

Under. Paris Skies

A NOVEL

Enrique von Kiguel

FICTION

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Under. Paris Skies

In this unique portrait of the glamorous life of well-to-do Parisians and aristocratic expatriates, a young Chilean doctor moves to Paris in the late nineteen fifties, lured by the promise of romance, freedom and culture. At first his new life in Paris is all that he had dreamt it would be—he lives in the luxurious apartment of a countess; his new friends include exiled princes from Eastern Europe and wealthy patrons of the arts. Elegant parties and luncheons are the norm. But behind the cultured facades and gracious manners lie dark secrets. The romance he so craved turns to tragedy in this novel based on a true story.

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Under Paris Skies





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A novel based on a true story

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D E D I C A T I O N

In memory of
Arthur Lawrence Buchanan.

He was my dearest friend,
companion and confidant.
You live forever in my heart.



Acknowledgments: Arthur Lawrence Buchanan (Larry) has been my hero ad infinitum. We met after I settled in the United States and lived together for forty-five wonderful years until his death in February, 2008. Without equal, Larry was the kindest, most giving and unique individual I have ever known. An unrelenting motivator, he encouraged me to put pen to paper in order to share my experiences published here in *Under Paris Skies*.

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The author in his native Chile before he left for Paris.

Chapter I

Alvaro turned another page of his novel, one with an elegantly designed cover that disguised a tawdry story within, and peered with his wide brown eyes over the top of the book, looking at me as if I were a ghost.

I felt Alvaro's eyes wondering over me, as though his favorite pet had been exchanged for someone else's, but he said nothing. He poured himself tea without a glance across the sunny room. Knowing Alvaro so well, I was attuned to his watchfulness, the machinations of my friend's imagination.

I already suspected that problems would arise during our planned trip to Lima, Perú, as fine as it had sounded when Alvaro casually suggested it. Now I was certain that the trip would be difficult in ways I could not even guess.

Such was life with Alvaro. He loved luxury and money, but easy money, without effort—he loved to appear the rich boy. When one of Alvaro's dubious dealings, usually outside the scope of his largely unprofitable antique business, produced a good amount of money, Alvaro's generosity was genuine and extravagant. His clothing was always in good taste, tailored from the most expensive materials available, as suited a man whose business was located on one of the most exclusive avenues in Santiago.

But today, in our small apartment crowded with rugs, paintings, furniture and *objets d'art*, Alvaro was quiet, almost eerily so. I knew that he was hatching another scheme. In a short time, it would be revealed.

Meanwhile, I gazed out the window, down upon pairs of women—mothers, daughters, friends—strolling arm in arm on the avenue toward the flowers in the park, as they had for generations. So strong at times was my desire to do the same with

Alvaro that I almost suggested it out loud, but in my pragmatic soul, I accepted that such a promenade was impossible in the world beyond this window. It was incumbent upon Chilean men of my social status to find an attractive woman, marry, and have children. My obligation was no different, and so I had to keep my relationship a secret or risk discrimination, rejection and stigma.

I had to be content with the life Alvaro and I had managed to build together within these walls, though at times it felt like we had only brought our belongings to a common space. Every time I began to relax into our life together, Alvaro launched another stratagem. Through the usual evasions and the passage of time, however, Alvaro had always been able to smooth things over with my practicality.

I relished the silence of this room, the time to wind back into my own reverie. I had finally relaxed after my long week of seeing patients at the clinic and had to force myself to scan the latest European scientific journal related to my profession on this lovely Sunday afternoon. My medical practice was an abject act of duty, performed for the benefit of my brother-in-law, a pediatrician who early on had tried to fashion me for a life of medicine. But my restless nature had abandoned me for the time being, and I was content. Alvaro and I had many loyal friends. Tonight, we were invited to dinner at Margarita's. I slowly sipped my tea and looked around the elegant room with gratitude. Although we had shared this space for a year, I still felt somewhat of a stranger in it, furnished as it was with Alvaro's tastes and the fruits of his finagling.

"Patricio, go take your shower," Alvaro said. "I want to keep reading."

Alvaro talked now with his eyes on the book. "Get yourself ready for dinner at Margarita's."

I glanced up and spoke deliberately. "Yes, it will be nice to see Margarita. I must thank her for introducing me to that Peruvian professor. He was generous with his time."

I tried to read Alvaro's thoughts. "Are we the only guests?"

“Catalina will be there,” Alvaro said.

“Catalina?” I asked and closed my eyes for a moment. “Ah, your mother’s friend.”

Catalina frequently made trips to the United States to purchase large wholesale quantities of stylish American dresses. For years she had built up an established clientele among the most prominent women in Chilean society.

The customs duties on articles of luxury were so astronomically high in Chile that bringing these goods into the country legally would cause the importer economic ruin. For several years Alvaro, with a healthy commission for himself, had helped her to penetrate the border with contraband, escaping the exorbitant tariffs.

Now, however, Alvaro was suspect. He had made one too many appearances at the customs enclosure, with his excuse that he had friends who worked in the section where they stored “unaccompanied” baggage. Eventually a new collaborator must be found.

Alvaro smiled. “Take your shower.”



In the warm spray of the shower, I recalled meeting Catalina. I sensed that this unique lady had liked me from the start—unusual, given that Catalina was a long-time friend of Alvaro’s mother, Isabel.

In spite of Isabel’s obvious antagonism to her son’s friendship with me, Catalina displayed spontaneous affection when we met. She openly rebutted Isabel’s negative observations and accused her of morbid feelings of jealousy toward her son Alvaro.

On our second meeting, Catalina was able to persuade me—a professional man and a skeptic—to visit a fortune teller. Catalina was developing an enormous concern for my sensitivity. My state of mind seemed to trouble her, apparently suspecting the mounting disappointments I was going through in my relationship

with Alvaro.

The fortune teller predicted my departure from my native country, which caused me a great deal of excitement and hope, but I had a disturbing and gnawing feeling that the destination of the prophesy did not match any vague plan that I had for myself. The seer had spoken of a ship that would near a tiny island with a large statue of a woman. To me this sounded like all of the descriptions I had heard of New York from friends who had visited that city, a place that held no real interest for me.

Yet I fervently wanted to leave Chile. The country's social structure and my own family situation were suffocating me. From an early age, I was aware that I craved the company of men, to the exclusion of physical love from women. None of the attractive, well-bred young women my mother introduced me to moved me in any way beyond simple friendship.

Unlike most of my peers who confessed to homosexual longings, I knew what I wanted and got it. Even though I detested any and all forms of deliberate exercise, my friends used to tell me that I had a physique that radiated good health and animal vitality, which had developed naturally through no effort on my part. Although several men had captured my attention over the years, and many more had approached me, no one had satisfied my need for affection, until I met the sweet and slick Alvaro, whose outward innocence masked many transgressions.

I feared that no one but Alvaro would understand the love I felt as a man, rather than as an obedient son or friend. But I sometimes asked myself what love was all about when those loving, tender and caring moments were followed by arguments filled with recrimination, criticism, disapproval, doubt and distrust. Did this happen to all love relationships as time went by? Should one overlook the negative points and keep only those feelings of love on the surface, fencing out the bitter moments, and remembering the bright sunshine shared at the beach, the caresses of salty waves, rather than those inopportune and furtive thoughts full of unfaithfulness and suspicion? Was love only such things as

tasting the same food, mutually wetting your lips with vintage wines, enjoying the same music and telling each other time and again “I love you,” after saying good night to the moon and the brilliant stars under a dark sky? Shouldn’t one occasionally hold hands when alone as a way of saying “what a wonderful evening spent together”?

Nothing like that happened between me and Alvaro. What I really wanted was to walk with my lover over the same path, share a permanent, stable relationship that in spite of differences, disagreements and impositions would avert the loneliness I had experienced in the past. At twenty-four I had already half lost the hope of finding what I dreamed of.



After I had finished dressing, I sat on the divan to wait as Alvaro prepared for dinner. Alvaro had said nothing else about Catalina, but had retained his secretive air. While I waited, I wondered what I ought to be prepared for.

The apartment was rather small by the standards of our friends in Santiago, when so many owned room upon room. Although it held just two bedrooms, it was furnished and decorated with a great deal of imagination and good taste, with a few antique pieces of furniture including a Renaissance chest with inlaid wood and hidden drawers (no doubt, I thought, crammed full of addresses and phone numbers of the illicit strangers Alvaro had attracted in the past), several Persian rugs, and a variety of old oriental porcelain decorative pieces. Through his antique dealings, Alvaro had traded and now owned a few oil paintings of some value.

One of my personal contributions to the apartment was an elegant portrait in oil of my mother, painted by a good friend, María Vial Prado, who had studied portrait painting in Italy for many years. The portrait held a great deal of sentimental value for me, since it had been painted at my request. My mother had returned by ship from a six-month trip to Europe, visiting

friends in various countries, and I had found her beaming upon her return, coming down the gangplank with a sedulous Italian admirer. It was the most propitious moment to have her portrait painted. The result was a great success because it portrayed my mother in all her mature beauty, elegance and distinction. I knew that when my mother left this world, I would be left with this magnificent reminder of her. Her face in the room always made me feel a bittersweet longing, as I could not, as much as I wanted to, bring myself to tell my mother about the true nature of my bond with Alvaro.

Across the room, I could see only my mother's mouth in her portrait, her lips mysteriously meeting, like those of the Mona Lisa, wise and withholding.



The dinner at Margarita's home evolved in an atmosphere of great friendship. The hostess was separated from an Englishman and enjoyed her own set of friends now. Margarita was a woman of culture, and she knew how to entertain her guests.

Wines were lined on the sideboard beside pungent, melting cheeses, waiting for their course. The vintages flowed freely, and I quickly became aware that I was receiving more wine than anyone else. I insinuated myself into the role of dinner host, and passed and poured wine before anyone could fill my glass.

I caught Alvaro and Catalina exchanging glances.

Alvaro spoke quickly, with too much mirth. "Catalina, darling, tell us about your last trip."

"This season has been richer than any other," she said, lighting a cigarette, breathing in the smoke and holding it dramatically before exhaling it. "They are finally making clothes for real women to wear, which could not be better news."

"Last season's were ghastly," Margarita said cautiously. "Even the formal wear. Who does Christian Dior think we are? Mannequins with fused legs that don't move?"

"When are you going back to the States?" Alvaro asked Catalina.

"Not until I can sell the things I have seen," she said. "Not until I ... have some help. Patricio?"

"Yes?" I knew now that I was trapped.

Margarita made an excuse to go to the kitchen.

I decided instantly to agree to the terms, whatever they might be. Almost as a reflex now, I wanted to keep Alvaro happy. I had been around Alvaro so long, I was learning to think just like my lover. In the grand scheme of things, I understood that I could refuse a favor the second time, but not the first.

"Could you be a dear and listen to me for a moment?" Catalina said. She fingered her gold lighter nervously. "I would never ask this of you, you know, darling, but this time I am in dire straits. All I need is for you to take an hour's time and sign for the shipment. Just a signature."

"Won't they ask—?" I began.

"It has all been taken care of," Alvaro said with some impatience. "I can get you a vehicle big enough to hold the shipment. It couldn't be easier."

"Darling Patricio," Catalina said. "If it were truly hazardous, I would never—"

I raised my hand, as if to wave off my own fears.

A recent flight from Colombia that I had taken had originated in the United States, with a stop in Bogota before reaching Santiago. Alvaro assured me this was justification enough for collecting unaccompanied articles shipped from the US. I promised to do it the following morning and said that once Alvaro had arranged the matter with his friend in customs, I would go and fetch the trunk.

"How do you like your lobster, Patricio?" Catalina asked slyly. "And which champagne?" She put another record on the phonograph and regaled us with plans for a feast, and I was toasted effusively.

Alvaro rubbed the back of my hand, but I felt empty, as if I had

never known an appetite. The din from the record player filled the room. I managed a smile as I watched Alvaro dance close with Catalina, swirling in circles around me.



“Doctor, you are sad?” asked the five-year-old girl who had been flirting with me for the last fifteen minutes.

“No, no, my dear miss,” I said hastily, smiling at the child’s mother.

The little girl nodded at me and looked closer into my eyes. The innocence of her gaze unnerved me, and I felt that she could read my soul.

I laughed half-heartedly and glanced at the clock. It was one PM. The interminable torture of bright morning hours had finally turned to afternoon, and by then I was fraught with anxiety.

On the pretext that I must visit my lawyer, I had changed and canceled patient appointments. I did not even stop to talk to my receptionist as I left.

A large vehicle, big enough to hold a trunk, was just where Alvaro promised it would be in the clinic parking lot. I tapped my hand on the chrome-plated fin. This was really going to happen to me.

I had to be at customs at two PM. I looked at the drawing Alvaro had made for me. It indicated clearly how to reach the enclosure where they kept baggage arriving by air freight. I had studied the paper so many times that lines were lost in the creases from folding and unfolding. I could still back out, but the temptation of excitement I had never before experienced was far greater than just buying a lottery ticket or trying my luck at the green roulette table in the Viña del Mar casino. It was the thrill of the unknown. However, now that the moment had arrived, a wave of panic shuddered through my body, like the feeling one summer when, swimming back toward the beach at Concón, the waves pushed me further and further from shore. When it came to playing the

cards available to me on the way to the airport, my mind and body became sluggish.

I swallowed hard and my chest became light as I reached the steel gate with a small guard's booth. I showed the documents in my name for unaccompanied baggage, and the guard allowed me to proceed. I drove in the direction of the Customs Storage building, parked the vehicle in a space reserved for baggage pickup, and entered the main door. I made a great effort to coordinate my physical movements, and also to push all the negative thoughts into a corner of my mind.

I followed a corridor to a large warehouse-like hall, filled with boxes of various sizes encased in wood strips and held together with metal bands. I turned down the first passage on the right, as Alvaro had directed, and finally reached a desk where a young man, short and with dark skin, was handing papers to an older man. Once the man had thanked the customs agent and said goodbye, I approached the desk and asked:

"Are you Pedro?"

"Yes, I am."

"I am a friend of Alvaro."

"Oh yes, I have been expecting you, Doctor." I could discern no special treatment from this man.

"Give me your shipping papers," the agent said gruffly. "I'll locate your baggage and have someone bring it to the inspection table. You have the keys to open it, don't you?"

Finally, Pedro gazed at me.

"Yes, of course," I stammered.

At this point I felt a knot in my throat and almost lost my voice. What would happen if someone else opened the trunk and, instead of my personal effects, they found it full of women's high-fashion dresses? The few moments that it took Pedro to locate this piece of luggage seemed like centuries for me. Finally, I heard Pedro's voice asking me in a somewhat nervous tone to follow him to the inspection area. He had instructed the porters to deposit the trunk on a table away from the view of the other agents who were

examining other baggage.

Pedro asked me to open the lock on the trunk. I hesitated with a wavering hand. Pedro, with a manual dexterity inherent to his profession, lifted the lid and ran his hands down into the contents in order to create the illusion that he was inspecting the trunk, then closed it a bit hastily and quickly wrote on the papers "Personal Effects," dated them, and stamped them with a customs seal.

At that precise moment, a stocky, bald middle-aged man approached Pedro, greeted him, and asked him if he had received the notice concerning the increase in the amount charged for customs duties. After a few moments I realized by the respectful manner in which Pedro spoke with this man that he was the chief of customs. My blood suddenly ran cold and complete inertia overcame me. To make matters worse, he also noticed a change in the expression on Pedro's face and a tremor in his voice.

"You look tired, Pedro," the chief of customs said.

"I am, Don Manuel. I haven't felt well all day and, actually, I have a splitting headache." All the while this was happening, Don Manuel leaned on the trunk, resting his left arm over it. In his right hand he held a small bundle of official papers.

My world was collapsing around me. The only thing I could think about was how this escapade, so like something that Alvaro would relish and laugh about later, would ruin my professional career. But the shame and humiliation paled next to the penalty.

"If you feel that bad, Pedro, I'll be glad to spot you for the rest of the afternoon. You go on. I'll take care of this gentleman."

"No, no, Don Manuel, I wouldn't think of bothering you. Anyway, I've already gone through this man's baggage. Doctor, I want you to meet Don Manuel Jiménez, chief of customs."

"It's a pleasure meeting you, Doctor. I see that you are arriving from the United States?"

"Yes, via Bogota. I was in Colombia for a few days."

"Look, Pedro," Don Manuel said, "this trunk doesn't seem to be completely closed. I don't see the padlock."

In his nervous haste, Pedro had forgotten to replace the small padlock. In the meanwhile the chief played with the latch on the trunk, saying, "You must have bought a lot of nice things, Doctor, since you had to send this as unaccompanied luggage."

Pedro anxiously waited for Don Manuel to let go of the latch so that he could insert the padlock.

"Yes, I took advantage of the trip to buy as much American clothing as I could since I doubt if I will be able to travel for a long time to come."

"But, Doctor, styles change," Don Manuel added.

"Yes, but the style of men's clothing doesn't change as much as that of women."

How clumsy to have introduced that subject, I told myself.

"I guess you're right, Doctor."

Finally, Don Manuel moved his hand from the trunk and Pedro quickly inserted the padlock and closed it nervously. Don Manuel extended his hand to me, saying:

"Nice to meet you, Doctor."

"The same here," I said, terribly ashamed of my own sweaty hand and fearful that the chief of customs would become suspicious of my extreme nervousness.

The most welcome sight of my life was Don Manuel's back moving toward another table. Pedro's voice calling two porters brought me back to the present. Pedro handed me the pertinent papers and asked me to follow so that I could tell the porters where my vehicle was parked. Still full of fear, I was barely able to murmur "thanks" before Pedro quickly disappeared.

The porters accommodated the trunk in the rented vehicle. I gave each of them a tip, got in the driver's seat and quickly took off. When I reached the steel door of the main entrance, the controller of the gatehouse asked for my papers. I handed them to him through an open window. The official examined them carefully and said, "Sir, the stamp is in order, but the agent forgot to sign the papers. If you like, I can check out your trunk again and sign myself. That way you won't have to go through the whole

procedure again.”

My entire world fell in on me again. I began to perspire. I thought I was going to faint. My habitual slowness to make up my mind produced a long pause. At that point the door of the car that had pulled up just behind me opened and out stepped a short, dark-skinned young man. It was Pedro.

“What’s going on here?” he asked. “Is there a problem?”

I felt warmth in my cheeks.

“You have no idea how happy I am to see you. The guard has just informed me that you forgot to sign the documents,” I said, speaking rapidly, too forcefully.

“I’m really sorry, Doctor,” said Pedro. “With this headache I’m just not myself. That’s why I’m leaving.”

With an understanding smile, the guard handed the papers to Pedro who signed them quickly, excused himself again to me and the guard and said goodbye. Finally I was able to leave with this *risqué* baggage.

Pedro’s car remained behind me on the trip back to the city, until he passed me, just inside the capital boundary.

He motioned for me to pull over and got out of his car.

“What now?” I asked myself.

“You have my envelope?” Pedro asked me. His demeanor had changed. There was no trace of comradeship any longer.

I shook my head, but I guess my wide eyes betrayed the fear that I had barely suppressed all morning.

“Alvaro told me you would have it with you. You were supposed to give it to me first. Or did you forget that, too?”

“Follow me back to the house,” I managed to say with a dry mouth.

The trip back into the city seemed to take forever. I went directly to Catalina’s house where she and Alvaro impatiently waited for me.

I went in first, leaving the agent outside, and demanded that Alvaro take over.

Alvaro smiled and shook his head at me. The coldness I felt in

my face must have betrayed how winded I was from the effort of mastering my fear. With a sweep of his arm, Alvaro cast me aside and went to face the agent. Before the door closed, I saw Pedro stare at Alvaro with disgust, and I wondered how many others felt the same way about Alvaro.

Alvaro returned to the house and tossed the car keys in my face with contempt. I threw them back at him.

"This is your party, Alvaro."

"Boys, boys," Catalina said, barely disguising her glee at seeing the trunk once more.

Alvaro opened the trunk. He pulled out dresses and threw them over the sofa and chairs in Catalina's elegant sitting room, and she, as much as Alvaro, laughed wildly until she suddenly exclaimed: "Alvaro, be careful. Don't get so excited. You're going to ruin them, and I'll have to take it out of your commission."

I felt sad at the scene. The evening, just as Catalina had promised, ended with bottles of champagne, bowls of caviar and tender, buttery lobster. But it failed to end as I had envisioned it, with Alvaro complimenting me on my grit and resolution, and proving his respect by treating me to the culmination of pleasure and affection that we had not enjoyed together for some time.

Catalina, with a face radiating happiness and a slightly distracted voice showing mild effects of alcohol, picked up the telephone, unable to wait.

"Darling," she said, waving her glass as she spoke, "there's a lovely Bonnie Cashin with a very low neck line that will look wonderful on you. Your husband will fall down at your feet, oh yes."

Chapter II

Alvaro had become accustomed to taking little trips to Lima, Perú, and other cities under the guise of buying merchandise for the antique store. The expenses of these trips always exceeded the funds invested in objects for sale, and I knew this trip would be no different. In accompanying him, I rationalized the trip as an excuse to attend a meeting at a Latin American pediatrics conference.

But I, too, sought something else. Away from my hectic work in Santiago, I could enjoy the approach to life that Alvaro took and that I craved, through the world of the arts, through the glory of discovering and procuring antiques and antiquities.

At the end of our first day in Lima, I returned to the hotel, intellectually spent. The first few scientific sessions were of interest, but by morning break, my soul ached to be out strolling in the streets of Lima with Alvaro. I never thought that practicing medicine would be a permanent vocation, but my family looked down on a profession in the arts as Bohemian, something none of them could tolerate in one of their own.

I remembered the morning that sealed my fate. The subject of my unclear future was like an elephant in the room, yet my mother and brother-in-law had not pushed anything upon me.

Finally, the latter broke the silence in the huge dining room: “Patricio, because of your natural inquisitiveness and tastes for intellectual pursuits, I am pleased to say that I have arranged for a final interview for you at the university. Because of your parents’ separation and the lack of a father figure in your formative years, I like to think of myself as a kind of guide for your education. Perhaps, at least I would like to think so—” he cleared his throat of his immodesty— “I have been an inspiration for you in some

respects. And I know that you would make a fine professional man in your own right.”

Without discussion, my future was sealed.



In our hotel room, Alvaro had risen early enough to see me off to another day of the scientific convention. He lay in bed, whistling.

“What is it?” I asked, envious of my friend’s freedom to roam the city.

“A surprise, a surprise tonight,” he said. “You will love it.”

I did not doubt my friend: life with Alvaro was a feast. The restaurants and bars that Alvaro frequented were always of the highest category, and he ate as he chose from extensive menus without a thought about the bill. He was unbelievably impatient when it came to receiving attention from waiters and servants. If they didn’t attend to him immediately after being seated at a table, he simply rose and abandoned the establishment with a marked air of indignation. I always feared these ridiculous scenes, which mortified my patient nature.

Now that another day in Lima had passed in a blur of technical posters and fuzzy slides with lots of numbers, I sought refuge with Alvaro in a world where beauty and refinement mingled with the inevitable characters that Alvaro attracted.

Tonight, I had the rare feeling that I did not care what became of me. A surprise from Alvaro on the way? So what? Too little, too late.

Yet in my secret heart, I had begun to believe that Alvaro would surprise me with an arranged passage to Europe for the two of us, and the thought made me alternately happy and anxious, because I had begun to think of Europe as the only place left where I could escape from my entire life. Recently Alvaro had been weighing whether to take a position in Venezuela, where his American brother-in-law had a great deal of influence. But Venezuela, as progressive

as it was, held little appeal for me. Through bloodlines and inherited tales, I knew that Europe was the best place for myself.

Years later, when I recalled this trip to Lima, I would understand that this evening's recklessness was my salvation.

I washed up, put on fresh clothes and splashed over my face some cologne I had bought in a boutique down the avenue from our hotel.

I knew exactly what dinner would bring—another bill to be paid. If Alvaro lacked sufficient money, his favorite tactic was to invite his friends to dinner, or myself alone. At the last moment, Alvaro would reveal, feigning convincing astonishment, that he did not have any cash on hand and that the payment made by his friends (or me) was just a loan that he would repay. He did it with such grace and display of generosity that his victims, including myself, usually fell plainly into his trap.

Alvaro's victims had begun to decline his "generous" invitations, in Santiago anyway. I had become the last of Alvaro's big spenders in Chile. Cynically, I thought perhaps that Alvaro's potential move to Venezuela, or this trip to Lima, marked ways to find a group of friends who were not yet wise to his tricks.



Dinner was a particularly delicious steak marinated in a sauce of limes and peppers. The wine was excellent and slightly earthy, and I gladly paid for the experience. Alvaro was delightful, on his best behavior, buoyed by lightheartedness and by lots of wine.

"Let's go back to the room," I said, suddenly ardent.

"But you never listen to me," Alvaro erupted. "I told you that tonight, we are—"

"Yes, yes. The surprise. You keep mentioning a surprise," I said. "I don't need a surprise. I don't want one." I patted my hair down on my head, impatiently.

Alvaro, placid in his chair, pursed his lips, as if delivering a quiet kiss.



As I pulled out my wallet and paid the cab driver, Alvaro leaned forward and hesitated, fumbling for a wallet that was safely ensconced. We were miles from the hotel, it seemed, in a garishly lit part of town.

Stepping from the cab, I felt I had landed in a feeble attempt at a Moulin Rouge, where the red and blue lights spelled artificial mirth rather than entertainment.

"It's time," Alvaro said.

"Listen to me, Alvaro," I said, but Alvaro had rounded a corner. I caught up to him as he knocked on a door at what appeared to be a boardinghouse.

In Lima, Alvaro surrounded himself with a small court of gays, among whom was a fervent admirer of Alvaro's, whose ugly physical appearance was coupled with an exuberant and festive personality.

He let us in and kissed both of our cheeks, exuding a sharp body odor that disgusted me. Tinkling strains of lively music made their way to the entrance hall and enhanced the cheapness that had fallen over our evening.

It was not a boarding house but someone's home. The main room was packed with gewgaws: statuettes of animals, small vases with dyed flowers, woven baskets, obscene plastic figurines. The room looked like a junk shop.

The air hung with a blue pall of cigarette smoke. A pan clattered to the floor in the rear of the house and laughter erupted. Other voices rushed to quiet the din, but the laughing continued.

I wished to rest: my morning had begun before six o'clock. I waved Alvaro away into the back room and sank into a divan. I almost relished the moment of solitude, even though the tawdry flowered divan tilted on a broken foot. A sculpture on the coffee table—a bust of a churlish young man—caught my imagination, and I picked it up to read what I could discern about the artist who crafted it.

A hand grabbed my shoulder suddenly. The bust clattered onto the glass table. I whirled my head. The hand held my shoulder more tightly. Here was Alvaro's admirer, even more taken with me. Now this unknown man's hand caressed my shoulder, and although I ignored him, the man did not stop.

"Where's Alvaro?" I asked, with false concern, as he stood up abruptly, breaking the contact.

I hurried through a dining room back into the kitchen, where I found Alvaro nude, thrusting and writhing with three other men. Warm body odors emanating from sweating skin permeated the close air of the small room. I recoiled, and from behind, my ugly pursuer fumbled for my zipper.

Alvaro pursed his lips and opened his eyes wide, commanding me to relax with something like a smile. He brushed his hand over his chest as he stared at me, then collapsed onto the pile of bodies.

