. Or very nearly cleared up. I explained who you all were, you and your children. Such enchanting children! They would have been so frightened.'

'One day you must come to White Sails.'

'Thanks, yes, Emilio. Oh, by the way, Javier, after lunch I'll ask you to give me half an hour. We'll leave this humble manufacturer at his office so that he can supervise the gold pouring in, and I'll consult you on a few points.'

'Whenever you like.'

'It's about some land we own near Alicante. So far it's only an idea, a vague project, but I thought we might build something on the lines of your Colony. For commercial exploitation. No special luxury. I have to spend my holidays in S'Agaró and if things continue as they are now my children will stay in the Calle de Balmes next summer.'

'They will continue.'

'Emilio, don't be a pessimist.'

'A pessimist? Look, Alberto, this morning Javier and I went to see Augusto.'

'Augusto Mondoñedo?'

'Well, he wasn't there.'

'Of course not, he's on his holiday in Malaga.'

'We didn't know he was in Malaga. Before bothering you we called on Augusto.'

'Quite wrong.'

'I had a talk with his secretary. I rang you up from there. I don't know if you've met his secretary. A young man, very clever . . . '

'Oh yes, he's very competent.'

'As you might expect we chatted about the speech. You know. You've read the speech, of course. I'm not an expert on cotton but . . . '

'Well, Emilio, if you start on the cotton problem you may spoil my lunch.'

They talked cotton till the coffee. The wine filled me with quiet enjoyment. In the far distance, in the haze that must have been the beginning of the sea, there was an end to the profusion of house fronts, roof terraces, the green patch of Güell Park, the spire of the cathedral of the Sacred Family, the factory chimneys, all encrusted in a block of crystalline light. Suddenly I felt a familiar sensation of strength and well-being. I had forgotten it during the past few days but it enveloped my whole body and it made me see the world a lucid, orderly place.

When Emilio tried to pay the bill we were told that it had already been settled by Foz's chauffeur. Emilio bought cigars.

'But did you see the girl?' asked Foz.

'Which girl?' I said.

'Yes, we saw her. Shattering.'

'Disfigured?'

'Oh no,' I answered hastily. 'She was quiet, peaceful, as if pretending to be asleep. Her mouth was unusually beautiful.'

'I don't remember,' said Emilio.

'I do. I saw her on the beach and later in the guard's hut. She looked as if she'd been a genuinely interesting person, and then it turned out that she was a tart.'

'A painful story.' Foz belaboured his teeth with a toothpick, shielding his mouth with his left hand. 'And bad luck for those young people who were with her. The girls particularly. In a peaceful society like ours. We weren't like that in our youth, were we? It would never have occurred to us to take the Hispano

and go on a trip with a prostitute and two young girls of our own class.'

'No,' said Emilio. 'The way these young people carry on is frightening.'

'To my kids I seem quite a stranger. And they to me, I don't have to tell you that. Behaving like negroes!'

We went for a little walk on the esplanade of the funicular railway. Then we dropped Emilio at his office and were driven to Alberto's. He explained his projects to me with the help of blueprints, economic reports, memoranda and personal comments. Unsmiling, with concentrated attention, he listened to my answers, and a kind of solidarity radiated from him which made it easy for me to think. It amazed me that it was as late as six when I parted from Alberto Foz.

'Many thanks, but I'd rather walk back to the hotel, Alberto. I'm most grateful to you for everything.'

'And I to you, great man. Tell Emilio I will take you up on your invitation. Next week you'll see me at White Sails. As I said, my car is at your disposal.' He shook hands with me. 'But as you like . . . and listen—don't hesitate to telephone me if they bother you again. I don't think they will. Regards to your wife.'

Before taking a shower I rang up Emilio. He answered, absentmindedly, that he would be with me in half an hour. As soon as I had put down the receiver I thought of calling Anna. The telephone operator said it might take between fifty and seventy minutes to get the number. I dressed slowly, smoked several cigarettes, ordered a gin, went for a walk in the Ramblas, bought the evening papers and read them in the hotel hall. Shortly before nine Emilio arrived, perspiring.

'Forgive me, but I hadn't even time to give you a ring.' He slumped in an easy chair. 'A coffee, please.'