I whirled and ran, knocking over the coffee table in my haste to get away. I exploded out the door into the street and bent over with my hands on my knees in an effort to catch my breath in the silence of the street. The oily puddles beside the curb reflected the garish neon colored lights, disgusting me all the more.

Without so much as a toothbrush in my pocket, I checked into a different hotel. I slept like the dead until morning and awoke grateful for the stupor that sleep had provided. My state of mind became as volatile as the weather.

I was sick of all this, sick of what my life had become. When had I lost the privilege to stand firm and make my own decisions with regard to my future, to make selfish choices that would make me happy and fulfilled without the threat or even an inkling of intimidation from Alvaro. Didn't I deserve the right to make my own mistakes, to stumble, recover and feel the satisfaction that can be felt only in one's triumphs? Sometimes I felt as if I had been left in the past because of my emptiness in the present, and I knew only too well that the future would lead me down a road of changes.

Yet I was optimistic and vital too, and this helped me to compensate for the low tides I was assaulted with on many occasions. I could hurtle from the depths of a mine to the highest peaks of a mountain. This reflected no instability, I thought, but rather my emotional character: although some events touched me deeply, painfully, at the same time they could push me forward to fight with all the strength that had never abandoned me.

In this moment of isolation, I remembered the profound solitude within my intimate self when, at an early age, I had realized I was deeply attracted toward my most handsome schoolmates. I had firmly believed I was the only defective mold, so to speak, of the entire human race. I felt alone, dejected, not understood, like a frozen iceberg surrounded by barren cold waters, or one of those small, tiny uninhabited islands in the southern archipelago of Chile close to the strait of Magellan, lost forever in the eternity of time. Would I ever have the courage to reach out of that tiny clinching circle to survive a certain death in the cold waters that seemed to surround me at that early period of my life? I panicked at the thought of being condemned to remain a prisoner inside tightly fitting armor and subjected to a slow, painful death. I jealously hid my true inner soul along the tortured and twisted path to puberty.

Then one day, a classmate at the boarding school looked at me with big, brilliant and ardent eyes. We were studying together in a lonely stairway that led to a storage attic in a faraway building of the school campus, trying to concentrate while preparing for our oncoming history exam.

When we reached this secluded place, I became fully aware of my friend's eyes filled with lust. Suddenly everything came to a standstill, as if the earth, suspended in the universe, had come to a halt in its journey around the sun. My classmate stared avidly at me, and I could not help but notice a bulge in the upper part of his trousers. I was fascinated with what I saw. My young classmate took one of my hands and guided it to the fullness of his erect penis. I felt an intense warmth in my face. Surely I had to be

blushing. My sensuality had been totally aroused by the mysteries that were finally going to be revealed to me in their crude reality.

My classmate, stronger than me, practically dragged me into a little area to one side of the stairs where we had been sitting. Lying on my back, I succumbed to the heavy weight of my friend's body lying over me. We embraced in a frenzy, and although fully clothed, felt our hard rods rubbing against each other in ecstasy. While our penises collided beneath our trousers, we rubbed our bodies together frantically until the magical delight of simultaneous orgasms erupted.

Exhilaration and joy had accompanied this first awakening into the world of sex. No shame attached to the experience that I had long desired in my wildest imagination. Why could I not return to that time when I had learned to hope for a world more understanding, full of more mysteries to be discovered? I thought again of the humiliations and disappointments in which my life with Alvaro had trapped me. I was determined to endure that trap no longer.

The confrontation I had dreaded, I now welcomed. Without checking out of my new hotel, I took a cab ride, and went over all of the things I had to tell Alvaro. I steeled myself for more dodges and attempts at reconciliation and told myself to be strong.

Chapter III

The room was deserted. Alvaro had not come back. With a heavy heart, I dressed in a fresh suit, pulled my tie in a final knot, packed and checked out with my belongings.

Alvaro had made no attempt to contact me through the scientific convention that morning. During breaks between sessions at my meeting, I found myself beside the telephone with a receiver shaking in my hand, but I steadfastly refused to call Alvaro.

By the end of the luncheon seminar, I had so much nervous energy that I called Miguel de Navea, a writer and history professor friend of a mutual acquaintance in Santiago, who suggested that we meet at the catacomb-like tunnels that ran beneath the city, preserved as a bleak reminder of the Inquisition's brutality. I was grateful for any diversion and left the meeting on the spot.

Within the hour, we met at the catacombs beneath the sixteenth-century cathedral, which exhibited not only the actual bones of monks, but also a number of mannequins depicting in detail the gruesome tortures inflicted upon the infidels by the Inquisition, and their horrible delivery unto death. I felt faint, horrified that men could do this to one another in the name of a just God. I gripped the wall. My fingers brushed a musty bone in the recess, and I wanted to run out into the light, run out of my skin, run from everything I had ever known.

Miguel did not notice a thing. He kept walking and explained to me that after death, the infidels' bodies were burned to prevent their souls from reaching heaven and to prevent their resurrection on the day of the final judgment.

"Can I please have some water?" I asked, fearing that I would pass out.

"Sure," said the writer, perturbed that his lecture had been

interrupted. We emerged into the light and I immediately felt better.

Miguel suggested we visit the anthropological museum. Again, I felt myself floating along a current of evil and ignorance as I looked at the mummies and images of gods worshiped by pre-Inca cultures. My entire world was caving in: my profession no longer interested me, my lover was faithless and presumptuous, I dwelt in a small apartment with a virtual stranger, and my sexual preference was condemned by nearly everyone I loved. The cumulative weight of my dismay crushed me and I bowed my head.

Without pause Miguel blithely explained the purposes of the dozens of artifacts used by the indigenous cultures.

"This tribe had a genius for various textiles," Miguel droned, deep inside his pedantry.

In agony about how to shed Alvaro from my life, I could not even be grateful for this interlude. I wanted to be in a quiet place alone to ponder my limbo. The more Miguel de Navea lectured about indigenous cultures, the more I retreated into the depths of my memory, searching for clues about how a life that had a week ago seemed intact could have become such a prison.

As Miguel de Navea's voice murmured, I clung to a sudden beam of hope and began to savor the thought that the unknown awaited me. Gradually, I was buoyed by optimism and a sense of wellbeing. As the image of Alvaro floated into my consciousness, the man who had brought me to Lima for his own egotistical, sexual and financial benefit, any guilt I felt was excised by the excitement of liberation. There would be freedom.

Without further effort to camouflage my lack of interest, I feigned a terrible headache and asked the professor to drive me back to the hotel in his car. That evening, I slept soundly and awoke refreshed. Although I could not remember the details of my dream, I sensed that it had been amusing, a good omen for the day.



That morning at the Hotel Bolívar facing the Plaza San Martín, I got into the elevator on my way to the dining room for breakfast. At the third floor, a rather tall, thin man got in. He was elegantly dressed in a three-piece suit, unusual for that early hour. He had short brown hair parted to one side and combed to the back. His face was slightly tanned, and his hands were powerful (I have an attraction to hands that borders on fetishism), masculine, with impeccably groomed fingernails.

With shyness typical of my youth, I did not dare to look at the man directly in his eyes. Instead I pretended to study the panel showing the floor levels. Nevertheless, I felt a strong and persistent power radiating from this person's being—so intense in fact that finally I could no longer avoid the temptation and, gathering up all of my courage, I raised my eyes.

The stranger pierced me with penetrating, large hawk-like eyes, which at the same time reflected benevolent complacency. They glowed with an extraordinary brightness and seemed to say things that I had lived to this moment to hear.

I had never experienced such intense scrutiny of my person and felt a warm wave flush over my face. I lowered my eyes and looked at the elevator floor, as if thinking, but I was unable to make sense of anything.

At the lobby level, the elevator door opened and the stranger waited for me to exit first. As I walked in the direction of the dining room, I heard the unmistakable steps just behind me. My elevator companion was so close to me that when we reached the dining room, the *maître d'hôtel* asked if we wanted a table for two.

"Only one," I said too quickly, in a hoarse voice.

Upon being seated, I again felt a vibrant wave of warmth flush my face. I was being watched. While I slowly drank my orange juice, I heard the man ask for a French newspaper and coffee with toast. I continued to slowly sip my coffee accompanied by

small pieces of dark toast that I carefully cut and spread with butter and marmalade.

All the while the stranger continued to send furtive but intense glances toward me. When I signed the bill, my elevator companion immediately called for his check.

As I walked along the corridor leading to the hotel reception area, I again heard the familiar footsteps that had followed me from the elevator to the dining room. Suddenly, the earlier images from inside the elevator overcame me—the man's entrance, his attentive eyes, his shoes, his suit, his gorgeously groomed hands. I turned and bolted through the main hotel door.

Almost angry at my habitual shyness, I fell into my customary calm cadence toward the Plaza San Martín. Perú and the city of Lima were new territories for me, a completely new and delectable experience. I began to relax and laugh at myself for my fear of the unknown, for the tricks of my imagination.

Not a moment later I thought I heard the same footsteps following me. This time they were quicker and stronger, almost like a crescendo of castanets as they approached. My heart beat faster and a wave of intense curiosity engulfed me.

I was overtaken. A nervous, trembling voice asked:

"Parlez-vous français?"

"Oui," I said, also showing a slight nervousness in my voice, *"pas très bien."* I defiantly stared into the man's eyes. *"Mais je crois je peux me débrouiller—I think I can manage."*

Monsieur X gave me a candid smile and we both began to relax. The Frenchman seemed to be about fifteen years older than I. His facial features were not fine, but they were strong, with an attractive aquiline nose, red, sensual lips, rosy cheeks, thick, dark eyebrows, and those incandescent and extremely expressive eyes that seemed to speak.

With my extreme sensitivity to this kind of unuttered message, I knew my face and neck must have been visibly red, not only from shyness but also from curiosity.

"Do you mind if I walk with you?" the stranger asked. His clear,

youthful voice impressed me, and I welcomed more familiarity.

“Not at all,” I replied, suddenly confident in the bright day.

The Frenchman seemed greatly relieved with these words, and took the lead in the conversation, which started as a tour through Lima’s streets.

We walked for nearly an hour around the Plaza, birds scattering from our feet as we passed. I spoke animatedly about everything that came to mind, unabashedly waxing philosophical to this stranger.

“I shall never forget,” I said, “how shocked I was when I saw the mannequins at the museum, the tortures inflicted upon the infidels.”

“Thousands were judged and condemned,” said the Frenchman simply.

“In the name of God,” I said, with a bitter chuckle. “Since then, I have been asking myself why God, in his supposedly infinite mercy, could stand by as people were murdered for refusing to abide by certain laws.”

The Frenchman, in sympathetic excitement, said, “You mustn’t forget that violence under the flag of faith goes back to antiquity. In the eighth century Charlemagne invaded Spain in hopes of driving the Saracens from Europe—all for the greater glory of God—and during the First Crusade, toward the end of the eleventh century, untold atrocities were committed in Jesus’ name trying to expel the infidel Arabs from the Holy Land. And what about the expulsion of the Jews and Arabs from Spain by the very exponents of holiness, the supreme Catholic monarchs, Queen Isabel and King Ferdinand? This so called cleansing even extended to the New World in the form of an over-all backlash against the native infidel tribes after Christopher Columbus’ discovery of America.” He rubbed his chin with an elegant thumb and finger.

In that moment, all I could think about was Monsieur X with those penetrating, inquisitive eyes filled with caressing lust, the inflection of his voice, his suave manner of speech and the way he

carried his masculine body, his head high.

“As you can see,” Monsieur X continued, “when it comes to violence, faith in God doesn’t stop anyone.”

“And why—?” I stopped myself.

“Go on.”

“We could ask ourselves why the Christian world condemns homosexuality,” I said rapidly, “saying it is *contra natura*, when the Bible teaches that mankind has been created in God’s image. What would then be God’s reason for creating men and women beyond the limits of his own precepts? Is it possible that we are dealing with precepts actually fabricated by lay people, reflecting their own prejudices?”

The Frenchman listened intently and indicated he did not wish to lose the vein of conversation. “You’re very wise,” was all he said to me.

I grew suddenly quiet, embarrassed about talking so much, about straying onto a subject that I knew interested both of us. I wanted to touch the Frenchman, take his arm, talk even more.

We walked in silence for a few steps. The Frenchman stopped and said, “I think that the Catholic religion may be at the edge of decline in influence. Religions that didn’t evolve with the changes of their era ended up completely disappearing.”

I felt my spirit was becoming one with this man’s soul, and I put my hand to my mouth in surprise.

As we walked, I erupted in spontaneous candor about my confined and circumscribed life in Santiago, and all of the social taboos of a relatively small country that was extremely conservative because of the letter of religion. Nevertheless, I felt privileged in the sense that I did not feel bound by what the church prohibited.

Each time I spoke, I sensed the Frenchman becoming more and more charmed by my command of the French language. I could sense his receptiveness through gestures made by his lips and his eyes. Likewise, I fervently wanted to engulf myself in this man of Europe, the land of my ancestors, the place that held my

hope of freedom. I made an effort to capture the inflection of the Frenchman's voice, the expression of his lively eyes, the gesturing of his arms and hands, the movement of his lips when he spoke and the manly cadence when he walked, so that I could remember them later, going over every detail of our exciting encounter at my leisure.

The stranger spoke about his life in France, his business affairs and his nation's culture, which I prized and desired. With trepidation, Monsieur X finally looked at his watch.

"I have to make my business meeting," he said.

His stay in Lima was part of a huge project his company had with the government of Perú. He asked me if we could have dinner together that evening in order to continue our conversation. I accepted without wavering.

"I will wait for you at nine in the hotel lobby near the main entrance," the Frenchman said. He firmly shook my hand. At the same time, he seemed to envelop my body with those powerful eyes that made me feel as if the entire surface of my skin were being caressed.

My heart beat faster again, just as it had done when I heard the Frenchman's steps following me from the hotel to the Plaza San Martín. I returned to my room trailing my emotions and lay on my bed, hoping to abolish the mad images my longing created. Who could I talk to, what could I do? I asked myself. Ahead of me was the longest day of my life. It was only 10:30 in the morning.



I decided to call Eloísa de Cañizares, a prominent figure in Limeña society, as well as a promoter and benefactress of various cultural institutions.

"My cousin's friend, Alvaro, has told me a great many nice things about you. I was hoping we might meet. Where is he?"

I cleared my throat, and mercifully, the voluble Eloísa continued. "We must meet so that I can show you some of the

sights of Lima.”

“Could you possibly lunch with me today?” I asked abruptly.

She surprised me with her willingness. “Yes, I would love to, but you must come here,” she said.

The lunch was set for 1:30. I lay back on my hotel bed without moving. Delectably and lethargically, I went over the conversation of the morning, trying to read between the lines.



Señora de Cañizares’ house was truly a palace, filled with English period furniture in the Chippendale and Queen Anne styles, Persian rugs and colonial paintings. A servant guided me to the sitting room where two interesting ancestral paintings of the Cañizares family hung in enormous hand-carved, gilded frames. Eloísa rose from the sofa where she had been reading a fashion magazine. She was much younger than I had imagined; tall with a dark complexion, an hourglass figure and extremely fine features. She wore a stunning white dress with a simple string of pearls resting on her considerable bust line. She was undoubtedly what another man would consider to be a sensual, life-loving woman.

“This is extremely generous of you, Señora de Cañizares.”

“Not at all. It’s the least I can do,” she said, resting a manicured hand on my arm. “It will be a pleasure for me to tell you a bit about this old city.”

At that moment the servant entered the room with a tray holding two crystal glasses filled with cocktails.

“Do you like Pisco? It’s the classic drink of my country.”

“Yes, I love it. We drink it in Chile,” I said, suddenly agitated. I had to stop myself from being rude, but I did not want to be with this woman, the luncheon was a mistake. I just wanted to be alone.

“Well, if you haven’t seen it, you must head over to the Museum of Cuzqueño Paintings—there’s one I just adore, and some say the woman looks just like me, only she has eyes the color of sea

water, and mine, as you see, are deep brown. Anyway ...” She prattled on. And on.

I was a little surprised that Señora de Cañizares had no other invited guests for lunch, but on the other hand it was not uncommon in aristocratic circles to get to know a person recommended by a mutual friend before mixing them with other people. The visit moved along pleasantly enough despite my moodiness, and she naturally shared private episodes from her life. I found that people often told those of us with a scientific background much more than they should, things far beyond the realm of medical complaints.

Doña Eloísa had been separated from her husband, because divorce did not exist in South American countries at that time. She had no children and her mother had just died. Her father was long dead, but she was surrounded by siblings and their offspring.

We enjoyed an exquisite lunch of several dishes, including ceviche. The raw fish marinated in spices and lemon juice was typical of Perú in its delicate flavors. Doña Eloísa and I went into the sitting room to have coffee. Her interest in me appeared to be authentic, apparently impressed that my manners complied with those of her circle. When I had heard enough about her family, I politely guided the conversation back to art and my love of oil paintings.

“I have one that is earmarked for the University of San Marcos—did I tell you that it is the oldest University in South America? Yes, 1551, my dear,” she said, and hesitated because of her own familiarity with me. She lowered her eyes and looked back at me with what she hoped would be innocence. “The painting is upstairs.”

As we ascended, with me behind my hostess, I noticed a change in her walk, a slow and deliberate flexing of her hips as they swayed from side to side.

At the top of the stairs, she gestured toward a portrait of a family member. On close examination, I could see that the eyes were painted without effort, too hurriedly.

Doña Eloísa's breath warmed my neck. I turned sharply. In mock surprise, my hostess pressed her delicate fingers into her considerable décolletage and cocked an eyebrow at me.

I looked at this comical woman with a certain gravity, so that I would not laugh. She mistook my seriousness for lust and placed her hands on my shoulders, pulling me toward her. Our lips met, and for a moment, I gave myself permission to do whatever she wanted, to follow this ridiculous scene through. I wanted to know that I could feel something for a woman, that I would not be isolated completely from the female sex, that I could be what others considered normal—that heterosexuality was not so different from what I sought.

Her huge breasts flattened weightily against my ribs and I held her more tightly. With clinical detachment, I allowed myself to be kissed by her furiously active, hungry lips. Yet I could at best pretend that her plump lips, her mouth, were those of the Frenchman. Soon my imagination faltered.

To remain polite, I returned the kiss as efficiently and briskly as I could without insulting my hostess. I decided that compassion would be kindest.

"My dear Doña Eloísa—"

"Don't say a thing," she said. "I had no business doing this—oh, if Eduardo—he's the estranged husband of my friend—oh, never mind—if he knew I was here in your arms he would kill us both. But Lord forgive me, I could not stop. I am sorry. Now you must go. We shall never speak of this, but did you like the painting?" She stood back and admired the work inside one of the gaudiest frames I had ever seen.



Outside once more, I couldn't bear the idea of waiting in the hotel until the hour of my rendezvous with the Frenchman. Instead I strolled for hours along the streets of downtown Lima, entering here and there the various shops along the way, some of which

sold only the most vulgar tourist souvenirs. Other establishments were dedicated to antiques and antiquities such as pre-Columbian textile remnants, Cuzqueño paintings and elaborate frames from the colonial period, encasing mirrors in which I could not resist looking, searching my own face for my fate.

Chapter IV

That evening, I lay in the ample bathtub and went over in my mind, step by step, everything that had happened that morning. My well-developed visual memory allowed me to recall each gesture, each movement of the Frenchman's hands, the lines of his body, his smile, those extraordinary, powerful eyes that seemed to speak more than see, as well as the smoothness and gentleness of his actions. The refinement of his dress, movements and speech contrasted to the powerful masculinity he portrayed on the outside, especially when he spoke about his business.

I asked myself just what kind of past life this magnificent human specimen had had. The thought of the man's apparent perfection evoked a warmth and longing that I had never known.

"Could he be a romantic like me, or is he looking for a one-night stand in a foreign country? God, I want to immerse myself in another human being's life. That is all I want."

I wondered if my wish for merging was an unattainable hedonism, as in the fable of Narcissus, who spent himself in dreaming hours for the love of his own face.

What a stupid and unwarranted dream, submerging myself in a make-believe world of Scheherazade over a casual encounter with a perfect stranger, I told myself with stern resolution, collapsing just as quickly back into reverie, then anguish. But why not? Oh God, why is it all condemned? Am I the product of some extraterrestrial experiment? Some adjustment for population control? An illusion? Why am I attracted to men instead of loving women?"

I stood up suddenly in the bath. A tremor of delight engulfed me when I looked at the clock. Eight-thirty.

What difference does it make? I said to myself sternly.

In any case I would have to return to Santiago and face the realities of my profession, my lover, and my family. I wished I could confide in my beloved mamá. I felt so close to her, but my private life was a chapter that she was not prepared to comprehend.

I dressed in my best three-piece evening suit, dark grey with stripes. My shirt was white with a garnet red tie covered with tiny blue circles. I looked at myself in the long mirror inside the door closet, and my slender figure made me remember Alvaro saying I still looked almost like an adolescent. I knew that my facial features reflected my mother's Germanic origins, with eyes that were dark blue and dreamy, white skin, prominent eyebrows that arched, moist red lips, neither too thick nor too thin and, as mother often said, a golden smile. I held my face in my hands as I wished to have it held.

It was nine o'clock.



The expression of anxiety on Monsieur X's face quickly changed to one that illuminated his countenance as I approached. The Frenchman walked to greet me halfway.

"What a pleasure it is to see you, my friend. I'm going to confess that looking forward to this moment has made for a very long day. I was a bit indifferent at my business meeting."

"Well, something similar happened to me," I said. "A woman caused me to act a bit indifferently."

Both of us broke into hearty laughter.

"I think that it is time we called each other by our first names and dropped the formalities. What is yours?"

"Patricio, and yours?"

"Jacques."

I thrilled to the sound of the man's name, which conjured everything French. Jacques' steps were firm and strong. I had to make an effort to stay beside him. An eighteenth-century building housed the restaurant where Jacques suggested we dine, with

huge wooden doors leading to a large cobblestone patio, done in a checkerboard pattern with channels between the squares. Inside, the floors were of antique blue and cream-colored tiles, and the walls were hung with oil paintings of the colonial period. All of the furniture belonged to the same era, and it was arranged in an inviting way, with the tables spaced far enough apart to assure privacy.

Jacques asked for a table for two in a slightly out of the way corner of the main dining room.

"You certainly look well in that dark grey suit," Jacques said as he gazed directly into my eyes, awaiting my reaction.

"Thank you. You look nice yourself."

A waiter approached and asked if we would like an aperitif.

"Have you tried a Pisco?" Jacques inquired. "The Peruvian cocktail?"

"I had one today, but it is also popular in Chile, my home. I like Pisco Sours, don't you?"

Jacques gestured robustly to the waiter. "Yes, wonderful, bring two Pisco Sours for the gentleman and myself."

The evening transpired quickly over the excellent dishes typical of Lima, with soft background music and the murmur of the diners who, by the end of the night, had filled nearly all the tables.

Both Jacques and I stayed on general subjects—our lives, likes, countries—and even though our gaze was intense as we conversed, we maintained enormous decorum, always aware of being in a public place.

"Do you know anyone in Lima?" Jacques asked.

"Almost no one, and the few I know are virtual strangers. This is my first trip to Perú. How about you?"

"Only business contacts, and believe me, it's not easy to deal with them because of all their idiosyncrasies. I can already see this trip being prolonged longer than I had originally anticipated. And you, Patricio, how long will you be in Lima?"

"I have to return to Santiago in two days."

“So soon?”

“Yes, my job—” I began and suddenly interrupted myself. “Oh, isn’t that nice! They are playing ‘La Flor de la Canela’—cinnamon flower. I really love this song. I don’t know if you know it, but it tells about colonial times when luxurious carriages drawn by handsome horses would take the Limeña aristocracy on the traditional promenade through the Alameda Park. That reminds me of the story of the Marquis d’Amat y Juliet, Viceroy of Perú, who as an old man used to promenade in the Alameda with his twenty-year-old mistress, an actress of great beauty who was a *mestiza*, of mixed Indian and Spanish blood.”

“I love the melody,” said Jacques, “and I like it even more now that you have told me that story, about the older man out with his prize.”

He looked toward me in all seriousness, so I decided not to tell the rest of the story, that the Marquis at times became terribly frustrated in his relationship with her. It was then that he would call her Perri-Choliwith, his Catalán word for “mestiza-bitch.”



When the bill arrived, Jacques insisted on paying.

“No, no, it was my suggestion and invitation, and it has truly meant more to me than you can imagine,” Jacques said as he gave me a look filled with tenderness and desire.

“Well, the next one will be my invitation,” and I added, “if you like the idea.”

“Nothing would give me more pleasure.”

“Then, what about tomorrow?”

Jacques quickly accepted. “Same time, same place?”

“Fine,” I said. “Thank you for a wonderful dinner in this charming place.” I paused a moment and searched Jacques’ eyes. “And for your fabulous company.”

“Come, come”, said Jacques in a lively tone that I had not heard until now. “The night has just begun.”



The streets were nearly deserted. A car or two went by and the air was fresh and dry, even though the temperature was slightly on the warm side.

This time Jacques accelerated his pace as if he urgently needed to reach the hotel. I had to make an effort to keep up with my companion.

As the hotel came into view, Jacques, without looking at me, spoke in a low tone of voice.

“Come to my room.” His voice almost begged. “I have champagne.”

I looked at Jacques, and an emotion of perfect, sympathetic comprehension arose in me. I felt a hot wave extend over my whole body and my heart rate rose to such a high that it left me nearly breathless.

Jacques watched me with an air of doubt.

“I love champagne,” I simply said.

Nervously, the two of us got into an elevator. Instead of turning his key in at the reception earlier, Jacques had kept it in his jacket pocket. This, combined with the advance preparation of the champagne, gave me the idea that the entire evening was being orchestrated. I was immensely flattered. Yet I continued to tell myself that this would be nothing more than a clandestine escapade for the two of us. After tomorrow, after Lima, I would hear nothing more from Jacques.

Jacques’ room was like mine, with a rather large balcony facing the lights of the Plaza San Martín. Along one wall was a sofa upholstered in bright colors and a coffee table in front of it. The champagne was on a small round table in a silver container filled with ice. Jacques asked me to be seated on the sofa and immediately opened the bottle of champagne. He showed me the label, indicating that it was his favorite French champagne, and that the hotel had to obtain it especially for him from an importer.

I almost started to say that he should not have gone to so much trouble, when Jacques said, "I've been drinking it for the past few weeks here. My stay in Lima has been somewhat held over."

I felt relieved not to have made a faux pas.

Jacques poured the champagne in two crystal glasses, offered one to me and sat down beside me on the sofa, saying, "To your health. And to a wonderful chance meeting."

"And to yours."

Jacques and I sipped the champagne with pleasure.

"It's really excellent. You have wonderful taste."

Jacques laughed and coughed into his hand. His eyes became coy. "If following you and concocting this meeting signifies good taste, then you're right, I have it," Jacques quickly added with a sly little smile. "In truth, I only requested this champagne tonight. Just for you."

"Thank you. You are very generous."

Jacques set his glass down on the table and moved closer to me, took the knot of my tie in his hands and, loosening it, said:

"Soon this champagne is going to make you feel uncomfortable with a tie around your neck. Why don't you let me take it off for you and unbutton your shirt at the top?"

I consented without saying a word. Jacques did the same with his own tie and shirt and then poured more champagne into our glasses.

"You feel better, isn't that true?" Jacques said.