'And another gin for me. But what's the matter?'

'Only that I can't get away from the office. Asunción thinks it's just an obsession of mine, something to make her life more difficult. But no. Tell her that I really can't leave here yet, will you? In three or four days time, I'll be back with her.'

'Have you got so much work to do?'

'Work? Explain it to her, and tomorrow I'll talk to her on the telephone. Tell her not to worry, I'm all right in our flat. All she has to worry about are the kids. Are you leaving now?'

'Yes.'

'It's late. Why don't you go to bed and leave early tomorrow morning? I've got to be at the office tomorrow at seven. I can't stay away.'

'I prefer driving at night, it's cooler.'

'Everything's piling up, nothing gets done, the orders are neglected. . . I tell you, when I endorse the pay-roll I sign my name to robbery. And it's my money they're stealing.'

The night was clear. Once I was outside the city a cold wind came through the car window. I stopped at a roadside restaurant and ate a French omelette and a sausage and drank a bottle of beer. Back at the steering wheel I felt less weary. For several miles the road hugged the coast; sometimes the sea was almost at the same level, sometimes the road rose above a small bay. Outside a village I was stopped by the traffic police and had to show my documents. Many cars and lorries were on the road, going in both directions.

On reaching the village where Anna lived I left the highway. The streets were deserted. I stopped in the dark when I could see the outlines of her villa. I smoked slowly, almost drowsily. If Anna hadn't opened the parcel the sweets I had bought for the fishermen would be dry by now. Then I found myself thinking of Elcna, of Foz's blueprints, of my thirst. Without lights I drove back to the road.

My petrol only just lasted me to White Sails. My shoesoles crunched on the gravel of the garden path. It smelled of wet earth. Fumbling along hall and passage I finally reached the kitchen. Some brown dots were running across the floor as I switched the light on; they stopped and didn't move. With the blood pulsating in my cheeks I didn't know what to do. This lasted several seconds. Finally I found a broom, but before I could even lift it the cockroaches had disappeared into the cracks between the tiles on floor and walls.

HORTELANO

Greedily I drank water. With lightning speed the view of those beetles had swept away my sleepiness, my fatigue, and also my sense of well-being. I went out into the garden. In mounting anger I rebelled against the absurdity of having cockroaches in my expensive new house. It took me a long time to remember the existence of insecticides.

33

CLAUDETTE HANDED me a martini. Through the window we saw three masons working on the breach in the garden wall. Dora came in from the street and started speaking before she'd reached us.

'That man. . . . That man's here again, Javier.'

'What does he want?' asked Claudette.

'Amadeo saw him come and is now with him at our house. But he wants to see you right away. Shall I go down to the beach to get the children?'

'Calm down, Dora.'

I emptied the glass. I was quite serene. A halo of white dust enveloped the three men and drifted over the grass. From the opposite direction Rafael was walking to the villa.

Julio got up when I came into the living room.

'Good day, Don Javier. I want to ask you a favour.'

'All right. I'll leave you alone.'

He turned to Amadeo. 'Don't go for my sake.'

'Sit down. What is it?'

'I know you gentlemen have been talking to my superiors.' He adjusted his glasses. 'It's only logical. I never wanted to cause you more trouble than was absolutely necessary. I asked for those summonses because . . . If you have time I'll . . .'

'I have plenty of time.'

'Two days ago I asked you to let me talk to the children, and you refused.'

'Right,' said Amadeo.

'I still need to talk to them.'

'I'm afraid . . .'

'Forgive me.' His left cheek trembled. 'I'm going to tell you what I want to ask them.'

'I am sure you have a good reason for wanting to question the children. I've never doubted it. I haven't wanted to put obstacles in the way of your work as I've great respect for what you're doing. You look out for all our interests and risk your own and, I'm afraid, for a rather low salary.' The inspector shook his head with an uncertain smile. 'But you haven't any children.'

'No, that's true.'

'If you had children, small children like ours, you'd act just as we have. I'm ready to listen to you at any time.'

'Thanks.' He cleared his throat and joined his fingertips. 'I've already explained that everyone involved in this case has confirmed each statement again and again. But there is one fact that isn't explained by any of the statements. The girl'—he raised his voice—'was drunk. In the launch they rented in the fishing village the young people went on drinking and she died in the boat. They were frightened, left her on the beach and ran away. All right. No one from the village or the camping site, not a single person, was on the beach. Your children found the body and the girl was naked. The others say they left her dressed and with a small handbag with money and personal papers in it.'

'Wait a minute,' Amadeo shouted, 'the children aren't thieves!'

'I didn't say they . . .'

Amadeo paced the floor, blundering into an armchair.

'No, but you insinuated that the children had robbed the dead. That they took her clothes and her handbag. It's ridiculous! Kids not yet four feet high don't undress a corpse!'

'Who did then?'

'How should I know? Whoever killed her.'

'Nobody killed her.'

' . . . or the fishermen. They had an incentive, they're half starved, poor bastards.'

'They deny it and I don't think they're lying.'

They shouted at each other, defending their respective

viewpoints. Julio got to his feet and loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar. In the lobby, Ruffi and Leles were listening. The little girl held on to Ruffi's skirt and was sucking a sticky candy. Amadeo and the policeman fell silent as I left the room.

'Ruffi!'

'Yes, sir?'

'Tell Leoncio or Rafael to empty the swimming pool immediately.'

The inspector's hand fell gently on my arm.

'Thank you,' he said.

'Amadeo, find Joaquín.'

He was not at home or on the beach. Within a quarter of an hour the search was on. I was dripping with sweat by the time I returned to the swimming pool; it was already much lower and Santiago dived in. I calmed the women. Andrés, in pyjamas, laughed at Marta's agitation. Ernestina and I went to the fishing village on her scooter. Amadeo and Rafael took the station wagon and drove to the other village. Luisa and Karl searched along the coast.

'But how can he have guessed that we're after him?'

'He's as sharp as a lynx and his conscience is uneasy. He smells things in the wind. It won't be long before he's a great businessman—unless he ends up in prison or falls off a tree.'

'Don't say things like that, Javier.'

'Drop me here.'

Ernestina went back to the Colony while I climbed the slope to the pine wood. After two hours I stretched out in the shade, too tired to recall the conversations I had had with Joaquín during the last few days, his excursions or his hiding places. Then I walked round for another half hour. In the end I went back home and arrived halfway through the afternoon, covered with dust, dirty and with a crust of dry spittle in my throat. There was still about two feet of water left at the deep end of the swimming pool.

'He hasn't shown up,' Marta said, 'and they haven't found anything.'

The women were talking in the living room. Cigarette smoke

HORTELANO

filled the stagnant air; saucers, cups, bottles littered the tables and the chimney-piece. Elena watched me drinking lemonade. Deep rings circled her eyes, and the absence of makeup threw her sunburnt cheekbones into strong relief.

'Don't worry. At the very latest we'll have him here tonight.'

'Andrés has gone out too, he's very worried.'

I put my head and chest under the jet of a fountain in the garden. In the calm of a lovely evening the waves lapped faintly at the beach. Then I heard Rufi shriek and ran in her direction.

'They've found him, Señora Santiago and Señorita Ernestina found him in the fields.'

'Is he all right?'

'Yes, sir. Thanks to Our Lady. He was sleeping in the shade of a thicket but he doesn't want to say anything to anybody.'

With an effort I ran on. Don Antonio was coming from the other side.

The room was crowded. The inspector, standing apart, leaned against the fireplace. Joaquín was chewing a piece of ham as I pushed through and the voices stopped.

'You seem to have had a pretty good run.' He looked up and smiled. I sat down beside him. 'It wouldn't surprise me if one of your pranks made your parents ill. You never think of them when you go off, do you?' He stopped chewing and frowned. I passed my fingers through his mop of hair. 'Well, now you'll have to tell us where you keep the clothes you took off that woman.'

'They're just dumb, they invented it all.'

'No one denounced you.'

'They're clods! They broke their oath!'

Enrique and the girls began crying and Asunción tried to quieten them.

'If your father were here . . .'

'Be quiet.'

'You'll see what happens when he hears about it.'

'Quiet, Asunción. No, Joaquín, it isn't true that they . . .'