"Yes, you're right, I do feel more comfortable. In fact, I have never felt more comfortable."

Jacques again placed his glass on the table and, without hesitating, took my free hand in his.

"You have nice, soft white hands, but they also show strength and determination."

I didn't move and allowed my hand to languish between Jacques', which radiated heat.

"And yours are firm, strong and warm," I said, leaving my glass on the table and placing my other hand over Jacques'.

Jacques came nearer, let go of my hands and gave me a strong embrace.

“Patricio, give me your jacket.”

Jacques helped me then took off his own and left them both over a chair. With my dark vest, I thought I looked like a Flamenco dancer. Jacques was the matador. Suddenly I felt the warmth of a hand firmly grasping my waist and Jacques’ excited breath next to my face.

I closed my eyes and felt the welcome contact of those lips, the set of lips I had craved in the morning, caressing mine. Just the pressure of Jacques’ lips, and then, after an interval of absolute pleasure, the pressure of Jacques’ body against mine, holding me close.

Jacques’ voice whispered, “I feel something for you that I have never felt in my life. *Je t’aime, mon cher, c’est ça, je t’aime.* I want to feel my skin against yours.”

Jacques moved away just enough to start unbuttoning my vest. Without speaking, I took off the remainder of my clothing while Jacques hurriedly did the same.

Jacques pulled back the blankets on the bed and picked up my naked body in his strong, muscular arms. The Frenchman delicately laid me on the sheets, almost without making a sound, as if he were afraid that something or someone might disturb this happy moment.

My body happily molded and adjusted itself to all of Jacques’ wishes and commands. At the beginning, it was a sweet and gentle ecstasy. It soon turned into a fire that seemed never to extinguish, gradually flaming to a volcano of physicality and emotion, a mixture of tender rapture, a perfect communion of instincts and desires. Jacques and I lost ourselves as we melded together and strove to become one.



It took me a few seconds to realize that I was not in my own

room and that the back, the neck, the hair on the head next to me was not Alvaro's. I grabbed the clock over the nightstand and saw that it was 3:10 in the morning.

"Jacques, I've got to go to my own room."

"I know." He hesitated and pulled himself up on an elbow and placed his palm on my shoulder. "If it were in my power, I wouldn't ever let you go."

"When the morning comes, Jacques, it's just possible that you will feel differently."

"You don't understand, do you?" Jacques sat up in bed and held my arm, stroked it.

I felt an extreme internal pleasure, and in spite of physical fatigue, my mind was flooded with a sensation of well-being and peace that I didn't recall having ever had. I wanted this moment forever and felt wild and desperate. I barely heard Jacques whisper, "*Vraiment, je t'aime*, Patricio—today, tomorrow, always."



I noticed from the big wall clock that it would soon be nine. Slowly I walked to the place where we were to meet by the main door.

Jacques wasn't there yet. I amused myself by watching the people as they came and went, mostly married couples, few with much to say to one another. One vivacious woman kissed her companion on the ear, but for the most part, people milled through the lobby quietly and soberly.

Five minutes past nine and still no Jacques. Strange. The day before it had been Jacques who was waiting for me. Something must have held him up. By 9:10 I felt very unsettled and began to think that I had been right about my previous speculations. For Jacques, all of this had been nothing more than a one-night stand. An untiring Don Juan, he was probably already on his way back to France.

Nine-fifteen. I saw the hands on my watch and became

extremely melancholic. I blamed myself for having been so naïve.

I tried to tell myself this was not meant to be, that I should be more circumspect in the future. The thought of Alvaro flickered through my mind, Alvaro, who had been unfaithful to me on numerous occasions. The memory of Alvaro, lost in the pile of flesh during that recent bacchanal in a despairing corner of this city made me reel with unreality.

I had never felt more abandoned, more alone, more uncertain. What would I do with this interminable evening ahead of me?

Suddenly the revolving hotel doors spun rapidly around and Jacques appeared. From his face, I could see that he was extremely agitated. Sweat poured from his forehead.

“Patricio, you must forgive me. You have no idea what anguish I’ve gone through in the last few moments.”

He was so out of breath that he could hardly speak. “Please, let’s find a quiet place where we can talk.”

We crossed the lobby to the bar where Jacques picked out a table away from the other patrons.

Jacques called the waiter, ordered the drinks and began to talk about a rough business meeting that went on longer than expected. He stopped talking when the waiter brought the drinks and then continued. “We reached a huge impasse that is making my work more difficult. To complicate matters more, Patricio, you were on my mind, and when I saw the time, I felt that my powers of concentration were disappearing, to the point that I had to end the meeting. I said I had a terrible migraine and left abruptly, asking that we continue tomorrow. God, what am I doing?” Jacques looked at me, seeking comfort.

I listened attentively, devouring the words that poured from Jacques’ agitated lips. Jacques quickly downed his whisky and mopped his brow with a handkerchief.

“You don’t mind if I order another whisky, do you, Patricio? I see that you haven’t even half finished yours.”

“Of course, please.”

Jacques called the waiter and ordered another Scotch.

"To tell the truth," Jacques said when the waiter had left, "the most traumatic part of my day has been arriving here late. At one point I was panic-stricken that I wouldn't be able to find you, and I even imagined being told at the reception desk that you had checked out and left for Chile. You have to remember that we haven't even exchanged addresses yet."

"Yes, we must. Why don't we do it right now?"

Jacques' hand shook as he wrote out his address, and I felt sorry for my friend.

We read each other's addresses in silence for a moment.

"Patricio," Jacques said slowly and evenly, "you are the most marvelous thing that has ever happened to me in my life. I have never felt such a strong emotional and physical attraction for another human being."

Jacques gulped his drink, steeling himself, and blurted, "Until now I had always conducted my life with a great deal of responsibility, the way that society sees as correct. Everything I did was acceptable. I was brought up in a strict family, with a strong religion."

I nodded in recognition.

"My father was a successful businessman and much respected in my country. Everything propelled me in a conventional direction. But I knew—I knew—that deep inside me was an ardor, if you want to call it that, for the forbidden. You understand. Forbidden fruit in the strongest sense of all that is forbidden by society and religion. I buried my feelings, completely buried them, so I could please everyone else. Yet I never met anyone who made me feel the way you do, and each time I see you my heart pounds. I want to tear myself out of my old life. I feel like I don't have a life if you are not in it."

I listened in silence, almost without moving, as if I feared that any move on my part could interrupt this confession.

Jacques held his hand over his face to gain composure. Then he straightened and said, "Patricio, I don't know how you are

going to react to this, but I'm married and have an eight-year-old daughter."

Jacques paused to watch me. As I must have seemed mesmerized for a few moments, Jacques became visibly perturbed.

I resettled myself in my chair and smiled. Slowly, with my usual calm, I placed my right hand on Jacques' arm and said:

"You have no idea how much I appreciate your confidence. I understand you more than you can imagine, and I assure you that what I feel for you is in no way affected by the facts of your life."

Jacques nodded with relief and I recounted the facts of my own existence:

"I am also tied to another person, Jacques, though not in a marriage. It involves a man, but it's falling apart. At least from my point of view. After a lot of hesitation, I know that I should end it. I will end it. We have known each other for three years and have lived together for the last year, so it won't be easy."

"Go on," Jacques said. "Tell me."

"I was also brought up, like you, in a strict family environment, but instead of religious taboos, we were raised with strict and conventional moral convictions. Before I reached my teens, my mother and 'supposed' father, because of an obvious mutual antagonism that had existed since I could remember, finally separated. Therefore mother was the strongest influence in my life. She was a bit possessive perhaps but positive in most every way, tacitly accepting 'unnatural' things such as our situation, which, even though she might comprehend, she would never discuss. Oh, God, there is so much to tell."

"We have a lot to talk about, and time is not on our side."

Jacques looked at his watch and, seeing that it was past 10:30, suggested a light dinner right in the hotel. He asked the waiter for the check, signed it along with his room number, and the two of us went into the dining room.

Out came everything, in a torrent of words: "Patricio, why do you think human beings such as ourselves feel the way we do, going against everything that has been established by society and

religion?"

After thinking for a moment, I finally answered. "These tendencies were considered perfectly normal and accepted by some ancient civilizations. I think they are normal. In reality, homosexual warriors were among the bravest in the world's history. So don't you think that men like us should be judged only by our conduct, rather than by our sexual orientation?"

"I couldn't agree with you more," Jacques said, as the pressure inside him dissipated with the liberation of conversation.

"As for me, it is how I felt at a very early age. I had no control over this. Long before my libido had even developed I was strongly attracted to men, to the masculine form." I spoke freely, enjoying giving sound to these well-hidden sentiments.

"Well, perhaps you are right. I think it developed in me the same way."

"Of course, there are infinite gradations, shades or tones," I said, "when dealing with this complicated subject, since there are so many factors that contribute. Not even all homosexuals should be included under the same category. A man can be totally inclined toward men, or can enjoy sex as well as emotional relationships with both men and women, in a totally equal manner. And then there are men who lean toward relationships with women, but who occasionally have homosexual encounters."

"Are you trying to categorize me, Patricio?" Jacques said, with his lips pursed in embarrassment.

"Not really, Jacques. What I don't like, actually, is the idea that people try to categorize sexuality at all. There are too many taboos that ward off and restrict human instincts. You obey your body. You sleep when you are tired and eat when you are hungry. And you should obey your true sexual appetite too. I think repressing it would upset your system. You understand, Jacques, what it is to want a man, to be with a man."

"Patricio, stop." A look of pain was on a Jacques' face. "I have to tell you that you are the first man I have been with in many years. Since my marriage, in fact."

I was astounded. “What? What have you done all these years if you wanted a man?”

Jacques shook his head slowly. “I ignored every feeling. I have tried to tell you this. That’s why my time with you has been so wonderful and so terrible. I don’t want it to end, but I feel like it never should have happened.”

I grabbed Jacques by the sleeve, almost angry.

“Listen to me, Jacques. Forgive me, but I cannot agree. What has happened between us is real and healthy. We both know that, and some day the world will know it too.”

“Are you suggesting that perhaps in the next century homosexuals may be re-classified as normal?”

“I certainly hope so.”

We toasted the idea of such liberation. I laughed out loud. This put Jacques at ease.

“You are very persuasive. I feel better,” he said. He leaned back in his chair and stretched, then jerked forward. “You know, you haven’t even told me details about your profession.”

“I have been always interested in the arts, but my family helped to influence me to pursue a conventional profession. I detested legal matters, business administration or anything to do with mathematics, but not being averse to biology, I settled for medicine. I looked away in bemusement. “How can I tell you everything I want to tell you?”

“You must.”

“I never thought that practicing medicine would become a permanent part of my life. You see, I really feel a deep attraction for the arts, Jacques, but I didn’t have the courage of my own convictions. My family looked down upon it, didn’t even consider it a profession.”

“Tell me more about them.”

I spoke about my family history, beginning with my mother’s side, because of its historical aspects. “Her Bavarian ancestors had held a Barony of the Holy Roman Empire originating in the early eighteenth century. When Germany lost the First World War,

my grandfather decided to take over extensive land in southern Chile acquired by his adventurous father during a long trip by ship through South America in the early 1900s. This also complied with his love of nature and his desire to transplant himself and his family to a place far away from the troubles of his defeated native country. He was fascinated with the natural beauty of his large new farm and the challenge of restoring the old country home. He took it upon himself to hire the right people to establish a profitable agricultural enclave.

“So they were survivors,” I summed up, “who learned how to cope with a different language and a foreign culture. My grand-papá learned the folly of basing oneself solely upon lineage and family fortune, which under the wrong circumstances can turn in reverse. My mother’s husband, as I used to call him, also of German descent from an old family in the region of Saxony, but untitled, was an incurable dreamer, totally lacking any sense of practicality and exhibiting true indifference toward me from birth, as if I wasn’t his son. I was born at a time of frequent matrimonial disagreements and separations.

“Fortunately for myself, my mother’s husband died after a long separation when I was a little boy,” I said matter-of-factly. “It was then that my grand-papá decided to legally adopt me, not only because he loved me, but also because he wanted me to have the right to his baronial title. As you now know, in Latin America people use the family names of both, father’s first and mother’s second, a traditional inheritance from Spain. Therefore, after my legal adoption, my two last names were reversed, but left joined by a hyphen. In reality, the only paternal memories I have are those of my grandfather and the affectionate visits of a German nobleman, another lover of nature who settled in Central America after the First World War. I think he is my real father.”

“You are joking.”

I shook my head. “His frequent visits and exuberant personality, his great affection toward me and his devotion for my mother, put the doubt in my mind. In spite of my mother’s long widowhood, I

have never had the courage to touch this subject with her. Unless my mother one day decides to reveal her secret, it will remain the greatest unknown in my life.”

“Now I see how you got your light skin and those eyes that are so blue,” Jacques said. “I also knew you must be an aristocrat.”



Later in Jacques’ hotel room, he ran his fingers over my forehead, nose and lips, almost as if he were attempting to engrave in his mind those features that had produced so much pleasure and excitement for him. His hand continued moving slowly over the rest of my naked body.

Finally he said, “How I adore feeling your silky smooth skin next to mine, and knowing that you are here beside me.”

“Well, this return to Chile isn’t going to be easy for me either, Jacques. My situation with Alvaro complicates things.”

I caressed Jacques’ hair and face, and when my fingers touched his lips, Jacques suddenly caught them gently in his mouth, and with his mouth full of fingers, and in a voice that was half serious and half laughing, he said, “I’m jealous of Alvaro.”

“I have no interest in Alvaro. All because of you. Come to Chile and see for yourself. When can you come?”

“I should have at least two or three more meetings with the minister of finance here in order to know exactly where I stand. This could take perhaps ten days, but when I know something positive I’ll telephone you at your clinic and tell you to reserve a room in the best hotel in Santiago.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “A room in the Hotel Carrera. The top floor has a swimming pool and restaurant with a fabulous view of the city and the snow-covered Andes Mountains in the background.”

“That’s fine, but all I need to see is you, Patricio.” Jacques pulled away from me to see me better and said, “This room, even though it’s not really mine, is filled with you, your presence, your voice, the contact of your skin. I don’t want to inconvenience you

in any way, but could I call you every day at your clinic? At a time when you can talk freely?"

"Between one and three in the afternoon would be good. It's lunch time in Chile. My assistant and the receptionist will be out."

"Thanks, Patricio, it will be a great consolation for me to hear your voice and to talk to you. What time does your flight leave tomorrow?"

"At one in the afternoon."

"I have an important meeting in the morning beginning at ten and I don't know how long it will last." He bit his lip.

"Yes, I know," I said as I caressed Jacques' dark hair and rubbed my leg against his.

Neither of us said goodbye, as a tacit promise.

Chapter V

When I opened the door of my old apartment, the first thing I noticed was cigarette smoke in the air. Neither I nor Alvaro smoked. The sun streamed in as usual, but the air hung thick and the plants looked withered. I dropped my bags and pushed my head back against the closed door. I longed for the joy of Lima.

Alvaro emerged from the bedroom wearing a wrapper. Without saying a word, he came to me and embraced me tenderly, quite unexpectedly, without a trace of the passion that I expected, the passion concocted to elicit forgiveness.

When we separated, I could see that Alvaro was shaking. The look on his face was of a man who had seen a loved one die before him.

“What is it, Alvaro?”

“I understand that I cannot live well without you,” Alvaro said with an honest voice that moved me.

“I feel as if I’ve been away for centuries—what a strange sensation,” I said in a slightly faint voice. Seeing the apartment left me with an empty feeling.

“Would you like something to drink? Shall I prepare tea, or would you like something cold?”

“A cup of tea would be ideal,” I said. “Thank you.”

“While I’m fixing it, make yourself comfortable. Take off your jacket and tie, and I’ll be right back.”

I knew then that there would be no discussion of Alvaro’s presumption in taking me unwillingly to what could only be termed an orgy. For Alvaro, that surprise was to have been a small diversion, a laugh.

I began to feel guilty, thinking about how I would approach the subject. After debating the matter in various directions, I

thought that the best thing would be to let myself be guided by my instincts and spontaneity in a free run of words. I had the sensation that Alvaro suspected something unusual, but without having any definite idea.

I lay back over the comfortable English Regency-style divan. Alvaro soon appeared with the tea and a lemonade for himself.

"You look tired."

"I'm not tired, actually." With manufactured enthusiasm, I told about the visit to the catacombs and the museum of anthropology.

"And after that, what else? Tell me," Alvaro pressed on with a touch of nervousness.

I then told him about my visit with Doña Eloísa de Cañizares, prolonging as much as possible the details about her home, if not her ardor. Alvaro seemed impatient listening to the story.

"All right, all right, enough of her," he said.

I looked at him. "Alvaro, tell me when you returned."

"I returned the day I found you gone. I was sure you had come home."

I nodded. "You thought I would leave my scientific meeting and come to find you?"

"Naturally," Alvaro said, his confidence returning. "I was very surprised to find you had disappeared totally. That's not the Patricio I know."

"Perhaps you never knew me at all," I said. I looked at the floor, wondering what to say next.

"You're hiding something," Alvaro said. "I won't be mad at you."

"Mad at me? Why should you be mad at me? All you ever did was make trouble and drain my resources and good will. You drag me out, tell me you have a great surprise—I thought we would be going to Europe together. I thought there would be some plan, for once. And instead, all I got was a cab ride to a bleak section of Lima."

Alvaro sipped his lemonade and studied me. "Your life is so

safe and sound. I thought you'd like a change."

"It turns out I do like a change," I said. My body shook because I was not used to expressing anger. "There's something serious that I must tell you."

Alvaro's face went pale.

"In Lima I met a Frenchman who has profoundly impressed me."

"Who introduced you to him? Eloísa de Cañizares?"

"No, it was nothing like that. No one introduced us."

Alvaro's large, dark, deep eyes froze beneath brows that rose in melancholy. I had seen this pathetic look before. In those times, however, there were no other amorous interests in my life. This was something new, totally unforeseen.

"Then, how did you meet him? In a bar? Tell me the truth. Did you have an intimate relation with him?"

"No, we did not meet in a bar, and, yes, we had intimate relations and we are strongly attracted to each other."

"Does he live in Lima? How old is he? Does he have a job? Is he a doctor?"

"No, he lives in France and was in Lima on business. He's older than I."

Alvaro relaxed a little. "When is he returning to France?"

"He doesn't know. Apparently it's a prolonged business negotiation."

"Are you planning to see him again?"

"Frankly, yes, Alvaro," I answered with tremendous firmness in my voice.

Alvaro had a grin on his face that was somewhere between scorn and sadness, and nervously rubbed his hands together. "When? Are you going back to Lima?"

"No, the truth is that he has decided to fly to Santiago soon. He doesn't know when yet because it all depends on the course of his business affairs. He will let me know."

"Does he know about me?"

"Yes, Alvaro, I told him everything."

The grin quickly disappeared from Alvaro's face. "All right, Patricio, you have made me jealous. I know that I haven't been a saint, and that perhaps I deserve all that is happening to me. But I hope that we can turn the page and remake our lives together. You can't deny that we have had many good times together."

"Yes, everything you say is true, Alvaro, but I fear that our relationship has reached a point where it is no longer healthy and it would be a mistake to deceive ourselves."

"Patricio," Alvaro said, drawing out my name. "Tell me sincerely if you don't still feel affection, friendship and passion for me after the three years we have shared together."

"Yes, Alvaro, it is possible that I still feel all of those things for you, but my concept of love, sincerity, loyalty, affection and companionship has always been totally different from yours. My family taught me what is good, honest and honorable. Yours was always clandestine and on the fringe of the law. If you really had feelings of true love for another person, you wouldn't compromise or risk or abuse the integrity of that person. Don't you see?"

Alvaro seemed to enter into a meditative trance-like state and, following a long pause, his eyes more melancholic than ever, he said, "Perhaps, in a sense, you're right. While I was growing up, with my mother a young widow, a series of bad influences twisted my mind in the wrong direction. I grew up thinking that such things were normal."

There was another long pause. We sat, I on the divan and Alvaro on a nearby chair, each in our own universe, incompatible with the other's.

I broke the silence. "I'm happy that those observations came from you. Now you have a unique opportunity to accept the position that Archie has offered you in Venezuela so that you can make a total change in your life."

Alvaro appeared to be submerged in a state of profound thought.

"Is this the way that you want to rid yourself of me?" he said in a pained voice.

“No, no, that’s not it at all, Alvaro. I see this as an opportunity for you to rectify your past, and if you are successful, there is always the possibility of your returning with a solid position in the automobile company’s Chilean branch.”

Alvaro made another long pause.

“Patricio, I will never forget the day that I met you, when I had the antique shop with Fabio Delorme and you came through the door with your old brass desk lamp searching for a glass shade that would fit. From the moment that you entered the store, I thought you were just about the most interesting person I had ever seen. That all seems so long ago, Patricio.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Come on,” Alvaro said, too cheerfully, too suddenly. He was back to his old tricks. “There’s to be a dinner tonight, and there’s hardly time for you to shower and shave before we must leave.”

I moved into my bedroom and automatically began to undress for a shower, knowing full well that the dinner was a welcome chance for both of us to ignore the rift that had begun.

Chapter VI

“I got a call,” I said. From the look on my face, Alvaro knew that it was the call from Jacques announcing his arrival.

“Oh, you did?” Alvaro said, poised on a crumbling throne of pride.

“He will be here later today.”

“That’s nice,” Alvaro said. Then he walked out.

I had already suspected that Alvaro, though he could not bring himself to confront me, would avoid meeting Jacques. We both knew that the visit from Jacques would be a turning point. As for myself, I had decided that even if I failed to convince Alvaro to accept the position being offered to him in Venezuela, and although an unavoidable territorial separation might take place between me and Jacques, my relation with Alvaro was over, with no possible salvation.



The moment when Jacques emerged from the customs area was electrifying. His eyes sparkled and were more intense than ever, with a slightly moist glimmer brought on by emotion, while my heart beat wildly as if I were engaged in a frenzied race. Jacques gave me a strong embrace and a kiss on each cheek *à la française*. Ever conscious of the people around us, I felt as if I was blushing.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed you, Patricio.”

“I’ve felt the same way, Jacques. Let me carry your bag.”

“Fine,” Jacques said as he picked up his suitcase, and placed his other arm around my shoulder. “This way I can have you a little closer to me.”

We walked in silence toward the parking area, giving each other occasional tender glances. I noticed that Jacques' suitcase was rather small and assumed that he had come for a brief stay, but I decided not to touch the subject.

Once we were in my car, Jacques asked me about Alvaro's reaction, showing a bit of anxiety about the matter. I calmed him, saying only that Alvaro had reacted in a civilized way.

As we approached the Hotel Carrera, I suddenly became apprehensive. Alvaro often went there, a popular place for Chilean society to meet for cocktails, but I didn't see anyone I knew. Soon we reached Jacques' room, and to my surprise, champagne sat chilling in a silver holder.

I was speechless.

Jacques confessed that he had called the hotel from Lima to request this special service. I felt a little ashamed for not having thought of some gesture to give Jacques a warm welcome to my country, and I began to murmur in stumbling words.

Jacques stopped me, embracing me tenderly, saying that what he treasured most and hoped to find was only me.

The bottle of champagne remained unopened.



During the next two days, I took Jacques in my car on a tour of my city. With pride and surprising emotion, I showed off the capital, as if I might never see it so clearly again. In 1956, Santiago was still a tranquil place with few cars, charming though provincial. We strolled down Calle de Nueva York to see Santiago's beautiful neo-classical palaces. We visited the Club de la Unión, Biblioteca Nacional, and of course, La Moneda, the presidential residence.

Instead of rising in skyscrapers, the city extended out to an enormous valley at the foot of the Andes. The foothills of the Andean mountains rise above the plains near the city with patches of crusted snow glistening on their high peaks. Jacques was deeply impressed seeing these enormous, majestic mountains, so

close and imposing.

The Parque Forestal seemed ancient with its huge trees, and left visitors with a feeling that was simple and natural. Then we traveled the Avenida Santa María with its luxurious mansions in the French style. Jacques marveled that I could think of leaving my home city.

On Jacques' last day, we drove toward the mountains, to the Barrio Alto in the highest parts of the city, with its houses set in remarkable gardens. The lawns were so thick and covered in green that they looked like carpets, and enormous March roses grew in curiously shaped varieties and colors. It was in this part of the city that I chose a small and intimate restaurant where we could have lunch and talk quietly.

"It's such a relief to be alone like this," I said. "Alvaro, well, is Alvaro. I thought I would have a lot to say about him, Jacques, but it's over."

Jacques looked at me with great seriousness. "You've talked to him?"

Alvaro, although never losing his melancholic look, had warded off all my efforts to raise the subject. He had also managed, still without any open unpleasantness, to keep himself too busy for any possible meeting with his rival.

"He knows, even if he doesn't understand. I will talk to him. It may take time, but it will be done."

Jacques nodded approvingly. "It must indeed be hard for you to separate from someone you've been tied to for years. But I don't know why you want to leave Santiago. It is magnificent."

"My introduction to Santiago was traumatic. My family and social pressures influenced my mother to enroll me in a private boarding school here, just after her husband died. In those days, the family lived in Viña del Mar, about three hours away by train."

I tried to explain how terrible my first separation from my family was, and the anguish I felt with my widowed mother gone, the woman I adored. Eventually, my pleas had their way, and

my family took up residence in Santiago. So, you see, it's not all golden memories."

"No one's life can be," Jacques said quietly.

At my insistence, Jacques also related with a great deal of flourish episodes of his life with Jeanne, the birth of his daughter Claudine, and his current life, filled more than anything with the thrill of his business.

Our farewell in Jacques' room was even more moving than our parting in Lima. Instead of sadness, however, Jacques was filled with absolute confidence and optimism. "Look, Patricio, I can't avoid the subject. I have been seriously planning a future for us. In Europe."

My heart stopped. I could scarcely tell how I felt at this proposal. "You've given this a lot of thought?"

"You are the one with your surroundings crushing you," Jacques said as gently as he could. "I know you love your mother, but you are independent beings. In spirit and blood, you are a European."

"But Jacques, you have a marriage, a daughter."

"I'm perfectly aware of that, Patricio, and I don't deny that I feel responsible. I will never abandon my daughter. But Jeanne is an adult, and if she chooses to be with me then she will have to share the life I have. What I feel for you is totally different." Jacques made a determined gesture with his hand. "It's a strong thing, as if you were a part of me, and the idea of separating myself from you horrifies me. You have no idea how sad and alone I felt when you left Lima. I had to make an enormous effort to concentrate on my business dealings because you were on my mind constantly." Jacques chuckled at the memory. "Even members of the Peruvian committee on economics commented about my attitude. They obviously noticed a change. I pretended to feel tired, and with their typical Latin suspicion probably thought that I was feigning indifference in order to precipitate decisions."

I laughed at Jacques, but he continued.

"Believe me, this second separation is going to be even more

difficult.”

With strength in his voice, Jacques asked:

“I would like to know how you feel about the whole thing, Patricio.”

“You know perfectly well that I feel the same as you do, Jacques, and although I also have my problems, they are different from yours. But I’m willing to consider the matter. The most delicate point at this moment is my profession, actually. I have created a select group of patients among members of Chilean society. I depend almost completely on my work.”

“If you’re willing, Patricio, I have ideas how to resolve that problem. During my upcoming stay in Lima I want both of us to think hard about being together for the rest of our lives. I will see you as soon as I can, as soon as I finish my meetings in Lima. I’ll telephone you often.”

Jacques gave me a strong hug. No one could possibly imagine that this person, so masculine physically as well as strong and aggressive in his professional life, could be so tender and gentle. Was it just me who provoked this reaction? Or was it simply a new experience for Jacques? Perhaps it was motivated by the fact that it was with a person of the same gender. Could it be that Jacques had a double personality, allowing him to act differently in a matrimonial situation? I wondered.

As Jacques’ plane flew back to Perú, I tried to organize my thoughts, but doubts kept me confused, unable to see anything clearly. My profession and future also tortured me, even though it was obvious that Jacques was already toying with the idea of solving this aspect of my life. But how? As yet, I did not know the answer. Besides, I still had the problem of my situation with Alvaro, and even though I was totally determined to end this relationship, that fact in itself disturbed me.

My sole hope was to convince Alvaro to accept the job in Venezuela. If this were to come about, it would be the first step toward a possible future with Jacques in France. Everything else, I thought, would work itself out in one way or another.

Chapter VII

Alvaro's sensitivity clearly told him that my relationship with Jacques had carved a final divide between the two of us. For the first time since Alvaro had known about Jacques, I appeared totally determined to change the direction of my life.

Alvaro saw no other choice than to accept the job his brother-in-law offered him in Venezuela. He knew perfectly well that this offer had been instigated by his mother, another of her diabolical ideas to break up this relationship that her son had. Not only did she consider it socially unacceptable, but it provoked within her an uncontrollable jealousy, to the point that she didn't care if her son became separated from her, as long as this undesirable relationship would be dissolved.

The day that Jacques left was a rare overcast one. Both Alvaro and myself carried our moods heavily, Alvaro his jealousy and hopelessness, I my doubts and uncertainty, and residual joy in the memories of my parting from Jacques.

Alvaro moved quietly in the kitchen and did not emerge although I had made my entrance known by dropping my keys on the cabinet beside the apartment door.

Alvaro brought out a tray of Pisco sours as if nothing in the world were different between us, but he sank into the couch with slumped shoulders. He looked down at his hands, folded in his lap.

"I've accepted the position that Archie offered me," Alvaro announced abruptly. "I'll be leaving within the month."

I looked up, with neither surprise nor relief. "I'm happy for you, Alvaro. You did the right thing."

"Down deep I know that you're right, Patricio, but it's hard for me to leave you," Alvaro said evenly, straining his civility. "I

realize that I have not been the ideal partner for you, but I couldn't help myself; it's my social nature, full of curiosity, that moves me to explore new sensations."

"I'll miss you too. Believe me, it won't be easy for me either, but I must confess that from my point of view, our relationship has become untenable. Look, Alvaro, you know you cannot continue living on the edge of the law, always thinking that one day you will discover a hidden gold mine. It's nothing but dreaming and you will only end up fooling yourself."

"Would you consider coming to visit me in Venezuela?"

I thought that it would be cruel to deny this remote possibility, because at this moment I had no absolute certainty that my relationship with Jacques would last. This new friendship was recent and there were serious problems to resolve, not just the problem of Jacques' wife and daughter. There was also an economic problem, since I would not be able to practice my profession in another country, and could only live comfortably off my savings for about two years. Being independent now, I did not wish to count on motherly help. My doubt settled in deeper, but my voice remained firm.

"Believe me, Alvaro, yes, I would consider visiting you in Venezuela if circumstances allow, but at this moment, to be frank, it is a remote possibility. I don't want to pretend." I stood and turned to the kitchen a moment before Alvaro held a hand up, reaching for me.



All of Alvaro's family and numerous friends were at the airport the afternoon of his departure. I stood in a small group to one side, surrounded by those who were closest to me and Alvaro, such as Catalina and Margarita. I silently took in the details of the crowd, knowing that I too might be leaving my homeland soon.

All of the efforts that Alvaro and I made to control our emotions vanished when the moment arrived for Alvaro to say goodbye

and board the airplane. First he took leave of his family and the general group of friends, leaving for the end his farewell to me. We embraced each other intensely. I stood back and gazed at Alvaro's packed bag. My imagination failed me. I could not fathom which few clothes Alvaro had chosen, which few sentimental items, letters, gifts he wanted to take with him.

Alvaro attempted to speak, but his voice broke. My eyes were wet and there was a knot in my throat. Finally Alvaro murmured in a quivering voice, "This flight stops in Lima. I'll telephone you from the airport."

"I'll be expecting your call."

Alvaro presented his boarding pass and hurried toward the waiting area for his flight. He walked with his head slightly bent, carrying his hand bag. Suddenly he turned around for a last goodbye and waved at all of us with his right arm. His face was red and his eyes were filled with tears. He took one last look at me. Seeing him leave, I felt rent physically and emotionally. I tried to suppress any sounds that might come from my throat. It became a supreme effort for me to suppress any other gesture that might call the attention of people nearest to my private circle.



Upon reaching my apartment that evening at dusk, I felt submerged in a deep void that I had never before experienced. Although on several occasions I had found myself alone in the apartment, I always knew that eventually Alvaro would come back.

I sat down in the English armchair and struggled to order my thoughts. Suddenly I was invaded by profound sadness. I believed that there would be nothing good again for myself, as Jacques was evolving into a memory now, slipping away from being a person that I had loved and trusted. I wondered what I had done, letting Alvaro leave now. All I felt was loss upon loss, both Jacques and Alvaro, the only men who had expressed the

love that I so richly needed.

I lost track of time until the phone rang.

“Yes, Alvaro!” I shouted with uncharacteristic ebullience.

Catalina answered me. She sounded genuinely worried and wanted to know how I felt. I confessed that I felt sad and alone. Catalina wanted to come and be with me, but I declined her affectionate offer.

The time passed with exasperating slowness. I tried to entertain myself organizing the apartment and rearranging things in the kitchen. Later I played some Edith Piaf records on the phonograph, but this didn’t help my state of mind because Alvaro had introduced me to this popular French music, to the marvelous voice of La Piaf. I closed the record player and tried to read, but my powers of concentration had escaped me, and I began to nervously pace the room.

I would not allow myself the luxury of pondering a life with Jacques in Paris. I would not allow myself to wait for that call or that letter, sealing my fate. So I waited and waited for the call from Alvaro, to save me from the emptiness I felt at my core. I did not even think about what I would say.

The phone pealed through the silence.

It was Alvaro, his voice weak and wounded. “One word from you, Patricio, and I’ll return.”

“Alvaro,” I responded in a low voice.

“Patricio, you don’t know how sad and alone I feel. I don’t care what people say, but what I want most of all is to be at your side.”

I heard a choked sob, and I felt a burning pain in my throat that prevented me from speaking. For a moment there was silence.

“Patricio, you have to make the decision now. I really want to come back. One word from you and I’ll forget about this flight and take the next one to Santiago.”

“No, Alvaro, no. We’ve already had the strength to separate. Now you have to prove yourself. We would never forgive ourselves for having sacrificed this opportunity to benefit your future,” I

said, with a depth of feeling that surprised me. I exhaled deeply, but Alvaro remained silent.

“We would be forever in the dark about what could have been,” I said. “You know that.” I knew that I couldn’t give in.

After another silence, finally Alvaro said, “I can see that you mean it. I’ll call you from Caracas when I can.”

Silence returned to the room where I sat, and suddenly a sensation of anguish and loneliness again swept over me because of my inflexible decision.

In the days that followed, many friends called me, not wanting to leave me alone, but I politely declined all of their kind offers. Now was the time for reservation and contemplation, I sternly lectured myself.

Chapter VIII

Alvaro had decided to maintain a spectacular silence, perhaps due to pride, or because he was waiting for me to show a sign of interest in him. Whatever the reason, no one knew where he was, although it was supposed that Archie must have temporarily set him up in a boarding house until Alvaro had the time to find a more permanent residence.

Jacques, on the other hand, called me often. Alvaro's departure had brought about a state of euphoria in the Frenchman, which, of course, he tried to cover up in his conversations with me.

About a month after Alvaro left, Jacques called as was his custom, but this time I detected a certain desperation in his voice. He spoke haltingly, as if uncertain or frightened.

"I want us to meet in Switzerland. We can live together there."

His voice stopped abruptly. A wave of heat emanated from my face and spread over my entire body. Then I felt as if my muscles had gone to sleep, and I was overcome by a feeling of inertia. I soon recovered my senses and became more coherent.

"Jacques, you can't be serious."

"I have never been more serious. You think I haven't given this matter all of my attention? I want to know when, when can you be there?"

"You know that I can't just up and leave my profession," I said, hedging a bit, because of my surprise and a sudden, extreme case of nerves. "Besides, you know nothing about my economic means. I live from my profession. It's my future."

"Patricio, I have a solidly backed economic situation for the two of us in Switzerland, and I've made plans so that you will never have to worry in an economic sense for the rest of your life,

no matter what happens.”

“Frankly, Jacques, you’re confusing me. Believe me, I want it with all my soul, but this is going to require more time. It’s too sudden. Precipitous.”

“It’s not precipitous for me. I do not want to be separated from you again. I can prove to you—I will prove to you—that I have the economic backing to do it.”

“Jacques,” I pleaded, “I don’t have the kind of constitution that allows me to make such drastic decisions from one moment to another. I find the whole thing to be fascinating, but terrifying too.”

“Don’t forget that my own family ties are much more complicated than yours,” Jacques said as gently as he could. “I am, however, totally determined to disentangle myself from them. Concerning my business, at this stage of my life I can easily arrange things by taking a few trips to France each year.”

“Jacques, I beg you, let me recover a little from this marvelous and unexpected proposition.”

“All right, but I’m expected in Bogota in four days. You would make me extremely happy if you would decide to leave with me forever.”

The attraction we felt for one another was stronger than ever, and I experienced great pleasure thinking about the possibility of living in the center of European culture just as I had always wished. I admired Jacques’ great inner strength, so decisive and firm, and was grateful for the suggestion of economic support that would dissolve my fears and doubts about the future. Jacques well understood my fervent wish to dedicate myself to one of my artistic inclinations, singing perhaps, or painting.

The prospect of attaining these dreams surrounded me in a kind of mist that was euphoric and idealized. Yet behind it all was a sense that this was lunacy, that the entire idea was unrealistic.

Jacques sensed my skepticism and called again the next day with soothing reassurances coupled with urgency that reminded me of a tone that Alvaro had often employed.

My maelstrom of fears flooded the wire. I spoke of the difficulties of liquidating my investments and of breaking with my mother, with whom, apart from our blood ties, I had a true friendship and understanding. At the same time I could think of no compelling reason to continue to live as I did in Santiago, under the watchful eyes of family, friends and an oppressive society.

“Just as soon as you give me a date,” Jacques said, “I’ll order your tickets. Please, Patricio, try to arrange everything as soon as possible. I’ll call you from Bogota.”

When I hesitated, Jacques spoke for both of us.

“Sometimes I think that your desires to join together our lives aren’t as strong as mine, Patricio.”

“No, that’s not it, Jacques, it’s just that my situation is different from yours. But you must believe me, my greatest wish now is also to share my life with you. I’ll also confess that the idea of living in Europe is enormously attractive to me.” I cheered up at the thought of myself on the continent of my ancestors at last.

“You need to come to Europe, of course, it’s a part of you,” Jacques said.

“To tell you the truth, I can’t wait to set foot over there and have you beside me. You know that my South American surroundings are heavy. You know why. No, Jacques, I only need the time to organize my personal affairs for the grand escapade. I only need time.”

But I declined the offer to see Jacques in Bogota, as I tried to reason exactly what I wanted to do, and how I would do it. My future with Jacques, although drawn along general lines that seemed to be leading to a permanent life together, was nevertheless still a huge uncertainty, with no fixed dates.

The telephone calls from Colombia grew in frequency. Each time Jacques’ urging for me to leave Chile was stronger. The effect, however, was to submerge me in a dense mental drowsiness, a combination of fear and despair about the decision to leave. I made little effort to find a young professional who might be interested in replacing me at my private clinic, but did close some

financial accounts, and arranged half-heartedly to have some personal articles, including the oil portrait of my mother, put into storage, where they could be sent easily to me whenever, wherever I established myself.

I was frightened by the idea of depending totally on one person, even though Jacques was attractive to me in every way. The truth was that we did not know each other well enough to make a long-range decision that involved the total renunciation on my part of my frankly independent character, and I was not prepared for what might happen if this relationship were to fail. I had already had the experience of a relationship that began passionately, but later, as the fire slowly dwindled, ended in almost constant quarreling. The fear that one day Jacques might feel that his closest family surroundings, his wife and daughter, were really more important in his life, did not cease to disturb me as a possibility. All of these thoughts left me in a state of total confusion at the beginning, and slowly the scale tipped in the direction of caution.

Then a letter arrived. It contained, in the minutest detailing and accounting, the life that Jacques could provide for me in Europe. But rather than Switzerland, Paris would be the venue, in proximity to Jacques' wife and daughter. This change in plans somewhat shocked me, as I was warming to the idea of a life with Jacques in Switzerland. The appeal of Paris, however, was immediately overwhelming and inspiring, despite the difficulties inherent in the situation for both Jacques and me.

It was all there for me if I decided to accept it: a part-time job with a prestigious scientist all legally managed through immigration, a monthly allowance, suggestions about where I could live, the various restaurants, shops, theaters, l'Opéra, cinema, cafés, the nature of each arrondissement—Paris was mine for the taking.

As the details sank in, I studied the typed letter itself. Nowhere on the letter did Jacques write a word by hand or leave any clue that he was its sender. By turns joyful and aggrieved, I spent hours trying to visualize the new life that Jacques suggested, but

finally the cool efficiency of the letter rankled me. My one piece of correspondence from the true love of my life contained no expression of emotion, not even a signature.



About this time, I began receiving calls from Alvaro. His talk was full of the beauty of the country, the advantages of life in Caracas. Why shouldn't I make an exploratory visit, with the idea of renewing our broken relationship? Uncertain whether I could give up everything for Jacques, I also felt the effect of separation from Alvaro, that strange phenomenon that betrays one's decisions, however wise.

It was this torment, finally, that brought me to the sudden and unerring desire to get back in touch with Dr. Carlos Costa.

He was a well-respected physician, considerably older than I, and had been the Maecenas in my professional career. This well-off and well-established professional had won the confidence of a large sector of the high society of Santiago. Having reached maturity and wishing to lighten the load of his professional activities, Carlos had been my benefactor by advising his patients to entrust their children to the care of my specialty in pediatrics.

Much time had passed since we had last spoken. At this crucial juncture in my life, however, I felt I could trust the spiritual and emotional details to Dr. Costa, whom I believed was just the person who could help me to decide. With trepidation at contacting this man from my past, I telephoned him.

"Carlos?"

"Patricio?" The old man was moved; I could hear it in his voice.

"I need your help."

"Anything."

"I have a terribly difficult decision to make."

"Tell me all about it," Carlos said, and it was as if no time had passed between us as I poured out my heart. Carlos was an

extremely spiritual man who unceasingly sought the “hereafter,” and who had never found solace in religion. He believed that the past, present and future coexisted in the universe, and that with concentration and training one could learn to penetrate beyond the limits of the past and the future. This belief was his personal explanation for accepting the existence of the so-called clairvoyants, whom I subsequently regarded with more respect.

Carlos’ theory had fascinated me. He also strongly believed that human beings have two souls or spirits that were different from each other. One was governed by the function of cerebral cells, totally controlled by the physiological nature of the body. The other spirit or soul was not ruled by cells but rather by something ethereal and unknown, of which our physical part has no true knowledge. Carlos was convinced that practicing elaborate spiritual exercises could lead to perception of that second spiritual entity, allowing us to reach an ecstasy through the carrier waves connected with the universe.

These conversations had thrilled me, as I also sought truth. Carlos also believed in predestination, in the sense that everything has already been organized to happen and does not depend totally upon ourselves. He firmly believed that he and I were destined to meet and become friends as long as we lived.

Carlos’ feelings for me, however, had not been solely based upon friendship. His passion for me while I was in my late teens, due to my youth and highly spiritual yearning, was truly volcanic and he was powerless to contain it. As time passed and the affair between me and Alvaro developed, my relationship with Carlos evolved into a friendship of a more paternal nature. Carlos understood my affair and subsequent immersion in Alvaro’s life, but he also knew that it was only a matter of time before a drastic change would come into my own life.

“So it comes down to this, Carlos,” I continued. “Either I go to visit Alvaro, to see what might or might not happen in the future with him, or I go to France, for a life that I can only imagine.”

“I have lived long enough to recognize when a full and lasting

relationship progresses toward the future on solid ground—and the opposite,” Carlos said gently. “And I understand the limitations for you here or in Venezuela. You have a long future ahead of yourself, and what I think is behind all of your words is a desire for not just happiness, but freedom as well. You could never give in to the impositions placed upon you by your family and your society. True, your absence will create a void in my life, but it would be egotistical on my part to keep you in Santiago.”

“So what shall it be?” I asked quietly.

“You must gather your courage to leave Chile, not in the direction of Venezuela, but rather, to France.”

Just hearing my spiritual mentor utter those words gave me a light-heartedness that I had been searching for so long. So it was Carlos, above all of my other friends, whom I heeded during my worst personal crisis.



The preparations for my departure no longer played through my mind in confusion, but emerged as concrete activities. Moving rapidly, I lined up suitable candidates to replace me in the responsibilities of my private practice, interviewed them all, and selected a man of whom Carlos greatly approved.

I felt that it would be best at this time to make a rental contract for just one year abroad in case my sojourn in France failed. The truth of the matter was that no one could guarantee that my departure would be permanent.

The following day, I went to the port to arrange passage for the voyage and bumped into an old childhood friend whom I had kept close tabs on for years. As luck would have it, José Luis had decided to continue his theatrical studies in England and was in the process of booking his travel as well. Without hesitation, we agreed to become traveling companions. He would be perfect company to keep me entertained during the long days aboard ship. Even as I hurried to make plans for my journey, I recalled

from time to time the words of Marta, the clairvoyant friend of Catalina, that I soon would leave Chile for good, but that in the end I would sail by a huge statue of a woman and dock in another land. That description undoubtedly suggested a ship's arrival in New York.

When I finally left the port of Valparaíso on the *Reina del Mar*, Queen of the Sea, destined for England, I thought that Marta had been wrong on just one count: my final destination would be Paris, France.

Chapter IX

A rumor began to circulate that a passenger had died on board ship. This had a great effect on me, since after just a week on the ship I was beginning to feel my personal stability founder.

Within a few hours it became known that it was a female passenger, thirty-five years old, traveling alone. The rumor also circulated that the woman had committed suicide. Apparently it had happened just after leaving the port of Guayaquil, Ecuador, as the ship made her way north, hugging the western coast of the continent.

The ship's personnel had noticed that the woman's cabin door was locked, but they thought that she simply didn't feel well. When this situation persisted and the passenger didn't respond, the captain ordered the door opened. Her body was found on the bed. The ship's physician determined that the cause of death was a potent poison, a faint residue of which was found inside a glass on her night table.

It was said that her husband, of English nationality, was expecting her in Plymouth. What a tragedy it would be when the ship arrived in that port.

The captain, however, was forced to arrange for the disposal of the body. During the fifties, maritime law required burial at sea.

Her body was wrapped in a heavy, coarse linen sack to which were attached several metal weights, and then it was bound with rope. A small group of the ship's personnel carried the body down to one of the lower decks.

The funeral procession passed in front of me on the deck where I stood. Since leaving Santiago, my nerves had grown shaky. I held tight to the rail as the body passed by, and I looked into the cool, gray, choppy sea.

I too carried an extremely potent poison in powder form that I intended to use should all my plans fail. Never before in my life had I assumed a decision involving as much risk as I was now undertaking by giving up my profession, and leaving my family, friends and country.

Seeing that body wrapped in such a rough and grotesque way had a profound effect on me. My body trembled and I felt faint. I no longer believed that my life was taking the course that it should, although it all seemed so right when I sailed from my native country, from my home in Santiago, from my gilded cage and all of the people I loved.



It had all seemed light and easy as the ship pulled away from the dock in Valparaíso, and the people on land grew more and more excited with their cries of farewell. My mood soared.

José Luis and I watched in nostalgic silence as the footbridges connecting the ship to the pier were raised. Even though I was still affected by having said goodbye to my mother, José Luis remarked that my eyes began to shine with a touch of euphoria, obviously at the thought of the unknown that I would soon experience and that I had wanted for such a long time.

On the gangplank, my mother had discreetly and delicately dried her tears with a small handkerchief. Her attractive cotton-print dress, with its vivid colors, contrasted strikingly with the profound sadness reflected on her handsome face; her white complexion was nearly transparent.

“Sí, Sí, José Luis, I understand everything that you are saying, and I appreciate your efforts to comfort me, but Patricio is my only son,” she cried.

At that moment the ship’s horn sounded for the second time and many of the passengers’ friends and family members began to go down the ramps to the dock where they stood waving to their loved ones.

I caressed my mother's face, and, looking at her tenderly, I said, "Do you remember the long trip that you took in 1954, for more than six months? Now it's my turn." The ship's horn blasted for the third time, and impeccably uniformed crew members moved about the decks, ringing small brass bells and asking the non-passengers to leave the ship. My mother, almost sobbing, hugged me. Her chest trembled slightly.

"Take care of yourself, Patricio," and hugging José Luis she added: "Take care of each other."

One last emotional embrace and my mother slowly descended the ramp until her driver took her arm to help her reach solid ground, and the two of them walked toward the car. The driver opened her door, and my mother turned around to wave one last goodbye with her right arm, and to attempt a smile that seemed more like a grimace on a Greek theatrical mask. This would be a moment etched in my memory for the rest of my life.

I discerned only a glimpse of color from my mother's day dress in the back of the car as they drove away and that too was lost from sight.

As I surveyed the crowd that remained, a young man with blond hair stood out. His face showed extreme sadness as he waved a small red handkerchief. José Luis, a great student of the human condition, noticed him too. In order to see to whom the handsome blond man was waving, José Luis and I leaned over the deck railing until our eyes rested on a man with strong features.

"That's Joaquín González," José Luis said, pointing excitedly.

The man leaned against a railing in the third-class section of the ship, obviously responding to the pitiful man who waved the red handkerchief.

What a surprise! We both knew this actor because José Luis had been the director of the Teatro Experimental of the University of Chile. Even though we didn't know this actor well, and we had only a vague idea that this young man wanted to continue his theatrical studies in England, just as José Luis was going to do, neither of us expected to see him on our ship.

When the *Reina del Mar* began to distance itself from the shore, picking up more speed and losing itself in the waves of the mighty Pacific Ocean, some good memories flashed through my mind with a pang, while at the same time, in my forceful determination, I had finally reached the decision I had been groping for. I was ready to jettison any sentimental feelings attached to the territory I was abandoning, and where so many times I had felt like an outcast, a pariah, walled off from the outside world, a reject from my own kinship, hiding my true self, cheating, lying and pretending to be what I was not to comply with the demands of family and society. Now I felt exultant with the idea of my impending freedom. That sense of belonging to a special caste of untouchables began to fade as the ship danced over the waves, carrying me toward my much desired liberation.

José Luis and I could no longer avoid the impulse to go down to the third-class section and personally greet the actor. Practically stumbling over each other with our words, José Luis and I said hello to Joaquín at the same time, expressing our surprise and happiness at seeing him on board. Joaquín was courteous in returning our greeting, but his mind seemed elsewhere. There was sadness on his face, and his eyes were somewhat reddened and slightly wet.

"My friends, you will excuse me, but this is a bad moment for me. Goodbyes are always somewhat dramatic, a little like theater, and I don't seem to be able to avoid feeling nostalgic about leaving Chile."

"We understand how it is, Joaquín, even though for us a feeling of freedom seems to surpass any sadness about leaving Chile," I said. "José Luis, was it okay for me to speak on your behalf too?"

"Yes, of course. My feelings are exactly like yours, Patricio. Tell me, Joaquín, is it just our idea, or was that young blond fellow waving the red handkerchief directing his goodbyes to you?"

"Yes, exactly, he came from Santiago to say goodbye. He's Wilhelm Arendt, the ballet dancer. We've had a very close relationship for the past three years."

“Would you like to have a drink with us upstairs and chat for a while?” I asked Joaquín, who was staring into space. José Luis immediately seconded my idea.

“Of course, I would be glad to accept. When you said upstairs, may I take it to mean that you are in first class?”

José Luis nodded proudly.

The three of us went to the upper deck in search of the least frequented bar, where already various passengers were sitting engaged in animated conversation. Joaquín asked for a whisky with soda, José Luis a martini, and I a gin and tonic. After taking a few strong sips from his drink, Joaquín began to unwind his tongue at a tremendous speed, telling about his relationship with Wilhelm. He was a young German lad who went to Chile at the insistence of Ernst Uthoff and Lola Botka, leaders in German expressionistic ballet, who had been contracted by the government of Chile to set up the first ballet corps and school in the country. They were successful from the beginning, culminating with the debut of *La Table Verte*, a successful satire of the United Nations, set as an agitated meeting around a table covered with green cloth.

Joaquín spoke calmly, although his tongue began to move with a touch of difficulty after his second whisky and soda. “I’ve had a very close relationship with Wilhelm,” he said, trying hard to concentrate on maintaining his demeanor. “Lately, though, things have not been going so well. Petty, imagined jealousies have become real problems. Leaving the country is going to be more of a problem for Wilhelm than for me, I think.” He made it obvious that the German ballet dancer was extremely possessive and that frankly he felt relieved by this separation. Nevertheless, there was no doubt that Joaquín suffered from a good dose of nostalgia and that he attempted to cover it up.

Neither was there any doubt that this young actor was feeling very alone, and, as time passed, he started sneaking to the upper decks visiting José Luis and me every day.



The announcement that the ship would soon arrive at the port of Callao in Perú, Lima's gate to the Pacific, caused a big commotion in the cabin shared by me and José Luis. We selected our best shirts, ties and suits, not only for the day, but for evening wear as well, since José Luis had contacted a prominent Peruvian friend and his wife who were fond of my charming and talented friend.

Thus, it was no surprise to José Luis to see their car waiting for him and me at the dock.

The ship docked at 10:30 AM. José Luis' friend's wife got out of the car just as soon as the gangplank was in place. After a warm embrace, José Luis introduced me; I noticed that this gracious and refined woman was extremely interested in learning the details about me. After a little tour around the San Isidro section of Lima, we were driven to a magnificent mansion where, amid elegant and tasteful furniture, paintings, and *objets d'art*, a tray with Pisco sours awaited us.

My thoughts turned immediately to my first moments in Lima with Jacques, from our chance meeting in that small elevator to our dinners together, sharing lengthy conversations, to the bottle of champagne on ice in Jacques' room. My chest filled with a lightness and joy that was difficult for me to contain. I felt, for the first time, truly at home with my decision to make a life with Jacques, and my happiness grew during these hours again in Lima.

That evening, José Luis' friend and his wife honored us at an elegant dinner party at their home. The dining room was radiant with its crystal chandeliers. Two large round tables were resplendent with fine silver, porcelain and crystal set within the spacious room.

Among the guests were the widow of a Peruvian senator, and a charming Lima society matron who headed an institution in charge of the restoration of buildings dating from colonial times. This cultured lady, who seemed to be in her second youth, took

a great deal of interest in me and insisted on introducing me to her husband over coffee, served after dinner in an adjoining room. Sergio, her husband, was an intellectual, and he showed an immediate interest in me.