'Oh yes,' said Andrés, 'it is true. They confessed because

they're honest children. Only my son insists on denying the evidence, though he sees that it upsets his mother and makes me ashamed. But it's true that they took off her clothes.'

'I didn't say it was a lie.' Joaquín dropped the sandwich he was eating.

'Did you do it, Joaquín?'

'Yes, I did. I'm honest too.'

'Why?' Andrés sat in the place I'd left, with his arm round Joaquín's shoulders. 'You're the leader of the gang so it was your idea, wasn't it?'

'First we saw the handbag but we didn't take her money or anything. The other children didn't know what a woman was like. They said that women were just like men. I said they weren't.'

'Go on.'

'I saw a photo once. And it was something we could have as a treasure. We swore it would be a secret.' Enrique sobbed bitterly in Dora's arms. 'I cut the stuff with my pocket knife, what didn't come off, but I didn't break my oath.'

'All right, where do you keep your treasure?'

He wrenched himself free; his eyes fixed on me in a long, beseeching, frightened look.

'I know where it is. You told me yourself a short time ago.'

'Javier, please,' said Elena.

'The day you showed me your hiding-place by the garden wall. Your den with three dilapidated wicker chairs, a stone table and a few packing cases of condensed milk. You see, I remember.' To keep his eyes on me he had to turn his head. 'But I won't say anything. It's up to you to confess where you keep your treasure. I don't want to betray you.'

'Joaquín, Javier trusts you.'

His hands trembled, he held them in front of his chest with the fingers locked.

'It's a lie. He doesn't remember anything. I told him where I kept the plan of the treasure'—his eyes were wet with tears—'but he'd have told you if he'd remembered.'

A slight tremor of his shoulders indicated the effort he was

making to suppress his sobs. He walked about the room. The inspector came to his rescue and lifted him up.

'You're a brave boy. I'm going to write and tell the chief of the whole police that you're the bravest boy in Spain but don't cry.'

'I'm not crying.'

'I like brave people. Just think how funny it is that I have been looking for your treasure for over a month.'

'It's in the lumber room, in mummy's travelling bag.'

Elena screamed.

Beyond the violet glow on the tree tops was a distant yellow radiance. Ernestina took my arm and Amadeo offered me a cigarette.

'Do you remember how annoyed Emilio was because the children had seen a naked woman,' said Amadeo.

'And because Javier had explained female anatomy to them. Of course I remember.'

'Well, let's see what happens when he hears that the boys undressed a corpse. He'll keep them on a diet of bread and water until Christmas.'

'By the way,' Ernestina said, 'is anything known about the poor girl's family?'

'No,' I lied. 'Perhaps she had no family.'

'Look, they're in.'

The armchairs were installed a few yards from the lighted porch. Marta was mixing drinks, Claudette, her legs crossed, balanced one of her shoes on her toes.

'Do you realize, Luisa,' said Andrés, 'how right you were to stay with us? You wouldn't have had so much fun in Zarauz.'

'Andrés, you're superb.' Luisa gave him a kiss on the forehead, 'I love people with a sense of humour.'

'No, thanks, Marta.'

'Andrés, aren't you drinking? Then I'm sure you've got an appointment with your doctor tomorrow.'

'No, but I'm going to see Joaquín in a moment. I'll have a drink when I get back.'

I rested my head on the cushions of the swing. I felt dirty

and my back ached. The glass was like a cold gentle touch. After the first sip I lost my nostalgia. After all Anna was only a prostitute and I could always look her up in Madrid when I felt like it that winter. After the second sip I realized that I was drinking gin.

‘Is it long till winter?’ I asked innocently.

Their laughter made me open my eyes.

34

RUFI PUT the call through to my study.

'What are you doing?' Elena asked.

'I've been working for the past two hours. And you?'

'I'm alone. Are you going to the beach?'

'Yes, I think so.' We both laughed. 'I believe I'm going now.'

Enrique was sitting on the veranda steps.

'I don't like to see you moping like a nitwit.'

'I've nothing to do.' He got up and came after me.

'Go and play.'

'Are you going to the beach?'

'Yes.'

'Can I come with you in the *Marta*?'

'Yes,' I looked at my watch. 'But it's half an hour too early. We won't sail before twelve. Wait for me on the beach, I'm going to Uncle Andrés' first.'