During dinner I noticed that this man hardly removed his eyes from me. I also felt some attraction for this collector of pre-Columbian artifacts. He had a lean and pleasing body and his face was refreshing, with noble features and eyes that were pale and penetrating. His mode of speech was very expressive and he had a lively, captivating personality.

While his wife Carmen conversed with other guests, Sergio involved me in an intense conversation concerning the native Indian cultures in the region that is Perú, followed by an interrogation about my past and present, showering me with questions. Since the name of José Luis cropped up during Sergio's questioning, I offered to introduce him to Sergio.

"No, it isn't necessary because we have known each other for several years," he said.

"But you hardly spoke to him," I said. "Don't you want to catch up?"

The man smiled knowingly at me.

When it was time to leave, José Luis announced to me that Sergio and Carmen had invited us home for a nightcap before our return to the ship.

Sergio and Carmen's home was also located in the San Isidro section of Lima. It was an elegant and stately residence, but not as large as the home where we met. It was filled with Cuzqueño paintings, the special pleasure of Carmen who descended from an old Spanish family with just a drop of Indian blood that she referred to good-humoredly as the intruder in the family. Sergio, who had an avid interest in pre-Columbian artifacts, had assembled an important collection. Toward the end of our visit, and while José Luis and Carmen were involved in an intense conversation about that evening's dinner at their mutual friend's home, Sergio asked me to follow him to the second floor because he wanted

to show me a special pre-Columbian piece that dated from one of the oldest Peruvian cultures, called Vicus, which apparently started around the year seventeen hundred B.C.

I went along only to find myself trapped a few minutes later in a small area adjacent to the bedroom. Sergio's strong arm had pulled me close, and despite being thin and not very tall, Sergio had incredible strength. I attempted to free myself without making any noise, but Sergio held me even tighter and kissed me harshly on the lips. He breathed heavily and I could feel that this man was extremely aroused.

"Patricio, since the moment I laid eyes on you, I've felt attracted to you."

"But Sergio, let me go! This is crazy. Besides, you're being presumptuous. What made you think that I would be receptive?" Jacques' image flickered in my mind's eye, and I felt his absence dearly.

"José Luis told me. As I said earlier, we have been friends for years. He told me that you have a French friend who is waiting for you in Paris, but I couldn't help this impulse."

"Sergio, be reasonable. Your wife is a few steps away, and we've been up here too long already. Come on, let's go downstairs. It could get us both into a lot of trouble."

Finally, I convinced Sergio to go downstairs. I fondly recalled Jacques, his decorum and consideration until the time that I made my receptiveness clear. Our affair, in its infancy, had evolved with a timing that seemed like perfection. I missed Jacques immensely at that moment.

As Sergio and I returned to the others, we pretended to be having a conversation about the pieces in the collection. Fortunately, José Luis, suspiciously aware of what might be happening upstairs, had entertained Carmen, who undoubtedly knew of her husband's worldly inclinations but preferred to ignore them.



The next day, Joaquín visited José Luis and me, carefully sneaking up to the first class section.

“I’ve missed you both. Did you have a good time in Lima?”

José Luis and I practically stumbled over each other telling him about the magnificent reception given by José Luis’ friends, and went into detail about each little incident, even the one concerning Sergio’s attempted move on me.

“I’m not at all surprised by that episode,” said Joaquín.

I felt my face turning red, not so much because of Joaquín’s flattering words, but because I saw for the first time a kind of fire in his dark, shining eyes that embraced me in a warm glow, not unlike the sting of desire. Joaquín’s deeply tanned face and thick, sensuous lips no longer grimaced from sadness but now displayed a wide smile that showed his even white teeth. Whenever he smiled, two tiny dimples appeared on his cheeks, giving him a slightly sly look. During the stretch to Guayaquil in Ecuador, Joaquín was a constant and agreeable companion for me and José Luis.



News of the suicide, however, had plunged me into doubt about the course of my own life, and the hold-up because of the arrangements for the funeral gave me time to ponder. After the corpse passed by, so close and fearsome, I retired to my cabin, and José Luis confided to Joaquín that I seemed to dwell on this misfortune.

The following day I took a walk alone on the uppermost deck and did not return for lunch. Joaquín and José Luis found me in a state of near shock and despondency, and they each took one of my arms and helped me walk back to the cabin. There they laid me down on the bed and José Luis went to the bar to get a bottle of Panimávida water, or mineral water, since the water in the cabin was only for washing.

Meanwhile, Joaquín covered me with a blanket and put his arms

around my shoulders to keep me from shaking. I felt the warmth of Joaquín's cheek next to mine, and suddenly they touched. For me it was a surprise how calming this was. I looked at Joaquín with a gesture of appreciation that he took to mean passive submission. He immediately placed his thick and sensuous lips on mine. The warmth and weight of Joaquín's body produced a feeling of well-being in me that I couldn't avoid.

Joaquín's breathing became stronger and I felt extreme pleasure in the wet contact of those dark lips that sucked with such leisure and lack of insistence. Suddenly the cabin door opened. Joaquín separated himself quickly from me and I guess we both looked extremely embarrassed. It was José Luis, looking like a waiter with his tray of Panimávida water and a glass.

"Well, well, what a nice little surprise," said José Luis, with a sarcastic smile on his face. "I bet you feel a lot better now, Patricio. Here, since I brought it, have a sip of water."

"Thanks, José Luis, but you can put aside all of your sharp little digs and wipe that insipid smile off your face."

"Come, come, my friends, up until now we've all got along so well, and there's no sense messing it all up over a tiny little impulse of nature," Joaquín said.

"Some tiny impulse," José Luis interjected, and in that moment we all understood that José Luis was jealous. "You sure have a way of minimizing things, but after all, it doesn't really concern me, does it?"

"Let's all go up to the upper deck bar. What I really need instead of water is a strong drink, and it wouldn't do you two any harm either," I said.

All three of us went up to the little informal bar on the top deck beside the swimming pool. There was still a certain air of commotion among the passengers. José Luis told us that as he was walking toward the bar to get the water he had to venture out onto the deck at one point, and he could hear the murmur of the funeral sermon followed by the sound of something heavy falling into the sea.

That was the epilogue of an incident that had been a bit macabre for the passengers, who had come together as survivors do after a tragedy passes. Everyone now speculated about the reaction of the victim's husband who waited for her in England. Would they notify him by radio, or would they inform the port authorities, or would some government agency handle the matter? They all wondered how things of this nature were handled legally. What would be done with her personal belongings until they reached port? The passengers never learned the answers to these questions that they whispered amongst themselves.

Once we were back in the privacy of our cabin, and because of our close friendship, José Luis asked me about my thoughts concerning Joaquín's amorous impulses toward me. José Luis insinuated that he had noticed I was receptive. He pointed out the danger in pursuing the affair, considering my circumstances and the purpose of my trip to France. Besides, it could all be a rather cruel game involving the sentiments of another person, in spite of the fact that Joaquín still seemed to be tied up somewhat with the ballet dancer.

After this conversation I felt uneasy. It had been several months since I had seen Jacques. The fact that I was ending my trip in France was clear to me. Nevertheless, my contacts with Jacques had been rather brief, and distance had separated us for a long time. On the other hand, I told myself that a purely physical attraction between me and Joaquín could not possibly weaken or place in danger my true relationship with Jacques, which was filled with a great deal of mutual understanding.

Well, I lectured myself, there is no use making myself a nervous wreck about these impulses. What is done is done, and I think I can be excused because I am off balance, literally at sea, where perhaps nothing counts.

These thoughts placated my conscience and I decided not to place any limits on my impulses. This fortuitous relationship, whatever it might be, would not last longer than the trip. I liked Joaquín's company, and besides, it flattered my ego that he

seemed to be so intensely attracted to me. That little grimace of unhappiness and mental abstractedness disappeared as if by magic each time that he got together with me, and his eyes sparkled with an incredible force. I loved the protective halo that Joaquín surrounded me with and found solace in his decisive physical strength that expressed itself in an almost aggressive way, but always gentle and sweet.



The crossing through the Panama Canal caused great excitement among the passengers, some of whom stayed awake until the wee hours of the morning just to see the locks filling with water and the ship being lifted and lowered. We three Chileans decided to stay together during all of these events and shared excursions out in the ports of Balboa and Panama City where I bought a portable Baby Hermes typewriter with all the necessary accents for writing in the Spanish language.

By the time we arrived in Jamaica, the three of us already knew a lot of the other passengers of various nationalities, among whom was an elderly married couple from Italy. José Luis had noticed that this Italian gentleman constantly watched him and me during meals. His wife seemed to be timid, or to be more exact, totally indifferent to everything that happened around her. She also seemed to be a bit older than her husband.

Dining alone one day, he finally dared to speak to us; we responded cordially. He never asked anything pointed about the lives of the two of us, and, by the same token, he clothed himself in a kind of veil. This elegant and mysterious Italian gentleman developed an enormous affinity for José Luis, who adored conversing with him about theater, as well as art, since the Italian seemed to be well versed in both cultures.

When the ship arrived in Jamaica we went out touring in two different groups, one headed by me and Joaquín, and the other by José Luis and the Italian couple. In one stolen moment, José Luis

and the man were able to commune and embrace, but they never did achieve the libertine pleasures enjoyed by me and Joaquín.

By the time we docked at Havana, José Luis was in an inflamed state. Everything was new for us three in old Havana, the city of sin we had heard so much about. Just the thought of being exposed to a world that was so much freer than our own country thrilled us.

After a general tour of the city, and a lengthy walk around the old section of Havana with its many buildings in classic Spanish architecture, we got into a cab in search of the secret services offered in abundance in that city.

“Could you take us to a place that has one of these live shows, you know, live sex shows?” José Luis whispered to the driver.

I laughed at José Luis’ comic urgency, but I myself was curious and Joaquín was blatantly enthusiastic.

The taxi driver drove us to a slightly run down three-story house that looked as if it dated from the end of the nineteenth century, painted grey on the exterior and rather sad looking. The driver rang the doorbell and told us that he would wait in front of the house where he had parked the taxi. After a rather long time that made us slightly nervous, a woman in her fifties appeared. Her hair was somewhat uncombed and untidy looking, and she wore far too much makeup.

“What do you señores want?”

“Well, you see,” began José Luis, his voice faltering slightly, “the truth is that we want to see a sex show.” His face turned totally red.

“Oh, but it’s way too early, my dears. Those things start around midnight. Come back at eleven.”

“Unfortunately, by that time we will already be gone. We’re passengers on a ship,” José Luis said with a disappointed tone in his voice.

“Do you gentlemen have any idea just how much all of this would cost?”

“No, we don’t have the slightest idea.”

“Well, at this time of the day, if I can fix something up, it’s going to cost you fifty pesos.”

We looked at each other and in unison nodded our heads. The woman asked us to come in and told us to wait in a small room decorated all in red to the right of the entrance hall.

Before she left, José Luis screwed his courage and announced:

“Actually, what we really want to see is a sex show involving men only.”

“Well, isn’t that just something! It’s not enough what you’ve already asked for, and now, at five in the afternoon, when all of the actors are sleeping or recovering from last night’s hard work ... Oh well, wait here and I’ll go and see what the boss lady has to say.”

With that she disappeared, muttering to herself and making a great deal of noise as her high heels clattered up the stairs.

The house smelled of cheap perfume mixed with kitchen odors, strange spices and incense, all floating in a suffocating humidity. All three of us felt anguished, as if to say, “Now what have we got ourselves into?”

“Do you want to leave?” José Luis asked.

Joaquín and I looked at each other indecisively. Joaquín only wanted to please me. However, with my nature, it would have required a whole day to decide how I really felt about the whole matter. Following a few moments of silence we heard footsteps coming down the stairs. The woman with the uncombed hair entered the little room, saying:

“Come upstairs with me. It’s all arranged, except for one thing—we were only able to get a man and a woman.”

This was a big disappointment for us, but because of our limitless curiosity, coupled with an air of mystery and the fact that it was all a little bit dirty and off color, we forced ourselves to go through with the strange, new experience.

“Oh, just one more thing. You have to pay in advance,” she said, smiling and shaking her head.

After we paid, the woman with the excessive makeup took us into a rather large room at the end of which was a big double bed in the French style covered with a red velvet counterpane. Over it hung a gold-leafed valance centered on the wall behind the bed with two flowing velvet draperies cascading down on either side. At the foot of the bed was a chaise lounge with a very attractive, dark-skinned semi-nude young woman reclining over it. She had a thin waist and large breasts, and a sensual mouth with dark red lips, obviously painted to look like garnets. She possessed a provocative smile and her teeth were white. Surprisingly for her age, her voice was incredibly deep.

“Come closer, darlings.” She began to move and touch her body in the most sensual ways possible. She had good legs, and when she lifted them you could see a slightly dark shadow under the thin skirt at the point where they met. Her well-formed breasts were covered by an extremely small brassiere and moved up and down with the rhythm of her breathing. Over a span of ten minutes or so, she did everything imaginable to awaken in us some form of sexual appetite, and in any man with desire for a woman she would have succeeded. With us, however, her efforts were to no avail.

When it became obvious to her that she was making no headway, this Semiramis plying her trade in a poor bordello got to her feet and rang a bell next to the bed. A few minutes later a naked young man in his early twenties entered the room. He was a bit pudgy with long, kinky hair and his overall looks were ordinary and common. He introduced himself, saying that his name was Jorge, and immediately informed us that he didn’t mind being “played with” if we so desired.

All three of us declined the offer. In order to end once and for all this whole grotesque episode, we insinuated that we wanted to see him perform with the girl. Jorge then began to sensuously caress the woman, but his movements and techniques weren’t at all convincing, and some of his motions were slightly effeminate. He wasn’t even able to achieve an erection. Sensing this, the

woman at that point used her mouth in an effort to stimulate his pathetic organ, but even with her assistance he was only able to achieve a semi-erect state. Suddenly the woman grabbed his limp tool and stuck it inside her, moaning and groaning and talking dirty at the same time in a feigned effort to act as if she were enjoying herself. After just a few minutes, she roughly pushed Jorge away and screamed, “Maricón—queer! You came inside me!”

The show was over. It was so obvious that the whole thing had been a complete failure and that these two blasé employees of the bordello simply wanted to get things over with so that they could go and rest. The madam didn’t want to lose the little bit of extra afternoon money and, without a doubt, had forced these two to work for their living.

We were extremely disappointed. It was nothing like what we had expected to see in sinful Havana. As we got ready to leave, we heard the click-clack of the madam’s shoes rapidly approaching. She stormed into the room, out of breath from rushing up the stairs, and in a hoarse voice managed to say:

“My dears, don’t leave yet. If you’re willing to fork over another fifty pesos, I’ve got two good looking fellows for you, who have just this minute returned from vacation and are really in the mood to do some special work if you’re interested.”

José Luis, Joaquín and I looked at each other with an expression of disbelief mixed with timidity. We finally asked the madam to give us two seconds alone to reach a decision. Our answer was a unanimous “yes.” When the boss lady had the money in her fist, she quickly left to get the new performers.

The minute the two Cuban boys walked into the room, we were completely sold. They were a handsome mixture of Spanish with Negro and Indian blood, and even though they were rather short, their bodies were well formed and extremely sexy.

Their eyes sparkled roguishly as they introduced themselves, and the voices that emerged from their sensuous lips were definitely macho. What a fabulous couple! The three of us couldn’t help but gasp a little just from seeing them. This was precisely

what we had had in mind when first arriving in Havana earlier that day.

The Cubans caressed and touched each other in a way that made it clear that this was not the first time they had tried to please each other. They lay in positions so that their audience could see every detail of their dance. They took turns teasing each other by sticking the tip of their tongues in the other's mouth so that we could easily see, and they started French kissing with a fury.

Then they got into a sixty-nine position. This proved too much for us. By now we all had enormous erections that hurt inside our tight trousers. Although embarrassed, we were so aroused by then that there was no turning back.

I couldn't help noticing how well hung José Luis was. Even though we had shared the same cabin and bathroom during this voyage, I had never before noticed this particular attribute because I had previously just thought of him as a friend, but now I was getting excited.

It was at that moment that the Cuban youths got up and offered themselves to the three of us. One of them grabbed José Luis by the hips and went down on him. The other decided to have a *ménage à trois* with Joaquín and me. Nearby José Luis and the other Cuban rolled around on the floor, mutually enraptured. Soon all that could be seen was our sweaty bodies recovering on the floor.

As we came to our senses, I recalled that the taxi was waiting for us. Although still a bit unsteady, we all quickly dressed, kissed the two Cubans goodbye, and made our way down to the street and our waiting driver, each sure that the others would seldom, if ever, mention the particulars of this small drama again.

As the driver sped back to the dock, I leaned on Joaquín's shoulder. I recalled now with some humility the scene that evening in Lima, when Alvaro had foisted the orgy on me. What made today different was my own daring, this carefree, welcome period of my life, between destinations, between my two lives, adrift.



The longest stretch of the crossing without ports of call was between Bermuda and the Spanish port of Vigo. During this long lap the semi-closeness of the trip's end began to worry me. I started thinking more about Jacques, and my feelings toward him were becoming stronger than the purely physical attraction I felt for Joaquín. My relationship with the latter had already lost the magic of the unknown. My conscience also bothered me, especially because my sensitivity told me that Joaquín's feelings for me were much more serious than a mere sexual fling.

The announcement of the ship's imminent arrival at the Iberian peninsula caught me by surprise. With my characteristic indecision and slowness, I decided to leave for some other occasion my conversation with Joaquín concerning our situation.

When the ship reached La Coruña, we organized an excursion to the historical city of Santiago de Compostela. The old part of the city was fascinating, with its magnificent noble mansions, many of them three stories high, with slanted roofs covered with old tiles, and some showing ivy climbing on their walls. The memorable beauty of the place inspired romance in Joaquín, and he boldly tried to take hold of my hand as we walked. Fearing that other tourists might be watching, I shook my hand away, and at that moment I refused to look at Joaquín, who was wounded.

With the arrival of the ship at Santander in northern Spain, my uneasiness increased. After dinner, as we promenaded on the deck as had become our custom, I struggled with myself to find the right way to launch the needed conversation.

"The quality of the light here is nothing like that of home, and I thought it would be identical for some reason," Joaquín said.

"Joaquín, you know that I have never had serious intentions of pursuing this relationship once we part," I said, with my tendency toward abruptness.

"So you don't want me to interfere with your ulterior motives," Joaquín shot back with a hardness that surprised me.

“Well, for me it was nothing more than a nice friendship and company.” I stuttered to get out the words.

But Joaquín’s face was gray, and the same grimace that he had when the ship left the port of Valparaíso returned to his mouth, twisting it bitterly. His eyes were sad, and he blinked them repeatedly to keep the tears back. Then there was silence, which made me uneasy. Finally Joaquín turned around and without a single word, his head lowered and shoulders slouching, walked slowly and sadly away.

I was desolate when I realized the profound impact my words had had on Joaquín. The thought that I had inflicted so much hurt and disillusionment on another human being filled me with a horrible sensation of guilt. I felt that it had been dirty to play with Joaquín’s feelings and sentiments at a frankly difficult time in this young man’s life, when he was trying to leave his country and escape from his family environment and his own personal situation. Because it was all so similar to my own circumstances, I felt even worse.

Joaquín never again appeared in the first class section, as he was accustomed to do, to see us. When José Luis tried to invite him to organize an outing in the city of Bilbao just before we reached that port, Joaquín declined the invitation without any explanation. José Luis actually was relieved because he understood without asking that I had done what I had to do to prepare for my new, unencumbered life in France.

Chapter X

I became extremely nervous as the ship approached the dock in Plymouth. In the distance a large group of people waited for the passengers. As the ship got closer and closer, the crowd became more and more excited and people ran constantly from one place to another in order to see their loved ones better.

“Calm down, Patricio,” José Luis said, “your hands are trembling.”

“If Jacques isn’t waiting for me on the dock I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“He’ll be there.”

“I don’t see him. I don’t see anyone who looks like him.”

“He promised you that he would, and from what you’ve told me, you can tell he’s a serious person.”

“But what if he’s had a last minute conflict or even an accident?”
I was now the comic one, entertaining José Luis.

“Patricio, you’re too much. You always have to look at the dark side of things. I’m certain that he will be waiting just as anxiously as you. Have you packed all your bags? Are you sure you haven’t forgotten anything? What about your passport? Everything else can fall into the sea, but you need that.”

“Yes, I’ve got everything,” I said, as I nervously patted the strategic areas of my jacket. My eyes never left the fast-approaching dock.

“Look, I think I can make him out. The one standing next to the wooden post, with dark hair, glasses, yes, and he’s wearing a grey suit.”

I raised my hand and waved nervously. Jacques knew that I would be on the top deck and that I was traveling with a Chilean friend. Suddenly Jacques also raised his arm.

“Patricio, he’s answering you. Quick, wave to him.”

“Yes, I’m doing it, see? You wave to him too. He already knows you’re with me.”

For me it seemed like an eternity before the ship finally docked. Quickly and nervously I arranged for our cabin boy to transport José Luis’ and my baggage down on to the dock. The two of us then hurriedly rushed down the gangplank to the pier.

Jacques’ dark eyes were moist from emotion and after kissing me on each cheek, he gave me a big, tight hug, unconcerned about this public display. I felt as if I had come home to comfort after my days adrift.

Finally I broke the embrace, concerned about appearances.

“Jacques, I want you to meet José Luis, who couldn’t have been a more perfect traveling companion.”

They looked each other over carefully, the way people always do when first meeting, and smiled pleasantly. Then the three of us made our way to the customs area where our bags awaited us. Jacques suggested that we have lunch together before taking the train to London, since there was plenty of time. José Luis was more than happy to accept, because he had the same destination.

This greatly relieved me, since I was still painfully worried about how to adapt myself to my new proximity to Jacques. At the same time, I could not wait to have Jacques to myself for several hours, so that the passions that so richly overcame me upon sighting him could dissipate themselves in joy.

But the hours passed slowly for me. Jacques took us to an elegant but discreet restaurant in the downtown section of the city. His questions concerning our trip by ship soothed our nerves. Jacques was totally charming with both of us, but of course, without being able to avoid giving me long, tender and very special little glances from time to time. As far as I was concerned, there had been no time on the ship, no interferences, nothing but an arrival in the arms of my most beloved friend.

The train trip was relatively short, and José Luis and I were totally fascinated watching the passing landscape that was so

new to us, as well as observing the British passengers with their characteristic coldness and indifference, so unlike the Latin world. Arriving in London, José Luis and I had to go our separate ways, at least for a while, since he would be staying with South American friends.

When Jacques and I reached the Ritz in Piccadilly, where he had reserved a luxurious room for the occasion, the first thing I observed was the pleasantly familiar bottle of champagne waiting for us in a silver cooler. Just as soon as the baggage porter had left our room, Jacques took me in his arms tenderly but firmly and gave me a prolonged kiss on my lips. He suddenly pulled away a bit in order to observe me face to face.

“You look better than ever, Patricio, and, if you don’t mind my saying, a bit more mature than when I last saw you. You have no idea how much I have been looking forward to being with you.”

“So have I, Jacques. This long wait has seemed like an eternity, and resolving all of my own personal problems, some of which were pretty complicated, was a nightmare. But now it’s all in the past and all I want to do is forget it.”

“You’re right, now we start a new life. We’ve got a lot to talk about,” he said, popping the cork with some ceremony, and pouring one glass for me. He held it out, but I shook my head and stared into Jacques’ eyes.

Jacques spoke. “All I want to do is enjoy your warm body.”

We forgot about the champagne and fell blissfully into a frantic entwining of arms and legs, of breathing and perspiration, until we reached that divine ecstasy so longed for by both during those many months when we were apart.



When I awoke the following morning, Jacques was already up, and I heard the shower running in the bathroom. Beside my pillow I found a small, handsomely wrapped package with a card attached: For Patricio, the true love of my life.

I was filled with curiosity and quickly opened it to find inside a handsome tiepin. The base was of gold and at the top was a pearl surrounded by small rose-cut diamonds, typical of antique jewelry. This tiny jewel was of fine craftsmanship and original in style. It reflected Jacques' perception of my love of things antique, and perhaps even promised a life in the arts for me.

When Jacques came out of the bathroom wearing a terry-cloth bath robe, he found me still in bed, beckoning to him with wide open arms. Jacques sat down on the edge of the bed, and I, moved by such an elegant gesture, said to him, "Jacques, you are exactly the way I imagined you to be. Your perception and generosity are really flattering. This reminds me, I have a gift for you too. It won't be as splendid as yours, but it comes with all of my tremendous affection for you, and I hope that you will always think of me when you use it."

"Whatever it might be, coming from you it will make me very happy," Jacques said. He kissed me once more, and I marveled at how much emotion each of Jacques' kisses aroused in me. "But Patricio, I don't need an object to make me feel your presence inside of me always."

I got up, opened my handbag and took out a small packet, also wrapped in gift paper, which I placed in Jacques' open hands. Quickly and filled with obvious curiosity, Jacques opened his gift. It was a gold money clip with a minuscule diamond surrounded by radiating lines to make it look like a star. Jacques' eyes sparkled with satisfaction. He hugged me so tightly that he practically took away my breath, and promised to use the money clip for the rest of his life.

While in London, Jacques had to attend to certain business matters. I took advantage of the time to tour with José Luis. We visited museums, historic sites, and the tailors whose Anglo-Saxon taste had been faithfully copied by my own tailor in Santiago. But I lived in expectation of my departure for Paris, the dreamed-of city.

At last the moment arrived. Following a farewell dinner with

José Luis, Jacques and I went to Victoria Station, where we caught the train that would take us to a waiting ship for the Channel crossing to France. Jacques had reserved a private compartment with two large seats facing each other that could be turned down into beds at night.

When we arrived at the Channel port after a brief trip, I was keenly interested in seeing how the wagons of the train were detached from the engine and pulled onto the rails of the ferry by a huge machine, then pushed along inside the vessel to special holding areas. At a little past midnight, the ferry pulled away from the dock. I was so excited that I ran up on deck to see the lights of the port with the city in the background as they pulled slowly away into a calm sea. A pleasant breeze blew on the deck.

Jacques enjoyed seeing my enthusiasm and excitement. Once the lights of the port were lost from view, the two of us went down to our private compartment on the train to spend the remainder of a night that, for both of us, seemed to begin our journey together.

The following morning we were awakened by the movement of the train cars being taken off the ship. We ate an early breakfast in the dining car. The landscape became visible in the faint light of dawn, and the dining car began to fill with passengers, several of whom spoke French. I again felt that sensation of finding myself in a foreign country where no one knew me. It surrounded me with a mystical halo and that feeling of freedom that I had dreamed of for so long.

When the conductor announced that our train was approaching Paris, I insisted on standing upon the deck area between the cars where the metal steps for getting on and off were folded under the floor of the coach. Outside, I had to make an effort to breathe in the rushing air.

Little by little it slowed down. Suddenly I saw in the distance the church of the Sacré Coeur high up on Montmartre. At that point tears of joy ran freely down my cheeks, and Jacques, who watched me, grasped the metal railing while he held onto me with

his other hand.



The first step of Jacques' plan was to install me in the Hotel Crillon in the Place de la Concorde, in the heart of Paris. The location couldn't have been better, and there was a station of Paris' fabulous *métro* that I would quickly learn to use, right under the big square. Jacques had chosen this fashionable hotel, going back to the eighteenth century, with much thought.

The dining room was especially elegant with its crystal chandeliers and murals of classical themes on the ceiling, and that is where we shared our first meal in Paris. The walls were flanked with enormous columns and covered with mirrors that made this already large room look even bigger. Sumptuous flower arrangements were everywhere. Jacques had made it clear that the expenses of my stay at the hotel would be totally covered.

I felt extremely happy and at ease in this exuberantly luxurious atmosphere. It was comfortable and at the same time its antique style conformed perfectly with my most intimate desires.

The next step was not so easy for me. Inevitably, Jacques had to introduce me to his wife and daughter, since he had already told them about the arrival of a Chilean friend whom he had met in Lima, Perú.

I had spent my first few days getting to know the areas closest to the hotel, walking through the Tuileries Gardens and the Champs Elysées. I was fascinated with the view from the Place de la Concorde looking toward the Arc de Triomphe, as well as the projection from the Rue Royale to the Église de la Madeleine. In the afternoons Jacques would arrive at the Hotel Crillon after work at his office. We chatted over cocktails until about 8:30, when Jacques would go to his home for dinner.

After three days, when Jacques announced that the next day, Thursday, I was to dine at his house, I felt undone. I had been living in fear of this moment. Jacques tried to calm me by saying that

his wife was really a very sweet, passive woman. Nevertheless, the idea of the existence of two beings who shared with me the sentiments of love and attraction for Jacques, and even more, the same house, left me in a state of uneasiness, with all kinds of doubts and mixed feelings.

Thursday arrived. Jacques came to the hotel to get me. I had set my mind to face firmly the reality of the evening, but my legs trembled as I walked from the car to the entrance of that austere and imposing mansion in the sixteenth arrondissement. A uniformed butler opened the door, greeted us and told the master of the house that his wife and daughter were waiting for us in the library.

The door to the library was opened so quickly that I was taken by surprise as I gazed enraptured at the magnificent entrance hall. I hardly had time to react when suddenly I was face to face with a woman of about thirty-five, rather small and lithe. She had a discreet, expectant smile and her eyes were slightly sloped with a rather melancholic expression, but extremely observant.

Her dress was elegant, but sober and of a light brown color that matched her hair. Her whole appearance gave one the impression of being modest and totally void of presumptuousness. Their daughter, who had just turned nine, was rather tall for her age and looked amazingly like Jacques. This shook me to my deepest foundations.

“Patricio, I want you to meet my wife, Jeanne, and my daughter, Claudine,” Jacques said after giving each a kiss.

Coming from an old and traditional European family, I made the gesture of kissing this lovely lady’s hand with just a slight inclination of my head. Then I kissed Claudine on each cheek, and indeed found it difficult to stop looking at this replica of Jacques. These two new persons in my life scrutinized me with eyes full of pleasant surprise, perhaps not expecting a man quite so much younger than Jacques. Although somewhat timid at the beginning, they both warmed up shortly after my arrival.

Jacques had been discreet in describing his new friendship

to the family, speaking more than anything else about his social indebtedness to me and my friends for the affectionate reception shown him during his stay in South America, exaggerating his story in order to fabricate a justification in Jeanne's eyes for following up a friendship that one might well judge as being nonsensical.

"I had no idea that Jacques owned such a magnificent home," I said, gaining confidence. "But his true prize is his family, that much is obvious."

Jeanne and Claudine warmed to my enthusiasm and compliments. This reception caused me to relax almost immediately, and I soon began to feel comfortable.

"Tell me, Patricio, how do you plan to spend your time in Paris?" Jeanne asked.

I held a fist to my lips then coughed.

Jacques answered immediately. "He has been accepted at the Beaujon Hospital for an internship with a medical doctor whose specialty is pediatrics," Jacques paused.

In my nervousness, I launched into an overly extended explanation of the challenges attached to determining ailments in small children that cannot yet talk, as compared with adults who can easily describe their symptoms, until I saw Jacques' bemused look.

While we sipped sherry, which the butler had discreetly left on a silver tray, Claudine watched every one of my moves with those large, sparkling black eyes, so similar to her father's. Sweetness and kindness issued from Jeanne, and this, combined with her grace and charm of motion, also greatly affected me.

Jeanne asked question upon question about my first impressions of Paris, my long voyage by ship, and life and customs in Santiago and the rest of South America. She displayed a true, avid interest in knowing more about me, perhaps because I may have appeared so different from the people she saw and dealt with on a daily basis. Both Jeanne and Claudine appeared enthralled by my stories of faraway, exotic countries. Jeanne looked at me with intriguing, darting eyes.

Dinner proved to be extremely cordial and pleasant. Jeanne had gone out of her way in selecting a special menu, accompanied by two different, excellent wines. Jacques had wanted to have an intimate dinner on this first occasion so that Jeanne, Claudine and I could get to know each other without the interference of other invited guests, and the courses, from the simple mushrooms à la Grecque to the filet mignon to the deftly prepared tarte tatin—upside-down apple cake—were a great success. Mercifully, I thought, the food was so delectable that there was not much room for conversation during the meal, although as a dutiful hostess Jeanne tried to keep the ball afloat.

Coffee was served in one of the drawing rooms, where I had the opportunity to admire the paintings, furniture, draperies and fine carpets that decorated the room. I grew wistful, wishing that I could spend more time in this marvelous household.

When I felt that sufficient time had elapsed, I discreetly expressed my desire to leave. Jacques immediately offered to take me back to the hotel in his car. When I bent to kiss Jeanne's hand, she made a slight backward movement with her head as if she were saying "no." That momentarily paralyzed me with uncertainty. Gently, however, she touched her cheek with her hand and moved her head so that I could kiss her face. This simple motion told me that she liked me and wanted to give me her friendship, a gesture that impressed me enormously. Jacques said good-bye to his wife, telling her that he would return shortly and, giving her a kind, thankful look, left the room with me.



"Patricio, I'm so proud of you. This first evening in my home has been an all-around success," Jacques said, as he navigated the bright evening streets of Paris.

"I think so," I said cautiously. I almost commented on how much Jeanne seemed to notice, but decided not to touch the subject of Jacques' wife.

"I knew that it couldn't be any other way. Even my little Claudine has totally fallen for you," Jacques enthused. "She has never stayed up as late, even for family affairs. She devoured everything you said and never once tired."

"I hope that all of this won't ever cause a problem, Jacques." I wanted Jacques to look at me, seriously, but Jacques continued.

"I don't see it that way, Patricio. They simply think you're great, that's all. It is the beginning of good times for us, and things are going more smoothly than I even dreamed." Jacques kept up his light, elated banter all the way to the Hotel Crillon, and I understood just how nervous Jacques too must have been.

With my greatest dread conquered—meeting the family—I slept better that night than in all the nights since my arrival in Paris.

Chapter XI

Jacques told me that he and Jeanne had gotten into the habit of dining out on Saturdays, unless they were invited socially. Saturday was the alternate day off for some of the servants. It was a good excuse to get out of the usual routine and get to know some of the most fashionable or new restaurants in the city. Quite often Jacques and Jeanne would invite close friends to these weekly outings. From then on, I could easily join them on Saturdays as if I were a member of the family.

On my first Saturday with them, I would be included in an entourage of four that included one of the couple's friends. Hubert had invited all of us to first have an aperitif at his home, and then Jacques had chosen a famous restaurant in Les Halles called *Au Pied de Cochon*.

Hubert's family home was not too far from the Crillon on a street somewhere between my hotel and the Arc de Triomphe. It was a quiet street with fairly well kept upper middle-class homes. After effusively greeting Jeanne and Jacques, Hubert quickly and rather clumsily welcomed me without even hearing the conventional words of introduction that Jacques attempted to mumble.

Hubert added some rather nebulous words of welcome to his country, as if he had heard long stories about me. He scrutinized me intensely with his small, slanted eyes. I was disappointed by his rather deplorable physical appearance for such a young man. He was short and, in spite of being slender, his frame was broad. His slouch made him look like a bookworm. Despite these physical defects, however, Hubert appeared to be very agile.

Hubert led the way to a large salon whose floor was covered by oriental carpets. The furniture was gilded and in the Louis

XVI style, giving the room a touch of opulence and elegance. He excused himself repeatedly for having only port to offer his guests, adding that due to his father's stinginess there was nothing stronger in the house.

"I'm afraid you might not be keen on what I can provide to drink," Hubert said, surveying me.

Jacques and Jeanne asked Hubert if he wouldn't mind showing me his home, which had been built in the nineteenth century. They particularly wanted me to see Hubert's father's collection of paintings from the Fauve period.

"Here is a sketch by Matisse for the Dance of the Spring," Hubert said, as if he had told the story one too many times.

"This has more facial detail than the usual Matisse," I observed.

"That's right," Hubert said, impressed with this stranger's knowledge of the artist and the art movement. "In fact, Matisse likes to strip it all down to the barest form. I think I like this better than the one in the Hermitage."

Although I favored antiquities myself, nevertheless I was charmed by the color and wild gaiety of the Matisses, Derains, and Vlamincks in this otherwise staid home. I felt as free as one of the nymphs on the canvas just then, when I looked at Jacques just across this room from me in Paris. *Luxe, calme, et volupté*—Jacques would have made an excellent subject for the Fauves, with his fiery personal sensibility tempered by the coolness of the orderly French mind. I still had to tap myself to make sure it was all real.



Les Halles was crowded that evening. The streets were filled with people and rather noisy. Jacques had a difficult time finding a parking space. The dinner progressed along extremely friendly lines with everyone getting along together wonderfully well, but it was difficult for me to show a true liking for Jacques' friend

who, in spite of his perfect courtesy, always seemed to be hiding something, unless he truly lacked depth and was trying to cover it up with an air of mystery.

Later, when they dropped me off at my hotel, Hubert insisted on having lunch with me the following Monday, and I agreed to wait for him at the Crillon at one o'clock.

That Monday dawned sunny and bright, and I decided to wear a grey suit I had bought in London. Coincidentally, Hubert arrived wearing a grey suit. We looked at each other and burst out laughing. This broke the ice on what might have been an awkward meeting.

Hubert's shoulders still slouched, and his head appeared to be sunk between them, making him look even smaller. His light brown hair was all plastered down on his head, giving him a greasy, unkempt look. I began to wonder if eschewing daily baths was a bad habit of the French in general. Hubert actually looked dirty in broad daylight. We walked toward the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. In short order, I learned that Hubert's mother had divorced his father and was now married to a man of Swiss nationality. Following this second marriage she had left France and never again showed the slightest interest in her only son. This situation had left Hubert in a state of depression. I murmured sympathies and wondered at Hubert's total self-preoccupation.

Moving past a row of stores and packed cafés where the patrons all seemed to be mired in intimate confessions, we reached a little restaurant that Hubert said he patronized often.

The place was simple but neat, and the waiters obviously knew Hubert to be an *habitué* of the establishment. The food was as plain as the place's decor, but savory. Hubert wanted me to taste a pot-au-feu—boiled beef with vegetables—as it was one of the specialties of that restaurant. I was glad I had taken his advice, and admired Hubert's quick intelligence and rich tastes.

We sipped some tea after lunch, and just as I had begun to relax, Hubert flooded me with a sort of confession about his own relationship with Jacques.

"We met in a *pissoitière* near the *métro* in Montmartre," Hubert said.

"A what?"

"A public street urinal," Hubert said. "I was not looking for anyone in particular, I promise you. But I felt those eyes upon me, and I could not resist the temptation to speak to him. And it changed my life."

At this point, Hubert stopped abruptly in order to observe my reaction. I looked at him in total silence with what I hoped was a mask of indifference, although I feared I wore a rather incredulous look on my face.

"There has never been another man for me, since Jacques, but he decided that the vows of his marriage must mean more to him than the paper license he signed," Hubert said. "So now I am relegated to the role of friend and confidant. It is irritating, but better than nothing."

Dumbfounded, I nodded.

"So I go along with these family dinners, and that is about the extent of my satisfaction with Jacques. A few polite words, greetings to his family, and then nothing until the next meal. It had all been so promising when it commenced, you know."

After listening to more details of what appeared to be a story that Hubert was embellishing a bit here and there, I began to think that what I was hearing might well be basically true. Was Hubert deliberately trying to weaken my relationship with Jacques? Although it might prove embarrassing, I could always corroborate the facts with Jacques. It was difficult for me to picture Jacques even using one of those fetid street latrines. Perhaps Jacques actually had ulterior motives for using such despicable, common, places. If indeed Jacques and Hubert did meet under those circumstances, it was also obvious that at some time they must have engaged in an affair.

It hurt that Jacques had lied to me about being his only lover since he married. Nevertheless, I listened to Hubert with extreme interest, filing away all of the sordid details. Hubert's speech

was so nervous and fast that I never had the chance to ask any questions, and I was grateful that Hubert never inquired about my personal life.

When Hubert's bout of therapeutic babbling was over, he suddenly changed the subject, telling me that he had been in touch with a lady friend of his family to see if she would arrange to let me move into her home as a paying guest. The lady was a French countess, a widow living in a large apartment located in an old nineteenth-century building. The countess was currently pinched for funds, and was willing to accept a paying guest, providing that said person would be known to and recommended to her by close friends.

Naturally I was extremely interested in the idea, and Hubert promised that he would contact the countess the next day and let me know something concerning the matter as soon as possible.

It was obvious to me that Hubert had invited me to lunch in order to get acquainted with me more closely before making any further move concerning the matter. I could tell that Hubert was sold on the idea of my living with the countess, especially after getting to know me better and by observing my manners and physical appearance. I left the luncheon certain that I would be accepted into the home of the countess. Luck was on my side in this city, or so I felt in those buoyant early days of my stay.

When Jacques saw me that afternoon, he anxiously asked how my luncheon engagement with Hubert had turned out. He especially wanted to know if we had talked about the possibility of working out some sort of congenial arrangement with the lady Hubert had in mind.

"You told him to arrange for a new home for me, didn't you?" I asked.

"No, I didn't," Jacques said.

"But how have you explained my presence to Hubert?" I questioned again.

"He knows only that you are a great friend of mine from across the world, and that is reason enough for Hubert to try to help you.

It was his idea,” Jacques said. He cocked his head and looked at me skeptically. “Hubert probably suspects the full nature of our bond, but he doesn’t have to know all of our secrets.”

“I know all of his secrets—with you,” I said without looking at Jacques.

Jacques hesitated, searching for an answer.

“You know, I was afraid that that scoundrel would use the opportunity to bring out his cutting tools and try to bring about a rift between you and me. It’s true, we did meet that way, and believe it or not, I’m ashamed of it. I never dreamed that I would be capable of doing something like that, but at the time things were rather rough for me and I guess I didn’t have my wits together. All of that happened long before I met you, maybe three years ago. I trust that you have enough kindness and understanding in your heart to forgive me.”

As I listened to Jacques’ words, I couldn’t help but recall my own dissipated deeds with Joaquín on the very ship that was bringing me to Europe to be with Jacques. I, of all people, did not have the right to condemn, or for that matter, even criticize Jacques concerning that risqué incident, or any other flirtatious incidents he may have had in the past.

“Of course I forgive you, Jacques,” I said, closing the subject, so that he wouldn’t ask me the same kinds of questions. “I also know that you and Hubert are just friends now.”

“Thank you, Patricio. You’re a generous and warm person who comprehends the pitfalls of real life. To be fully truthful about it, my initial encounter with Hubert was nothing but an act of simple curiosity at a moment in my life when I was desperately searching for someone to rid me of my own doubts and tribulations. Hubert is a very intelligent person with a great deal of class, although his physical appearance is not exactly an asset.” Jacques paused and I smiled. “Hubert is normally discreet and I feel that he compromised that quality with you out of sheer jealousy. You see, he is still attached to me in spite of the fact that I cannot reciprocate his feelings in the way he would like except by giving

him my friendship. At times this drives him out of his mind, but in reality he has got used to an uncomplicated but strong friendship.”

“I understand perfectly well, Jacques, and I promise you that I’ll do my best to be his friend also.”

“As you get to know Hubert better, he will tell you about his childhood and his teen years, and then you’ll be able to see how miserable he was. The amazing part is that, instead of becoming a bitter person, he has turned into someone who has a great deal to offer and who is always willing to help. It really was his idea to find living accommodations for you in the home of an upper-class family. I already have a few thoughts that we can toy with, but we can talk about all of that later. Now tell me, did Hubert talk with you about his idea of approaching the countess on your behalf?”

“Yes, he told me he was going to see her tomorrow and that he will let me know the results just as soon as he sees her. That’s all he said.”

“That is typical of Hubert. Obviously, you must have passed the test. I happen to know that he likes you because he told me so. Now he must be sure that the countess will be open to the idea and, of course, she will have to meet you personally.”

“Of course. If I were in her situation, I would do the same.”



The next day, Hubert called me early to let me know that the countess would be delighted to meet me that morning at eleven. His enthusiastic tone of voice led me to believe that there was a great deal of hope for positive results in the matter.

The home of the countess was a relatively short distance from the Hotel Crillon on the rue de Rivoli. I was a bit nervous during the walk with Hubert in the direction of the rue de Rivoli, with its wide covered sidewalks separating the pedestrians from the bustling street that could be seen through the imposing archways of the promenade. Hubert noticed my nervousness.

"Louise is one of the most charming and capable women I've ever known," Hubert said. "She's not aloof at all. The war took that out of her." Hubert got suddenly quiet, and I did not pursue the subject.

Soon, we reached an entrance for cars leading toward an attractive inner courtyard through huge wooden double doors. Inside and just to the right was a small, enclosed area with a window through which we could see an elderly woman sitting and looking at us. She wore extremely thick glasses set in a pitch-black frame, giving her a bit of an owlish look. Her neck was long and thin, and her face matched the proportions of that neck, with a prominent aquiline nose to hold her glasses. She was the concierge. She looked the part totally.

"Bonjour, Madame. The countess is waiting for us," said Hubert.

"Oui, oui. I have been duly informed. Please go ahead, messieurs."

I followed Hubert to the left of the large entrance leading toward the courtyard. A few cars were parked here and there, and we entered a grand foyer with a wide winding stairway that was nicely carpeted. To the left of the staircase was a small old elevator made of bronze. It looked more like a bircage than a lift, as one could see right through it to the stairs that surrounded it.

The stairs seemed to rise with us as we rode the elevator, a phenomenon that delighted me. We got off on the third floor, where I noticed just one large double door. The wood, apparently mahogany, was well polished and emblazoned with the most elaborate handle and lock in bronze doré that I had ever seen. It shone so brilliantly that I looked closer to make sure it was not gold.

Just the lavish entrance to the apartment inspired me. The hallway on that floor was as wide as the staircase and covered with the same type of carpeting as the stairs. Hubert rang the doorbell, and the countess's *femme de chambre* opened the door and asked us to come in. After we removed our overcoats, she

placed them over a chair and asked us to follow her down a wide corridor just off the large, elegant entrance hall until we reached a set of tall double doors decorated with panels outlined in a gold border. She opened the doors into a salon of generous proportions that communicated with a suite of two other rooms.

The maid asked us to be seated and said that the countess would be with us shortly.

The feeling of space in those rooms produced a curious sensation of relaxed freedom in me. They were decorated elegantly in the Louis XV and XVI styles, the carved wood brushed with gold leaf and upholstered in hand-embroidered fabrics original to the pieces.

Hanging from the ceiling of each of these elegant rooms were enormous crystal chandeliers. Impressive mirrors made the rooms look larger than their actual size. The carpets in each room, also of the eighteenth century, were soft in color and slightly worn in places, but still reasonably well preserved and inspiring. A large black grand piano could be seen in the background, partly covered with a throw of pale red antique brocade over which had been placed several old family photographs in silver frames with easel backs.

The architectural features of the building and the interior decor of this spacious apartment far exceeded my expectations for living quarters in Paris. The city continued to envelop me in a dream rather than in any stark reality.

My reverie about living on such a grand scale was abruptly dissolved by the entrance of a simple-looking lady. She was of medium height, a bit plump, and her hair, possibly dyed, was ash blond. A rather small and fine aquiline nose gave a great deal of character to her face, which was extremely fair. Hubert immediately rose to greet her, bending gallantly to kiss her hand which she graciously extended to him with a warm smile.

Hubert then introduced me with a sweep of his hand. The countess inspected me with her penetrating eyes. Her expression remained unchanged, welcoming, but at the same time challenging.

It was as if I were being undressed in public, and I felt I surely blushed.

While the countess asked Hubert if he had seen the last play at the Comédie Française and extolled the acting of Madelaine Renault, the talented lead actress, she continued to observe me surreptitiously. Soon the maid showed up with a silver tray containing coffee in three delicate porcelain cups with their corresponding saucers.

“How was your crossing?” she asked me.

I answered with a manner of speech as easy and graceful as I could.

After coffee the countess expressed the wish to show me the room that I would occupy as a paying guest in her home. It was quite clear that she wanted to see my reaction to the facilities that might be available to me. Strangely enough, the room was connected to a short and narrow hall just off the main entrance. There was a small room to one side with a sink, but no bathroom, which slightly baffled me. The bedroom itself, however, was large and pleasant with a wide bed in the heavy French Empire style. The other furniture in the room included a Louis XV chest of drawers with bronze ormolu mounts, a massive wardrobe with a large facing mirror, a comfortable armchair, and a small writing desk with matching chair. Ample light from the Paris sky poured into the room through two tall glass French doors opening onto a large balcony overlooking the street that ran perpendicular to the rue de Rivoli.

“Will it do?” the countess asked me rather bluntly.

“Of course,” I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster, despite the fact that I wished for more information concerning the amenities normally included with a room rental.

The countess immediately understood that I was politely waiting.

She pointed to the end of a long hallway on the right side, not too far from the pantry and kitchen.

“What you are looking for is there, and it will be yours

exclusively.” She apologized for a rather long distance between the bedroom and the bathroom, explaining that it was a nineteenth-century building that had not been brought up to the standards in plumbing most people enjoyed at that time. I noticed there was no shower, only a small tub and a toilet. I understood the situation, however, since I had already realized that the French were, to say the least, not the cleanest people in the world. It was obvious that the countess lived within a strict budget and could not afford the expense of bringing the bathrooms up to better standards.

The countess then excused herself, saying that she had an appointment with her hairdresser. She assured Hubert that she would call him the following day, and then accompanied the two of us to the front door.



“What do you think?” Hubert asked, once we were out on the street.

“I liked the countess a lot, Hubert. She is extremely nice and indeed has a warm personality, just as you described her. And the house is fabulous! It’s so elegant and I’m certain without a doubt that I will be more than comfortable and happy living there,” I said, coming to an urgent conclusion. “Please give me an idea of what this is going to cost me.”

“Well, I’ll tell you. It’s all very simple. I’m sure you travel with American dollars, right?”

I nodded.

“I know for a fact that she saves American dollars, and since she likes to portray that she is doing all of this out of friendship more than for financial gain, she has already told me that she would like fifty dollars a month paid in US dollars. Would that be agreeable with you?”

“Of course. That’s much, much better than what I had expected. You have no idea how relieved I am. To be honest with you, I was worried after seeing the luxury in which the countess lives that it

was going to be a lot more expensive.”

The prospect of living in this inspirational environment moved my soul, and I felt that if I could just win a room in this apartment, I would be taking a giant step toward the life that I had only vaguely been able to describe to myself while in Chile.

Chapter XII

Just as I expected, the countess was agreeable to my living in her home, and I soon moved in, with Hubert's help. I had only two suitcases and a trunk, packed with things of sentimental meaning. I regretted that I had not brought along the portrait of my mother. I missed seeing her dear face and needed her nod of approval, especially now.

The night before leaving the hotel, Jacques had decided that the two of us should have an intimate dinner in my room. Jacques was pleased about the arrangement with the countess because his greatest wish was for me to live in Paris, but not in the totally impersonal atmosphere of a hotel. Jacques had envisioned me being in a home with the warmth of a family.

"Jacques, I want you to know that this is not going to be my final address in Paris," I said firmly.

Jacques made it clear that he considered this to be simply a temporary situation since, in the long run, it would make it terribly difficult for us to see each other intimately. But from his point of view, this would be a worthwhile sacrifice, because Jacques could not bear the idea of having me live in an apartment all by myself. He feared that a young man, newly arrived in a foreign country where everything was so different, would surely experience moments of solitude and isolation if left alone. The truth of the matter was that, down deep, he did not want to turn me loose in the city.

"I think I know how we might solve our personal situation," Jacques said. "But the details can wait."

"I don't want to wait," I said. "The better I can imagine my life, the better for us."

"If I'm not mistaken, Patricio, I have the impression that you

don't dislike Hubert's company. Am I right?"

"Yes, of course, I don't dislike him, and the truth is that I should be very grateful to him for the fact that he went to a lot of trouble to make arrangements with the countess on my behalf. But come on, Jacques, don't beat around the bush. Tell me exactly what you have in mind."

"Well, this is the situation," Jacques said, sighing over the complications. "As you already know, Hubert has a serious problem getting along with his father and, of course, you know that his mother divorced his father and re-married. She now lives in Switzerland and completely ignores Hubert's existence. This has hurt him deeply. Can you imagine? His own mother not wanting to have anything to do with him. Hubert desperately wants to leave his father's house, but at the same time the loneliness of living by himself terrifies him."

"He's a resourceful man," I said. "What's the problem?"

"I thought that perhaps you could entertain the idea of sharing an apartment with him. It would be wonderful for everybody involved."

"But Jacques, I'm just now moving into the home of the countess. I haven't even had the opportunity yet to see how I feel about living under those circumstances."

"I'm aware of all of that, and I also realize that these thoughts are premature. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned this yet. I guess I was just thinking out loud. I'm sorry."

"For heaven's sake, Jacques, don't be sorry. Your intentions were good. I prefer to know exactly what's on your mind, especially concerning things that involve both of us. I don't know Hubert that well yet, and this whole idea has taken me by surprise. You often surprise me," I said in a low, approving tone.

Jacques pursed his lips with pleasure.

"Hubert appears to me to be a person who keeps too much to himself," I said. "Now, I may be mistaken, but I have a strong feeling that he may also suffer frequently from depression."

"I must say, Patricio, you certainly are perceptive, because

you've penetrated Hubert's character extremely well. But you know, I have a feeling that his whole personality would change if he could just get out of his father's house. Of course, having you as a friend would also help. Besides, Hubert is very much of an intellectual, and I think that the two of you would enjoy going to museums, the theater, concerts, all of the things that might interest the two of you here in Paris. This doesn't mean that Jeanne and I would never go with you to a concert or a *vernissage*—private viewing of an art exhibit—in the evening, and whenever time will allow me to be away from the office, I can go out with you during the day," Jacques said, apologetic about the volume of his work. "On occasion when I'm tied up with business commitments in the evening, you and Hubert can take Jeanne to some of the cultural events available here in Paris."

"I don't dislike your ideas, Jacques. It's just that I don't want to jump into making any hasty decisions right now. I need more time."

Jacques held my wrist, and slipped his fingers around mine.

"Of course, Patricio. I never intended to be precipitous in my thinking, nor to impose anything on you. The only thing I want is for you to reach a point where you feel totally at home in Paris and get to love the city as much as I do. I want you to feel at ease here, and I sincerely hope that you eventually create a circle of friends around you. I want to protect you. There is a lot of evil in this big city."

"Evil?" I said. It all seemed so light and easy so far; any thought of trouble in paradise was hard to imagine.

"Just a dozen years ago, we had more evil in this city than anyone cares to recall," Jacques said. He looked down at the floor, obviously remembering the horrors of the war and the German occupation until 1944.