'Uncle Andrés has gone off with Joaquín. They left very early to buy him some toys.'

'Anyhow, wait for me on the beach. You can help to get the launch ready.'

I hovered on the corner until Enrique had disappeared. Walking in the middle of the street I whistled. Higher up, the trees cast deep black shadows on to the asphalt, the ground and the lawn. Elena was waiting for me on the veranda. As soon as the door of the living room closed behind us we embraced.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes.' I sat on the sofa. 'And you?'

Elena brought me some fruit juice. She wore a dress which left her back bare.

'Very well. Andrés took Joaquín away for two or three days to put his mind on other things. You're going sailing, aren't you?'

'Yes. How was Joaquín this morning?'

'Excited about the trip. He'll soon stop sulking. Have you really been working?'

'For the past two hours, I got up, sat in my study and worked until you telephoned. I had piles and piles of letters to answer.'

'Do you mind . . .' She took up a little bottle of nail polish. 'When do you start?'

'At twelve, according to Amadeo. I feel like fishing and swimming far out to sea. Why don't you come too?'

'I won't have time.' She adjusted the venetian blind to let in more light. 'You're bound to be back late. Is the fruit juice good?'

'Very.'

In profile in the ray of sunlight that cut through the dusk, Elena looked younger. She bent down to look at her fingernails and shook her head almost imperceptibly. After drinking my fruit juice I would get up and kiss the curve of her shoulder where it merged with her back.

'I'd forgotten how beautiful you were.'

She looked at me and smiled. There might be a letter from Anna any day now. Elena examined her nails which flamed red at the tip of her outstretched hand. Outside, the soil crackled with heat like bubbling sand or resin.

'You'll have to forgive me,' she said.

'I have forgiven you.'

'I know you have but I had to apologize, because those last few days I didn't behave very well.'

'Elena, forget those last few days. Everything's reverted to where it was before.'

'I missed you,' she had got to her feet, 'and that made me nervous, stupid and, most of all, clumsy.' She walked slowly towards me, round the table, with both arms extended before her. 'I'm accustomed not to think, as you know. You do all the

HORTELANO

thinking for both of us and have been for a long time. All of a sudden, I had to figure things out myself.'

Kneeling on the sofa, she put her arms on my shoulders.

'You did it very well.'

'You're right; we must forget it.' She slid down sideways. As I put my arm round her waist. 'Be careful, don't get nail varnish on you.' Her arms pressed into my neck. 'Do you love me?'

'Of course I love you. These declarations sound a bit ridiculous, don't they?' She rubbed her nose on my cheek. 'To me, you're still young.'

'Oh. And you aren't?'

'Not so young, let's put it like that. There are times when I have to admit that I no longer have the energy I had at twenty.'

'Nonsense.'

'Let me give you a quick kiss.'

When she drew away she lowered her eyelids and didn't look up for some time. Her face had a wry expression that reminded me of a rainy evening.

'Do you remember one evening when it rained hard and we were waiting . . .'

'Listen, I don't like hearing you talk of growing old. Sorry, what did you say?'

'Nothing special. Anyway, Elena, it was a joke and a lie. I've never felt younger.'

'It wasn't a joke, let's face it. You think that you've come back home because you're no longer young. Isn't that it?'

'No.'

'You're right. You come back because you're a man. A whole man.'

'Elena, my love, that sounds like some popular song.'

'I don't mind you pulling my leg.'

'I'm glad. But listen seriously now.' I put my hands on her lap. 'You say I'd been thinking for you, and it may be true. But you are worth a lot on your own, because you knew how to do the right thing. It's best to talk things out as we've always done.'

'Javier . . .'

'You were right not to leave your husband for me. You know what life is, Elena, you knew how to live, even when I'd forgotten. I came back because I ought to be with my own people and because I like to be with them, believe me. Most of all now that I no longer consider myself the father and saviour of the world,' I said, laughing.

'Oh, I was so moved by what you were saying and then you ruin it by a joke. I love you.'

'I love you . . . and I need you, with interest for the time I missed.'

'One hundred per cent interest.'

Standing, I held her firmly against the wall, drowning in her aroma, in the familiar touch of her skin and in the light which the blind dissolved into single strands.