"Jacques, the most wonderful part of this whole affair is that I know you are around for me to confide in and that you understand me and, most of all, that I have your affection."

"Passion, you mean, not just affection, and you know it."

“Yes.”

At that point Jacques surrendered himself to me, and we submerged ourselves into the mist of spirits who know, as if by art of magic, how to amalgamate like the fusion of two metals in a roaring fire.



The first few days at the home of the countess went by extremely fast, as I was busy arranging things in my quarters and getting acquainted with the different rooms that were so sumptuously decorated. I felt as if I were born to dwell amongst the interesting furnishings and art works that were so much more than the items themselves. The upholstered chair with the gilded frame in the countess's sitting room looked remarkably like the one in the oil painting of Louis XVI and La Pérouse, a sea explorer who discovered the straits of northern Japan. I found the painting in a comprehensive book of French art history, which I devoured in the mornings and at night. Although Louis' chair seemed a minor detail of the painting—and no doubt of Louis' life itself—the fine handiwork and painted details on the chair's legs told me much about how such craftsmanship had been revered, how opulence in the court was so customary as to have been taken for granted, and how the acclimatization to such elegance ultimately dragged Louis to the guillotine, as the bare-boned populace waved their outraged hands in celebration.

I felt it a vast privilege to live in the midst of such genuine articles, and to be able to study them in the minutest detail at my leisure. By leafing through the shelves of books and observing the objects that furnished this apartment, I had embarked on a rich education of art inextricably tied to history.

The private quarters of the countess were sacrosanct and totally inaccessible to anyone except her chambermaid. I felt a glorious solitude in the fourteen rooms, alone even when I wasn't. I was aware that a woman did all the cleaning, cooking and so

forth, and she did not live in the apartment, usually arriving at nine in the morning. I was allowed to fix my own breakfast in the kitchen if I so desired.

Only once did my breakfast time coincide with that of the countess's. She entered the kitchen very naturally in her robe and nodded to me then ran some water in a kettle.

In general, it was her nature to be pleasant, and that morning she insisted on fixing coffee with toast for the two of us. Her kindness delighted me, as I had not realized how I had missed the companionship of a woman. Although it had been several years since I lived with my mother, I vividly remembered how she took pains to make my life delightful, making my breakfast, coffee, tea, my favorite dessert when servants had their day off.

The countess's coffee turned out to be the best I had ever tasted. Needless to say, it was a vast improvement over what I had been able to stir up in my new abode. When I complimented her on the excellent coffee, the countess seemed more than happy to give me a little demonstration of the correct proportions of coffee to water, to guarantee the desired result. I felt I had recaptured a family for myself, and the feeling warmed me.



The countess had entrusted me with the keys to the apartment, as well as those to the big street doors that remained closed at night. My bedroom was just off the large entrance hall, so my late arrivals at night never disturbed the countess since her private quarters were far away. I then understood why the countess had assigned to me that precise bedroom. The concierge, who had been duly informed of my presence as a new member of the family household, was already totally familiar with my daytime comings and goings.

My work with the professor of surgery occupied my mind only during my hours in the pediatric clinic. For the most part, I labored to familiarize myself with the city—its curving maze of

medieval streets and its artwork, which graced every corner and, I imagined, every fine apartment in this ancient town.

I felt so familiar with the city that many times I didn't even consult the map that I always carried with me. The first time this happened was the day I left the children's clinic at the hospital to go to Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the quarter that was a magnet for intellectuals, and presto!—as if something ethereal had conjured a spell, without yet knowing the city, I had instinctively and mysteriously arrived at the precise area of Paris I was looking for, as if I had taken that route a thousand times or lived in Paris in another life. I was almost shocked. Was it just a fluke, or had some inherited genetic code guided me to the precise place I had so often heard about, that exciting, avant-garde *quartier* I so longed for. This was where Impressionism had flourished, and it gave me the smell of freedom, the feeling of reaching understanding and acceptance, the liberation of my tormented soul. I lingered in that fascinating area, and my fertile imagination dreamed of the thousand and one magic nights of Scheherazade.

As if by miracle, I reached the famous Café de Flore I had heard so much about. I sat down at a table on the street terrace where the wide, white awning sheltered me and dozens of others who, like me, had turned their chairs ever so slightly to have a look at the sidewalk and the street beyond. While sipping my coffee, I was thrilled to watch the people as they passed by, lulled into a sense of unreality.

I was mystified as to why I was almost losing all recollections of my past troubled life. I had created a space as wide as the oceans that separated the continent of my birth from Europe; so far, I had managed to cross an imaginary bridge. The feeling was extremely comforting. It was as if I had been re-born into a world that was truly mine, even though I knew so few people in Paris. But the latter didn't bother me in the least when I weighed it against the feeling of freedom I now experienced throughout my entire body and soul, a freedom I had acquired with unabashed strength and determination. In spite of the fact that at that moment Jacques

was not physically present, I did not feel that old, profound sense of inner solitude. The sensation was that of a bird taking flight toward a chosen destination with no obstacles in sight.

I was brought back to reality when the waiter presented the bill, smiling at yet another customer in reverie in the Parisian sunlight.

Watching two women sitting at a nearby table, I suddenly recalled my Chilean girlfriends, Gloria and Elena, who had emigrated to Paris like me, to escape the narrow minds of Santiago society.

As if by force, I knew I had to contact them immediately.



If Jacques was the materialization of passion, then Gloria and Elena were living symbols of freedom to me.

I had known them almost my whole life. Gloria was the more overt, gregarious and exhilarating, while Elena was more inclined to be retrospective, observant and pensive. When puberty exploded to the point of awakening libidos, the girls had begun to fondle each other when they spent the night together. This inevitably led to sexual curiosity, so common at that age, but for Gloria and Elena it was not just a passing fancy: they made ardent love to one another in a manner that would have made the most professional courtesan envious. They truly loved each other and only felt oneness when together.

As they reached their late teens, this amorous entanglement was to make their parents somewhat suspicious. They only wanted to be together and, unlike other girls of their age, never talked about boys. When they reluctantly attended their first society ball, they showed little interest in dancing. Actually they looked out of place and a bit clumsy in their lacy satin gowns that did not suit them at all. It was at one of these dances that I and my first real lover, Alvaro, met the two girls.

There seems to exist a kind of sixth sense, a mysterious

sensitivity, that is commonly found among people who like their own sex and that allows them to discover others of the same persuasion. Gloria and Elena were thrilled to meet Alvaro and me, and before long a strong friendship developed. Needless to say, their respective parents were more than delighted to see their daughters dating just the right fellows. This was a perfect cover-up for our families and their social environment.

At first we conversed about the most conventional subjects, but it wasn't long before we talked openly about our respective relationships. It was better than true confession: it was a sort of liberation, but what all four of us really wanted was freedom.

The girls' situation was more propitious. Elena's maternal grandmother had left her a substantial trust fund to which she would become entitled upon reaching the age of twenty-one, and that was just around the corner. The young ladies were already toying with the idea of leaving the country as soon as finances would allow.

The problem, however, was not their legal age. At that time in Chile, women, regardless of their age, required permission from their parents or husbands to travel abroad on their own. This could present a problem, but they were so determined to carry through with their travel plans that they were prepared to face their parents with the truth about their lives and shock them into granting permission to leave the country. They correctly deduced that their parents would consider it less embarrassing if their aberrant girls pursued their abnormal lifestyle far away in the obscurity of a foreign land.

Both Alvaro and I admired the girls' firm resolution to follow their true instincts and, naturally, were a bit envious of the financial backing that allowed them to carry through with their plans. From the time Gloria and Elena first announced what they wanted to do with their lives, almost every weekend would find the four of us together on a Saturday or Sunday evening engaged in deep philosophical discussion concerning homosexuality. This liberal sounding board rescued our souls and gave us the chance

to pursue freely all of the ramifications of this subject so close to our hearts, yet totally taboo in the world around us.

Gloria and Elena eventually suffered the depressing cruelty of being disowned by their mothers and fathers. Neither family wanted any further rapport with their daughters. From that moment on the two girls were thought of as dead by the very persons who had brought them into this world. Gloria's parents went further: they told her that they would pretend she had never existed. Although the girls had expected a strong reaction from their families, the violent storm they ended up provoking was far greater than their worst speculations.

Both were left totally devastated. The only positive aspect to emerge from the unfortunate encounter was the immediate granting of permission by their respective families for the girls to leave the country. Passports and visas were promptly obtained, and within a short time Gloria and Elena quietly departed for Paris. After seeing what had transpired between the girls and their parents, I was more determined than ever not to confront my mother with the truth about my inner self. The idea of being rejected, vilified and mentally tortured by someone so close to me would be worse than being buried alive by an avalanche. My love for my mother was so intense that I could not bear the idea of risking her rejection. Even then, I knew that my only salvation lay in working things out so that I could shed my old life completely.



"There he is," yelled Gloria, who ran recklessly across the Boulevard St-Germain. Cars honked incessantly around her and Elena followed, her cheeks beet red.

"Patricio, love!" Gloria cried.

I rose from my seat at the café, and knocked over a chair as I reached for her arms.

In another moment, Elena joined our embrace. Both women cried and I wiped a tear from my own eye. No time had passed.

Again, we were teenagers, giddy with secrets, excesses and hope. The people seated around us nodded and smiled, understanding the depth of the reunion, over time and miles.

“Look, he’s gotten more handsome, Elena.” Gloria held my chin between her thumb and forefinger and turned my head so that she could see my profile.

“Gloria, you are as bold as ever,” I said, gesturing for all of us to sit down.

Getting together in Paris brought a great deal of joy to the three of us and a sense of support and companionship. We felt that we were no longer alone and separated from the culture, good or bad, that we had grown up with.

Growing up and gradually discovering what was expected of us was a lot like looking through clouded glass. Unlike heterosexuals, we were never able to see clearly what was supposed to be reality. As the years passed, life for all of us had become a mental struggle; the threat of an approaching storm was always present. We were like hapless trees unable to uproot ourselves and flee from the approaching wind and lightning that would surely destroy our branches and leaves, for we were like saplings, fragile growing things.

Gloria waved a finger to make the point: “You may think that we are able to do whatever we please here in Paris, Patricio, but life is still circumscribed by old orders.”

“It’s true,” Elena said. “We may live together, but we are not as free as we thought we would be. Society everywhere seems to frown.”

“Well, I’m still so new to Paris that I feel a real burden has been lifted.”

“Tell us more about this Jacques,” Gloria said. She winked at Elena.

“I won’t try to tell you that it’s perfect. He’s married,” I said. “And yes, there is a child, a girl.”

“You find more ways to make your life difficult,” Gloria said. “Is he going to leave his wife?”

"He has promised that ..." I halted.

"Promised," Gloria repeated. "I suppose that's better than nothing."

"I'm sure of his feelings," I said quickly. "I'm sure about the way he feels."

The women nodded but looked as if they had just learned about someone with a terminal illness.

"Darling, Paris is an open stage for you," Gloria said in a kindly maternal tone. "We have many people you must meet. I can see from your arrangement that you must have a lot of time to yourself. You must let us entertain you."

"That's what I was hoping you would say. Life is brighter already, just seeing the two of you."

"Promise me that you will not let yourself suffer with this love," Gloria said, peering at me closely. "Love is not supposed to be an obligation."

"It is hard, it's difficult," I said.

Elena patted my arm. "Coffee? They have the best coffee here."

"Oh, no. The best coffee is where I live. You must come some time for lunch, perhaps. Although lunch will be hard to manage, because, well, I am not sure yet about the boundaries on my entertaining in the countess's home."

"Countess?" the women said in unison.

"Another story, another time," I said. I gestured for the waiter to bring three coffees.

"What are you doing later today?" Elena said. "Perhaps you could come along with us. We were going to shop and then perhaps go to the cinema."

"I have to go back to work this afternoon. I'm working with Professor Michel Seuratôt at the Beaujon Hospital."

"Your specialty?" Elena asked.

"I will assist him with diagnosing ailments and diseases in children under three years old, a very challenging matter within the specialty of pediatrics." I spent a few minutes answering their

questions about what kind of cases I was expecting to see.

"My word, Patricio, I must say that you didn't show such a serious side when we knew you in Chile. You were such a golden boy then. Who knew that you would become a world-famous pediatrician?"

"I don't think I will ever be," I said flatly.

"Of course you will," Elena said. Gloria patted my head.

"Patricio, what's wrong?"

I looked down at my lap, unable to speak.

"What is it?"

I inhaled deeply and looked directly at Gloria: "I don't really enjoy practicing my profession."

"After all of your studies and all of your work, what else are you going to do?" said Elena, the pragmatist.

"I know my true calling now. I'm not certain how I can or will pursue it, but I know that a life in the arts is the only meaningful way for me. My spirit is not in my profession. It has always been a duty. And I know I need to do something that elevates my spirit."

"Only a romantic disposition can enter into the romantic," Gloria said, nodding.

"Only the poetically exalted spirit, which received its consecration in the center of the temple, can understand what the initiate expresses under inspiration," I said. "A German, Goethe, I think."

"Patricio, that is how we remember you," Elena said. "Even when we were young, you were always such a romantic, enraptured by a single painting, talking about this or that exhibition. One time, you spent five hours wandering and meditating at the art gallery. Five hours!"

"And I didn't see half of it."

"Patricio, darling, I hope you can find your way to a position that does suit you," Gloria said.

I blew air from my cheeks, frustrated. "Right now, I will continue. I hand my life to the fates. It's all right, I do learn and even enjoy the cases I'm seeing, don't get me wrong, but it is just

a job.”

“It’s tragic to spend your life as it wasn’t meant to be spent.” Gloria motioned for another cup of coffee.

“That’s enough coffee, Gloria,” said Elena. “She’s ready to jump out of her skin as it is.” We all smiled at each other, knowing so well Gloria’s propensity for drama.



The three of us spent hours talking and discussing those subjects that stimulated our imagination so richly and necessarily. We met often in those early days, discussing the burden of pretense that had become a way of life: two lives—one that was false for the public eye, and a real one that reflected our inner beings.

Even as children, we had had the analytical bent that helped us to dissolve the great sense of guilt society had poisoned us with, much like the sting of a bee that first produces painful swelling, but gradually fades away. Our way of being appeared to us totally normal and authentic to our physical and psychic makeup. The fact that our inclinations appeared at a very early age and were not influenced at all by our environment or family surroundings appeared to indicate to us that sexual preference must be determined by a factor similar to those that direct a human being to have blond hair, or be left-handed or cross-eyed.

Meeting again as adults, we still shored up each other’s spirits. These two women were very encouraging, asking me the questions that I needed to think about out loud. Likewise, I absorbed from them minutiae about living in Paris that helped me immensely in making this sometimes cold and confusing city my home.

We were quick to agree that our biggest problem was that society—in Paris as well as Santiago—judged us solely and exclusively from the point of view of our sexuality. Rather than judging us by canon laws of conduct and character universally accepted, such as having a sense of responsibility, honesty, discipline, perseverance, loyalty, friendship, courage and other

attributes, society deliberately ignored the fact that the great majority of the members of our persuasion become honorable individuals. Most of them practiced their professions or trades with devotion, worked hard for a living, and suffered all of the emotions, desires, aspirations and frustrations of everyday life that all human beings are subjected to. In spite of all that, however, gays still suffered from social ostracism and were deprived of certain legal civil rights afforded exclusively to the heterosexual world.



With introductions from Elena and Gloria, I was soon surrounded by an intimate group of friends, male and female, who shared our sexual inclinations. This allowed us to sort out our feelings with a few other human beings. Life at large, however, was still restricted, false and deceiving.

It was only through the shared blessing of love making that any of us finally found a source of true inner satisfaction. By loving, sharing, touching, caressing, tasting and talking we could at times forget about the false facade of the world that surrounded us. Love was like a blessed unguent spread over us, not unlike those used by the ancient Egyptians to lubricate their skins in rites of spiritual cleansing.

Chapter XIII

One day, sitting alone at the Café de Flore after a morning of work at the hospital, I saw a few drops of rain. A cool breeze made me realize that I should change into warmer clothing, so I paid for my lemonade and, instead of ordering lunch, hurried toward the nearest *métro* station to return home.

Entering the apartment, I ran into the countess in the entrance hall where she was taking off her coat. She had returned home just ahead of me after doing some light shopping.

"It's becoming autumn, finally," she said.

"I came, in fact, to get my raincoat before lunch," I said. Meals were not included in my arrangement with her, and I found it easier to dine out than to cook for myself.

"Oh, Patricio, the day has turned so cold and sad looking. Why don't you stay right here and have lunch with me? Unless, of course, you have another engagement?"

"How kind of you, I would be delighted. It's so nice of you to ask me. Indeed, on a day like today it would have been sad to have lunch by myself."

"Marvelous. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll ask my maid to prepare lunch for two. Why don't we meet in the main drawing room in half an hour? We can have a little aperitif and chat before lunch."

Before going to my room to freshen up, I remembered to call Jeanne, Jacques' wife, to confirm our engagement later on that afternoon at the English Tea Room on the rue de Rivoli, not far from the countess's residence. One of the amenities of living with the countess was the proximity of the entrance hall phone to my own quarters.

In the main drawing room, it was a joy for me to see the

attractive old landscape paintings hanging from the highest part of the walls by gilded ropes with bows at the top of each. Suddenly through the open doors the gracious lady of the house emerged carrying a tiny silver tray with two small glasses of cut crystal and a lovely decanter filled with an amber-colored liquor.

"It is only sweet vermouth," said the countess. "I do hope you like it."

"As a matter of fact, Madame, it's one of my favorites, and we often drink it in Chile before lunch."

"Patricio, won't you please call me Louise from now on? I find it a bit ridiculous carrying on with formalities. You now live in my home, we see each other daily and, after all, we have friends in common. Besides, I want you to feel comfortable here."

"Thank you, Madame de Sa—sorry, I mean Louise." We both had a good laugh.

While we sipped our drinks, I asked Louise about the style and period of the paintings in the room. She told me they were original nineteenth century oils, but that the artists were relatively unknown. However, they were decorative and the frames were extremely ornate and massive, all hand carved with gold leaf.

The majority of the paintings in that room had belonged to her husband's family, she said. She rarely spoke about him, I had noticed.

Originally the paintings had been in their country home in Provence and had been moved to the city when they had decided to have a place in Paris also.

"It's lucky we have them at all," the countess said. "So many people lost everything during Vichy. It was nothing to be forced to sell your treasures to the Nazis. Oh, yes, they were efficient in everything—stealing, looting. And killing too." She caught herself becoming overwrought and pursed her lips.

"Let's just say that their operations blanketed everyone who could possibly assist them: art museums, private collections, art dealers, valuation businesses, and when all else failed, sales of work for money."

We ate in the small room adjacent to the kitchen. This small informal eating area was very intimate and had a great deal of charm. Louise told me that it would be a rather frugal lunch, as well as simple cuisine. She was a bit plump and had a tendency to gain weight, so she was always careful about quantity.

While we lunched, Louise showed a great deal of interest in my life in Chile, my family and my profession.

“Are you planning to do something in relation to your profession here in Paris, Patricio, or are you just going to be a playboy during your stay in France?” She laughed good-naturedly.

“I have just started spending some of my days with Professor Michel Seuratôt at the Beaujon Hospital,” I answered dutifully. “His specialty is maxillofacial surgery and I am taking an internship with him.”

“How interesting, Patricio. I’m sorry, I try not to pry, and you hadn’t said much about it. I’m pleased. I firmly believe that men should always be occupied. But now, tell me the details.”

I tried to satisfy her curiosity, telling her of my work in the reconstructive surgery that was Dr. Seuratôt’s specialty. I concluded by saying that I had many other interests in Paris.

“And what are the other things that interest you, Patricio?”

“Art in a broad sense, Louise, but especially oil paintings and engravings. They must be old, though. I have absolutely no interest in modern art. I simply cannot identify myself with it.”

“I can understand your feelings perfectly well. As you can see, I have a similar appreciation for things that are old.”

“I also appreciate music, theater and the decorative arts in general,” I said. “In reality, I should have pursued the arts, but I didn’t have the courage of my most intimate convictions and I ended up bowing to family pressure.”

“But you have a noble profession, Patricio. To heal human beings must be a very rewarding feeling.”

I nodded without enthusiasm.

As the conversation progressed, I noticed that the countess felt more at ease with me. She talked generally about her own life,

her marriage, raising two girls and then a boy, the hardships of the war, especially the German occupation.

Like a veil rising, Louise shed her reticence. During the occupation both she and her husband were part of the outlawed liberation movement known as *la résistance*, even though they knew that being associated with the organization could mean violent death. In the early years of the war, and perhaps later also—she wasn't too sure—members of the clandestine group had a tiny butterfly tattooed on a part of their bodies that was normally covered by clothing. It served as a form of identification. She told me that it was during these turbulent times that she learned to ride a bicycle in order to carry secret coded messages between Paris and Versailles.

"But that is a long distance to cover on a bike," I said.

"Yes, it is, but I was young then and filled with patriotic enthusiasm."

She fell into a trance as she recounted those days. Cyclists were often detained at the various checkpoints along the route where German military police would stop them and ask to see their papers. The times when she was required to show her travel documents were moments of agony. She lived in fear of being taken into one of the control huts and forced to undress. If her tattooed papillon and secret documents were discovered, she would have been shot immediately or tortured to extract information about other members of *la résistance*.

"I purposefully changed the way I dressed, so that I looked poor," said Louise. "I even went so far as to intentionally arrange my hair so that it would look disheveled. To complete the disguise, I often tied a long loaf of bread to the handlebars so they would think I was just a common housewife doing her shopping. My luck didn't last for long."

One day, just before reaching a town along the route and not too far from Versailles, she was detained at one of the control areas. After glancing at her papers, the German policeman smiled and waved her ahead. She had gone probably no more than two

hundred feet when, from the direction of the checkpoint, she heard shouting. Glancing over her shoulder, she was horrified to realize that she was the subject of all the commotion. Several policemen were running after her, yelling in German, a language she understood.

“Stop her, stop her! You idiot, you should have got her name. Don’t let her escape. We have to find out who she is.”

She sped up her bicycle through a narrow path toward a heavily grown area of brush. At this point, the shouting sounded far away.

“I knew a couple of resistance members living in a nearby town,” Louise explained, “because I had stopped at their house several times in the past to recover from these long trips to Versailles. As a matter of fact, I planned to spend that night with them. You know, it is a good ten kilometers from Paris, and if you think the roads are bad now, you should have been here during wartime.”

Never before had she pedaled so fast. If she could outdistance the German police, who were also on bicycles, she could abandon her bike in the brush area, and run to the town. It was easy to lose oneself in the narrow, winding streets, and she remembered exactly how to get to her resistance acquaintances.

“I felt guilty about involving Pierre and his wife in this situation, but there was no other solution. I knew we could all be shot, but those were the risks of the times,” she said, shrugging.

Even though she had become a good cyclist, the Germans were rapidly catching up. Then they began shooting. She kept heading for the bushes, but suddenly felt a sharp blow on her left shoulder that caused her to lose control of the bike. At first there was no pain, just a feeling of numbness. She knew it was a bullet.

She picked herself up and ran for the brush. The pain in her shoulder and arm became excruciating, but she ran for her life.

Fortunately, the sun was beginning to recede behind the crest of the nearby hills. Finally she arrived at the bushy area and darted into their protective mass. There, crouching low with her head

down, she quickly brought the branches around her and pushed her body to the ground where she lay without moving.

Gasping for breath, she strained to listen for her pursuers in the semi-darkness of the overgrowth. At first, she heard only her own breathing. It took her a few minutes to control herself. She scrupulously surveyed the field. She knew too well that the Gestapo would comb the field, and she started a mute prayer with a fervor she had never felt before.

Then she heard it: the approach of running feet, darting around the area where she huddled. It sounded like the trotting of a herd of horses. Scores of soldiers searched for her. She closed her eyes and accepted her fate. Sooner or later, one of them was bound to find her.

Miraculously, that didn't happen. The noise and the shouting voices gradually faded away like the clearing of the sky after a fierce storm. Again silence set in, and her almost suppressed breathing returned to normal.

Surmising that the Germans had left, she stayed still until she felt she could dare to raise herself to a squatting position to peek through the branches and trace a route of safe passage. It was past sundown and twilight was descending. Moving carefully, she peered all around her. She tried to stretch, but the pain in her shoulder reminded her that she was wounded.

Darkness came quietly. There was a slight breeze that somewhat freshened her. Walking into the open was an added risk, but nobody was in sight. It was obviously dinnertime. She took a narrow path that skirted the edge of the hamlet, carefully looking all around and trying to be aware of every sound until finally she let herself go and ran until she reached the village streets and her friends' house. When Colette opened the door, she was staggered by the scene and uttered a faint but shrill cry upon seeing the blood trickling through the countess's clothing.

Colette helped her into the house and, after glancing up and down the street to make sure no one had seen, she latched the door. She led Louise to another room in the rear of the house

where Pierre was reading a newspaper. While Colette lit a candle, he pushed aside some of the badly worn straw mats covering the floor and raised a small trap door that concealed a narrow stairway, down which they descended into a dark secret cellar. Once her eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness, the countess saw that the only source of light was a small opening high up on the wall toward one end of the room.

“Later I learned this was a ventilation duct leading to a covered shed just over this basement area,” the countess said. Her eyes shone as she told the story, obviously the most wrenching moment of her life.

Colette helped her to lie down on an old mattress placed directly over the floor, and told her she would be back in a few minutes with a towel and water to clean her wound. When she returned, she removed the countess’s blood-soaked clothing and carefully washed the area where she had been shot, which by now was extremely painful. Luckily, Colette was not a novice when it came to dealing with the injured. She had been witness to all too many horrors.

Calling a doctor was out of the question, since a physician came only once a week to that small town, and all emergencies required immediate transportation to Versailles. Besides, a physician connected with *la résistance* would have been required in a case like this. Attempting any move would only serve to arouse suspicion, because by now even the town’s pharmacy would have been alerted by the Germans to be on the lookout for a wounded woman. Colette knew from previous experience that the German police didn’t give up easily.

Before long they started a house-to-house search. A commotion seemed to envelop the whole village, with harsh shouting in German followed by women screaming in neighboring households. Both Pierre and Colette moved silently up the stairs, swiftly closed the trap door and quickly covered it with the old floor mats. When the Germans knocked on her door, she was shocked by the scene she saw through the side window. She could distinguish the head

of a tall man who loomed over a throng of uniformed men as he barked out orders about thoroughly searching each one of the village's dwellings. Colette knew enough German to understand that he was saying something like "find her, and don't fumble the job!"

Colette opened the door in a casual way, while her husband pretended to read a newspaper. Pierre's wife was one of those strong-willed French peasants whose great inner fortitude and strength had been developed over years of dealing with the day-to-day struggles of existence. While the German police proceeded to ransack her home, she and Pierre acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary, and ignored the men as Colette went about kneading dough and preparing dinner.

"I could hear the policemen talking to each other," the countess said. "At one point they were standing right on the straw mats covering the trap door, and one of them seemed to be wiping his boots on the floor mat. I was petrified, afraid to move or even breathe. Finally one of them commented that the person they were looking for obviously wasn't in the house, and most likely not in the town. I heard him say: 'She's probably dead or hiding somewhere in the woods.' That simple sentence gave me more joy than I had ever known."