'Oh, you, you'— I pressed against her body—'change your mind and come with us.'

She walked with me into the garden clinging to my hand. Although I walked on the shady side of the street, I was sweating. At the beginning of the path I stopped to look at a recent sign, its black paint still wet. KEEP OUT. PRIVATE PATH. Before reaching the beach I took off my shirt. Amadeo and Santiago were bending over the motor of the boat, which was grounded on the sand. The kids came running up behind me as I walked to the edge of the water and took off my sandals. The sea was cooler than usual and I swam for a time.

Dora was putting up the awning poles, helped by Asunción and Luisa.

'We'll be late starting,' said Santiago.

'I don't care, I'm in no hurry.' The sand was scorching the soles of my feet.

'Hello, Asun. Did Emilio phone?'

'Yes, and we talked for a quarter of an hour this morning. José, put on your cap, or you'll get sunstroke!'

'Here's a nice spot for you.'

'Thanks, Dora, I'm going to take a short sun-bath. Is there a towel for me?' Don Antonio looked up from his newspaper. 'Thank you. The water's very cool today.'

'José, José, don't sit by the water, it's cold!'

'Oh, mummy, cold!'

I spread the towel near the shade from Don Antonio's awning, put my cigarettes and matches into a plastic bag and lay down. Don Antonio's shirt had the print of an enormous palm tree on its back. Claudette was setting up her easel.

'What's wrong there? Do you want me to help you?'

'It's those damned sparkplugs, as usual.'

Enrique was bobbing up and down, perched on Santiago's shoulders.

'Aren't Juan and the boy back?' Amadeo asked.

'That motor . . .' Don Antonio said. 'One day it'll conk out on you.'

'If Amadeo weren't so stingy he'd get a 12 hp Johnson . . .'

'A Chiscraft for water skiing is what we need,' Marta said.

Don Antonio peered from behind the paper.

'What's new in the world?'

'Wars, revolutions, accidents, madness . . . The world's gone mad.'

'I'm waiting for you, Ernestina,' said Claudette.

'It's peaceful here.' I crossed my hands behind my neck.

'Yes, here it's different.' Don Antonio folded his paper after offering it to me. 'It's wonderful weather, the children are playing, the women are chatting and we're resting. It's a lie that everything's going to the dogs, that's only what grouzers and misfits say. One gets sick of reading the paper.' Don Antonio brought out a detective novel from under his chair where he stowed his bags, his folder and his bottles . . . 'You say the water's cold?'

'Very cold.'

I turned round. Ernestina, arms akimbo, legs straddled, threw back her shoulders and stared fixedly through her sunglasses out to sea.

'Are you posing in the sun?'

'Don't distract her,' said Claudette. 'Only ten minutes, my sweet.'

'I'm not protesting, Leles, rub some cream on my waist.'

The sand had a warm, acrid taste. My forehead grew damp and with one open eye I saw the beach in a haze of swirling light which was filled with coloured disks at times. Through Ernestina's legs I saw Claudette, the palette in her left hand, lean over the easel and step back again. I relaxed my leg muscles.

'High time you came, man,' shouted Amadeo.

They came on slowly, their trousers rolled up to mid-calf, the shirt-tails tied in a knot over the navel: first Juan, then, a few steps behind, the boy. Anna's letter would surely arrive before I decided to drive to the village one afternoon. Juan waved towards the launch. My forehead slipped from my arm and I shut my eyes. Then a rancid smell, like that of rotted wood, dazed me for a moment. A light dust was floating over the sand.

'Javier, did you promise Rufi a raise?' Dora asked.

'Not that I remember,' I dragged myself to the shade under the awning. 'But if she asked you for one, let her have it.'

'You'll get scratched by the sand.' Dora went away. 'Who has the rubber lifebelt?'

'Amadeo, why don't you have a drink?'

'Give me the inner tube for Aunt Dora.'

'What are you going to call your seascape, Claudette?' I asked.

'I don't know when we'll get away.' Amadeo jumped down from the boat. 'Enrique, bring us some cans of water. José can help you.'

'It has no name.'

'Landscape with siren,' said Luisa.

I placed my lips on my forearm. Now all I smelt was my own skin.