The countess described the generosity of Pierre and Colette, who insisted that she remain with them until she was healed. With each passing day there was less danger of the countess being detected by the Germans, so Pierre and Colette moved her upstairs, to a small but cheerful back bedroom that had been their son's room. He was an only child and had been killed early in the war. Perhaps they had joined the resistance more out of vengeance than patriotism, the countess speculated.

Little by little, Louise regained her strength and her wound began to heal, but because her shoulder's articulation had been somewhat damaged by the bullet, she was left with a slight impairment in her arm for the remainder of her life. After a month or so they secretly transferred her to more comfortable quarters

in the home of an important resistance leader in Versailles, but she would never forget the debt of gratitude she owed to Pierre and Colette.

"I never saw them again," she said. "It all seems like it was lifetimes ago."

"What happened? Why don't you see them?" I said. Looking at her face, I understood that they were dead.

"Eventually, Colette was arrested by the German police and tortured to death," Louise said matter-of-factly. "Pierre, crazed by grief and rage, killed a checkpoint guard on his way to Paris and was machine-gunned on the spot."

"And your husband?" I asked boldly.

"Even though the count had been secretly informed by Colette that I was alive and was being cared for, he had been unable to see me or even contact me, for fear of being detected by the Gestapo. We were reunited after many weeks, but our joy proved to be short lived, as he had to return to Paris on a secret mission," Louise said.

I wondered that this woman, who appeared so regal at the same time that she advanced toward frailty, could have survived so much. I reminded myself that there are indeed secret mechanisms of the human will that can never be fathomed.

"While I continued to recuperate in Versailles, I was told by the secret service of *la résistance* that the count had been arrested by the Gestapo. They said he had possibly been killed. From then on, I lived in anguish, not knowing my husband's fate, or exactly where my son was. It wasn't until I returned to Paris, at the end of the German occupation, that I finally found out that my husband had been assassinated. I did find my son, who had been cared for by friends. I do have him."

She confessed to me that, in a way, she preferred not to have known details of the count's death, although she gathered that he was tortured in order to get from him names of other resistance members. Sadly, the countess was never able to discover where her husband's remains were laid to rest.

After several years of anguish and questioning, the countess suspected that some neighbors were probably collaborators responsible for turning her husband in to the Gestapo. Maybe they had denounced her too. She would never know.

The countess discreetly wiped tears from her eyes.

“Louise, I am extremely moved and flattered that you would confide your story in me, but at the same time I can’t help but feel a deep repulsion and fear of the horrors of war. Fortunately I have never had to go through that experience and I certainly hope I never will. After hearing about all that has happened to you, one need not read Darwin in order to believe in the survival of the fittest.”

For a few moments we sat in quiet thought. Louise broke the silence. “Patricio, would you like to go with me to look for an old frame? I found a photo buried in a chest of drawers in the study, and I know a good antique store. In fact, I think you will find the proprietor interesting. He gives me all the good gossip, even about things going on in my own building.”

I smiled at her. I could hear the wheels turning—Louise would introduce me to the antiquarian world of Paris I so longed to enter. I was certain that whatever she put her mind to, she would accomplish, and was grateful that I was to be counted among her projects.

“He’s fast friends with Madame Duclos downstairs,” Louise said, and stopped in her tracks. It was as if a light had come on in her head. “I must introduce you to her, but it must be done rather selectively. Madame is so reclusive,” Louise murmured.

Madame Duclos, who lived one floor below, was a famous patroness of the arts in Paris and a friend of the countess.

“She gives one party each year in her home, and invites *tout* Paris,” she said excitedly. “Even though she apparently loathes entertaining in her apartment, this social event is now an annual obligation for her. We’ll have to see to it that you receive an invitation.”

My luck had not turned. It was almost as if the whole world

was at my feet and willing to help me.



That afternoon, I took care as I dressed to meet Jeanne, an exceptionally elegant woman, at the English Tea Room. The three-piece suit I chose for the occasion was of a grayish-beige checkered fabric known in Chile as “Prince of Wales,” and had been made for me by the then-famous Chilean tailor, surnamed Mata. It was a classic suit for a man, but in the British style and perfect for a daytime occasion. I looked at myself in the mirror and wondered whether I was not overdoing it like those middle-class people rigged out in their Sunday clothes; but no, I couldn’t err. It was a special occasion, my first get-together with Jacques’ wife in a public and fashionable place. I knew Jeanne would arrive dressed with her natural excellent taste and allure.

As Jeanne had suggested, I had reserved a table for two, and it was a good thing that I did, because the tearoom was filled to capacity. This famous Parisian establishment was close to my new address, but without Jeanne’s suggestion, I wondered when I would have discovered it. Paris still overwhelmed me. On my brief walk to the tearoom, I had stopped to examine no fewer than four inviting antique shop windows. I marveled at how Louise, like Jeanne, had come to know precisely the right restaurant or shop for each occasion and longed for the day when I could conduct my affairs so elegantly.

I sat down at the table I had reserved and anxiously awaited Jeanne’s arrival. In spite of the fact that Jeanne exuded a sweetness that made everybody feel comfortable in her presence, I always felt nervous when she was with me. This delicate creature was Jacques’ wife, I constantly reminded myself.

She arrived with her petite and delicate figure wrapped in a magnificent fur coat. I rose to greet her with a kiss on each cheek. I helped her remove her fur coat and then held the chair for her. She sat down and graciously slipped off an attractive dark brown

silk scarf that complemented the soft beige tones of the chic dress she was wearing.

Jeanne's arrival, although quiet and discreet, coupled with the warm welcome given her by a younger man, caused a bit of a turmoil among the other patrons of the tearoom. For a few moments I felt as if we were the center of attention. The people crowding the establishment were obviously of the upper class, some of whom were known to Jeanne, who could not avoid greeting them when their eyes met.

"I imagine that now we will be food for gossip," Jeanne whispered to me in a bemused tone, "but it really doesn't matter. It's just part of the world we live in and can't be avoided. I'm very much afraid that tomorrow morning the phones all over Paris will be ringing off their hooks with little tales to tell about us."

"Are you troubled by that, Jeanne? I already feel guilty for compromising you."

"Don't be silly. Not at all. It's only speculation on my part. Besides, I actually find it all quite flattering and amusing. I guess the only time I wouldn't like would be if they talked about seeing Jacques with an attractive lady. As far as I know, that has never happened."

At this point I swallowed with difficulty before I could continue talking. She obviously didn't have the slightest inkling about Jacques' true inclinations. I felt extremely guilty.

At that moment a waiter appeared with our tea and sweets, and I took advantage of this interruption to change the subject.

"How is life with the countess?" Jeanne was fascinated with the idea of my living in her home and wanted to know all about my everyday life in her household.

"Today we had a breakthrough," I said. "She had a very hard time during the war."

"Yes," Jeanne said. "Everyone did."

"She has prevailed courageously. I cannot imagine so many tragedies."

"It seems burdens are borne," Jeanne said plainly. She cast her

eyes downward and then back at me. "Tell me more about her."

I told her how well I got along with the countess, and how much I liked her. I also mentioned proudly how she had invited me for lunch that day.

"And she even asked me to call her Louise. I can't express how good that made me feel."

"She's fortunate to have found such a nice companion for her household, I think," Jeanne said. "What is it like? Is everything brushed with gold leaf? That's rather how I imagine it."

"She does have her share of furniture from the Louis XVI period. Each room has a distinct character."

"Which is your favorite?" Jeanne asked, and as I answered, she had another question ready. But beneath the surface of her intent interest, Jeanne baffled me with a deep melancholy that manifested itself in her eyes. Prying into her private life in order to attempt to find out the reason for her apparent sadness would be, to say the least, extremely audacious on my part, but it bothered me profoundly because deep down inside, in my innermost soul, there was a whisper that told me I was the source of her discontent.

Just the thought that my relationship with Jacques could be disturbing the peace of that delicate and apparently devoted wife, made me feel extremely distressed. Each time the foreboding ideas flared up in my mind, I would immediately try to drown them by changing my thoughts to a myriad of other subjects.

"How is Claudine?" I asked. "How goes her schoolwork?"

Traipsing onto the subject of the little girl made matters worse, because Jeanne told me that the girl had developed a deep affection for me.

I recalled that the last time I had seen Claudine, she had inundated me with hugs and kisses, and held my hand when we walked together. Jeanne and Claudine, these two angelical creatures who showered Jacques and me with so much love, were unwittingly pushing me into a state of tremendous doubt.

Nonetheless, I kept the conversation as light and informal as

I could manage, and Jeanne, for her part, did the same. I felt as if Jeanne would tell me much more than I wanted to know, if only I asked. I felt blessedly relieved as I kissed her cheeks in farewell.



“Jacques,” I said. “I have to talk to you.”

“Where are you? Can I meet you somewhere after work?”

“Well, it can wait I suppose. It seems all we do is wait, Jacques. I just had tea with Jeanne, and I feel low. I feel terrible.”

“You have to cheer up, my friend,” Jacques said. “She is as innocent as the babe unborn. She loves your company. I think you’re just overly emotional this afternoon.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” I admitted.

“I’ll see you as soon as I can. I’ve been doing some thinking.”

“Oh, no,” I said, in mock horror. We both laughed, but Jacques was aware of the mental whirlwind that was starting to test the strings of my relationship with him.

Trying to maintain an intimate affair with Jacques, combined with the proximity of Jeanne and Claudine, as well as the rest of the world, was no easy matter for me. It did not help that I envied Gloria and Elena, who lived together in the same house and were free to enjoy each other’s company day and night.

Seeing Jacques on an intimate basis was, for the moment, out of the question. Living in the home of the countess, I lacked such freedom.

“I would like to rent an apartment, a large one, to be shared by you and Hubert,” Jacques said. “This is the best solution I can manage.”

“Give me more time, please, I have to get to know Hubert much, much better. Put yourself in my place.” Yet the crisis through which I was currently passing involved two innocent creatures—Jacques’ wife and daughter—and made me even more madly undecided. I knew that a quick decision would only serve to sink me into a darker and deeper hole.

“You remind me of how you were when I asked you to come to Europe,” Jacques said soothingly. “You are not much of a one for decisions.”

I stressed to Jacques the importance of reaching a better assessment of Hubert’s disposition and character before entering into a close life with him. At that moment, I didn’t dare confess to Jacques that, in spite of numerous attempts on my part to develop a closer and more comfortable friendship with Hubert, I had never been successful. Nevertheless, I decided to make the effort once more, if only to satisfy Jacques. I knew that Jacques was firm on the point that I should never have my own apartment. On that point, there would be no discussion. Jacques’ reasons were all too obvious, I thought, reflecting once again upon my lack of freedom in this city that had laid an eternal claim to *liberté*.

Chapter XIV

I called Hubert on the phone with an invitation to lunch in a little restaurant on the rue Saint-Roch. While we were eating, I scrutinized Hubert more intensely than ever and felt as disappointed as ever. The more I thought about the idea of sharing an apartment with this dirty little creature with those enigmatic eyes, the greater was my feeling of repulsion. I couldn't help but return to my original impression: this situation was being forced upon me.

I was faced with an enormous dilemma. I could only imagine that Jacques had also proposed this apartment-sharing matter to Hubert, just as he had done with me. A flat refusal on my part would undoubtedly drive a wedge between me and Hubert.

I tried to be amiable. "You know, I am very happy at the home of the countess, thanks to you."

"I knew it. Who wouldn't be?"

"She's almost like a mother to me. She fusses over me now, and insists on making my coffee each morning. Life could not be more pleasant."

"My mother could not be any further from me if she had settled in the Arctic." Hubert smiled sadly and began to talk about the rift between himself and his own mother, a story that I had heard before.

I thought about my mother, back in Santiago. Our correspondence had continued, and she had stopped begging me to come home. But she would soon get the letter that asked her the big question about my heritage, without coming expressly to the point of asking who my true father was. I hoped she would read between the lines and respond directly. I was not hopeful for a clear answer, but was relieved that I had broached the subject.

Being so many miles from home made my inquiry that much easier.

Hubert continued to rant against his mother, and I bit my lip. Hubert was the most self-pitying creature I had ever met.

"Did I tell you that I just had tea with Jeanne?" I said, changing the subject rather tactlessly. "I admire her kindness and elegance so much."

Hubert just looked at me.

"Actually, she is a bit of an enigma for me. I always detect in her eyes that she is enduring some sort of secret torment or suffering."

"You're pretty perceptive, Patricio. Did you know that she has been regularly consulting a psychiatrist for months?"

I felt as if an abyss had just opened under my feet. A cold wave ran down my face and a long silence followed Hubert's statement.

"Are you going to tell me that you didn't know?"

I nodded my head without being able to articulate a single word.

"I'm sorry, Patricio. I thought Jacques might have mentioned it to you. I can imagine how you might feel. It wasn't really my role to inform you about Jeanne's problems. I personally don't think it's healthy to hide things in a relationship like yours with Jacques." Hubert spoke pointedly, and I had nowhere to hide.

I slumped in my chair and could not finish my food. It was like an explosion of thunder without the warning of lightning. I was upset by Hubert's truculence.

Hubert, observing the heavy impact of his words on me, said, "Come on, Patricio, don't make me feel like a heel. Sooner or later you would have known about Jeanne anyway. Maybe I've acted hastily and it's really none of my business, but at any rate, I assume the responsibility entirely. You can discuss the matter with Jacques and tell him that I informed you." Hubert looked into his glass of wine, and then emptied it in a gulp. "His scolding doesn't bother me any more. He does it so often."

I had completely sunk into my chair and was more silent than ever. The idea that my relationship with Jacques was a contributing factor to Jeanne's mental condition gave me unbearable remorse. I could tell that Jeanne, that fragile and sensitive creature, was deeply in love with her husband. She obviously felt that for reasons unknown to her, their marriage was slowly slipping away. She was most likely suffering from a terrible state of frustration since she could not find a motive or a suspect or, for that matter, any way to fight a subtle situation that remained a total mystery.

"Oh, cheer up," Hubert said. "All married people have their troubles, apparently. Be grateful that you have a wonderful friend in Jacques. I recall that he was a most generous man, at times." He looked at me pointedly.

"Yes, I agree," I said, feeling something of a puppet in Hubert's hands.

"But what about you? Are you traveling in a wider circle now?"

"Yes. I am in debt to my old childhood friends, Gloria and Elena. They have taken me under their wing."

"That's nice. I'd like to meet them sometime. Have you talked to Louise about having people over? I don't think she'd be averse to the situation."

"You mean entertain at her home?"

"Precisely. You should have some fun in your life. And it would be a way to see Jacques and others you know, to introduce him to your wider circle, if you like," Hubert said pointedly, searching for an invitation himself.

"I never even thought of it. What a terrific idea."

Hubert continued to paint pictures of some of the recent parties he had been invited to, but I never lost the feeling of being stung. My penitence only grew in Hubert's presence, knowing that Jacques would soon insist on my making a move on behalf of our relationship, which was now strained to a breaking point.



I tortured myself for days, trying unsuccessfully to gather the courage to discuss the matter with Jacques. In an attempt to escape myself, I approached the countess with the idea of entertaining my friends. I was overjoyed when she offered me the use of her salons if I wanted to invite some of my friends to have an aperitif from time to time, providing, naturally, that I would let her know in advance in order to be certain that the dates would not coincide with her own entertaining at home. I had noted, however, that it was rare for her to have anyone in for tea or an aperitif in her salons. I immediately acted upon her kind offer and began plans for my first party in that city. I called Gloria and Elena first.

It was with a heavy heart that I called Jacques, who I knew would probably try to come without Jeanne. Fortunately, Jacques was to be out of town on another extended business trip. I did not feel the need to extend an invitation to Jeanne because I did not want to make myself more queasy than I already was. Perhaps the party would be the tonic that I so badly needed for my spirits, I told myself.

There remained the sticky point of whether to invite Hubert, but I brushed it aside, until, conveniently, it became too late to do so.



At that time in Paris, it was correct to invite friends to come at eight in the evening for a good port wine accompanied by a variety of hors d'oeuvres. I bought all the ingredients at Fauchon, one of the most sophisticated gourmet shops in Paris, close to the church of La Madeleine, and not too far from the home of the countess.

All of my friends were terribly impressed by the luxury of the apartment where I lived, especially Gloria and Elena, who lived simply. They spent a great deal of time speaking with the countess, who I had insisted must come. Being in her own home,

she felt totally at ease, and I could see that she thoroughly enjoyed mingling and chatting with my friends. Since it was my party, given to entertain my friends, who for the most part were young, and perhaps thinking that everyone would feel more relaxed without her presence, the countess excused herself rather early and withdrew from her elegant salons into her private quarters.

José Rodriguez, a young compatriot of mine whom I had met at the embassy of Chile, had asked me if he could bring along a friend who was a Hungarian refugee. When I met José at the embassy, he appeared to be the picture of restraint. But at my soirée, José grabbed me and held me with amazing stories. When Stefan, the Hungarian, left José to mingle, José blurted out to me the man's history. I was stunned. It seemed that everyone I met in Paris had suffered outrageously, although they all wore a veneer of gentility and worldliness.

"Stefan survived the dreadful Hungarian revolution," José said breathlessly. "Several members of his family, as well as close friends, died in the fighting in Budapest. His people had revolted against communism operating under the mistaken belief that the United States would send them military assistance. Help never arrived, and the combatants, to whom Stefan belonged, were ruthlessly put down. Can you imagine?"

I understood from José's depth of emotion that Stefan must be José's lover, and wondered just how much more José would tell me.

"Stefan was devastated by the loss of so many friends and family members, as well as the destruction of his country. Along with many other refugees, he walked across the Andau Bridge to freedom in Austria. From Vienna, with the help of friends who had reached the West earlier, he was able to make his way to France, where we met."

I again felt a flicker of envy for this couple, whose lovemaking undoubtedly was unimpaired by difficulty, as mine was.

"Excuse me," I said as graciously as I could. "I see that more people have arrived."

The evening progressed wonderfully well and there reigned a pleasant spirit of camaraderie and warm friendship.

Chapter XV

My first winter in Paris had not been nearly as cold as I had envisioned, and as the days grew longer, I was glad to know that in the coming weeks I would shed the season's layers. I longed for the warm gentle breezes that would fill the air with the perfume of spring flowers.

In spite of my feelings of guilt, I could not ignore my lover's wife. At Jacques' insistence, I started inviting Jeanne to museums, art exhibits and the occasional play or concert, but our outings together took a different turn. Jeanne's physical appearance changed drastically. Her makeup became more provocative and sensuous. Her clothing, increasingly less conservative, entered the most far-out realms of design and color, outlining more and more her bust and body curves so that I could not ignore them. Her garb made her stand out even among her more daring peers, but she was not flaunty and she kept her poise. The fact was, however, that she was suddenly loosening the rules.

Like most gay men, I immediately noticed her lovely outfits and jewelry and warmly complimented her on her good taste and gracious carriage. Jeanne would pretend an unself-conscious delight in the attention I paid to her. When Jacques was present, however, Jeanne would return to her subdued and formal ways and softly applied makeup.

During our solo situations, I noticed subtle advances, such as holding my hand when pointing out something special, or taking my arm as we walked together on the street. When she looked at me, her eyes were penetrating and inviting. Slowly and gradually, I became more and more attracted by her charm and gestures of affection. Needless to say, I never mentioned to Jacques either her change in appearance or her rather flirtatious devotion to me,

which sometimes could almost be interpreted as the behavior of a woman searching for a man on whom to bestow her virginity. This lasted for a while. It appeared as if Jeanne was testing my confidentiality.

When time had passed, and the possibility of repercussions had become less likely, she gradually became more daring, to the point that I felt aroused when she physically touched me. I was almost shocked at first and could not explain this metamorphosis developing within my inner self, as if a sorceress were spiriting herself into my body. Could this be possible, considering the fact that my true sexual persuasion was inclined only toward men? Was it possible that I could actually end up being in love with both Jacques and Jeanne at the same time, or was nature playing a sordid trick on me? Was this the awakening of a dual emotional and physical self?

These thoughts frightened me to a point where I began to feel as if I were suspended in mid air, like those trapeze circus people, but without the safety net. Would feelings of heterosexuality make any difference in my sense of belonging? I couldn't figure it out. In spite of those disturbing thoughts, I felt strongly inclined to continue this sort of dangerous game in order to find out more about my sudden dual sexual and emotional inclination.

I actually encouraged Jeanne to draw closer and closer in her advances toward me whenever Jacques was abroad on business. However, the first time she actually seduced me to kiss her on the lips, I stalled and hesitated, feigning a terrible headache, even though I felt almost totally aroused. Was I actually playing a woman's role, using a feminine trick to avoid a full sexual encounter? At this point, I did not know. What I did know, however, was that I felt sexually attracted to Jeanne, but without losing one ounce of my intense desire for Jacques. Could Jeanne be to me just a curiosity because of the mixture of tenderness and sex? I could not sort out this puzzle, but the temptation was too great not to try. Whenever the three of us were together, I wondered if Jacques noticed when Jeanne and I looked at each other.

Shortly after my first passionate kiss with Jeanne, Jacques had to take a business trip to London. Just after his departure, Jeanne invited me to dine with her and her daughter at home. I accepted without wavering. At the beginning, it sounded perfectly normal, considering Claudine would be present. I knew that during Jacques' absences Jeanne felt lonesome and enjoyed my company.

However, her mahogany-grained voice soon gave me the feeling that she could be plotting something more than just a casual gathering. I knew perfectly well that shortly after a late dinner, Claudine would get tired and would retire to her quarters, while the servants, in due course, would follow suit. I hesitated for a moment, but with my natural delayed coordination of facts, I realized it was a *fait accompli* and too late to retract. On the other hand, the thought of the unknown gave me a thrill.

After I hung up the receiver, a warm wave ran up and down my body. I remembered fantasizing about having sex with Jeanne, pulling her thighs open and sinking my head between them. Just those bursts of imagination would strongly arouse me. I went to my bedroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I realized I was blushing. A sort of electric *éclat* ran down my spine and I soon became aware that my trousers were bulging at the precise point where my legs joined my body. It was a curious sensation taking hold of my flesh, and I felt an untenable, almost explosive desire for Jeanne. Suddenly, my mind filled with her slender, graciously curved body, her wet and sensuous lips, those big deep expressive brown eyes and the hard, excited breathing the first time that our mouths, full of desire, made contact. I tried to erase the image of my previous stalling after that first kiss and my gradually controlled steps to avoid what I thought was the wrong fruit for me, but this time I felt somewhat like Adam seeking Eve, with a naked Jeanne holding the tempting apple and inciting me to take a bite out of it.

I couldn't wait to get dressed that evening. I was eager to begin this exciting new adventure of ripping off the veil that covered me

and discovering a new me inside, one that was strongly pushing forth from my body to free itself.

The time for my risky rendezvous was approaching. I took a bit longer bathing, carefully scrubbing every inch of my body so I could present myself in my best physical form should the mysterious and unknown moment actually arrive. Would I be capable of engaging in a battle of the sexes and experience sensations I had never known before?

The expectations were so great that I felt almost like a woman losing her virginity. The sudden elongation of my penis, brought on by the mere thought of having Jeanne's petite and slender body in my arms and again touching her warm, wet and succulent lips with my own, increased my excitement. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Jacques' virile body came to mind. The two images mixed as in a blender. This left me caught in a web of confusion.

What would happen if I ended up falling in love with Jeanne, or if after a sexual encounter with her I realized that my true love was still Jacques? This would surely cause Jeanne to fall deeper into her own despondency and confusion. There was also the possibility that Jeanne could fall in love with me, but would I be able to retract later? My change of heart could incite her to cause an estrangement in our triangular relationship out of spite.

These twisted speculations caused me to feel ill and dizzy as if I were at a giddy height, but I made an effort to pull myself out of the confusion and concentrate on dressing in my best evening suit and tie. To hell with the sordid machinations assaulting my tortured brain! At this point, I didn't care about the consequences. Selfishly, I felt like a free-lance journalist writing when and what I pleased. At any rate, I could not get hold of myself. The temptation was too great. I finally left my abode and took the *métro* toward a *rencontre* that might turn out to be either paradise or hell.

The minute I saw Jeanne's face, I realized she must have gone through similar torments. Although she had obviously taken the same pains in appearing at her best, she did it subtly, wearing an extremely elegant but not daring dress and subdued makeup, to

avoid calling the attention of the servants and her daughter. Her deeply melancholic eyes and gestures reflected that an inner battle disturbed her most intimate thoughts. However, her manners were natural and congenial, and as the dinner progressed, following a brief cocktail, the attention we both conferred upon Claudine greatly eased the beginnings of this rather bizarre evening.

When the little girl retired to her own quarters, and the servants disappeared, Jeanne led the way toward the library, where we could relax more comfortably on the large, soft and fluffy contemporary sofa, upholstered in vivid colors. Jeanne had requested that coffee be brought to that room before the house staff retired, saying she would serve it herself. After a banal conversation filled with furtive glances, and me feigning a passive mood, Jeanne's caressing eyes suddenly grew brilliant as she took my hand in hers. In response, I gently pulled her body toward me as I squeezed her hand. She faithfully followed my commands. I placed my arm around her shoulders and caressed her cheek with my free hand.

No words were uttered, but we were both aware of our heavy rhythmical breathing. At that point, Jeanne hesitated and, apparently with self-doubts, gently detached herself from my embrace. I was lost trying to interpret her gesture, but in *sotto voce* she sweetly excused herself for a moment, adding that she wanted to change into something more comfortable. I waited in suspense. My entire body was tense. Sooner than expected, Jeanne appeared in a most sensuous and provocative tunic, its transparent flowing gauze showing her swaying buttocks as she walked toward the coffee table. As she bent over the tray, I discerned through the pale fuchsia folds of her gown, which seemed to float around her well-shaped legs, the nipples of her small, firm breasts. Her high heels were of a gold color, striped in such a way as to show most of her lovely, petite feet, which seemed to dance around the room as she handed me a delicate porcelain demi-tasse cradled in her hand on an embroidered cream-colored napkin.

I had been gazing at her all along and felt a rush of desire

mixed with fear of the unknown. It was as if all I had imagined in my wildest feverish dreams was about to happen. Jeanne's large dark almond-shaped eyes darted at me. This creature before me did not resemble at all the discreet, sweet, quiet, almost shy and naïve Jeanne I had known before. With the exception of my own transformation, I was now witnessing the most incredible change in a person that I had ever experienced. I felt frightened.

She picked up a small piece of chocolate from a little silver tray, approached me and delicately placed it between my trembling lips. I took her hand as I savored her sweet offering, and licked her delicate fingers. I wondered if she would be receptive to my erotic thoughts. Like the Greek goddess Aphrodite, was Jeanne tempting me to join her on Mount Olympus? Would I, like Zeus, put on one of the ingenious disguises he used in order to have love affairs with humans rather than gods, as when he abducted Europa in the guise of a snow-white bull?

My desire grew stronger, and I felt the characteristic bulging in my pants. I gently guided her hand to my rod, which throbbed against the fabric of my trousers. She didn't resist and sensuously leaned toward me on the sofa where I reclined on the pillows. While Jeanne devoured my lips, I became overwhelmed with desire as my anxious hands crept beneath her thin, transparent gown and caressed her legs and her back.

I couldn't help remembering the episode with Eloísa de Cañizares in Lima, Perú, when that sensuous woman felt inclined to have a brief sexual encounter with me. Was my lack of interest at that time due to my infatuation with Jacques, who had impregnated all of my being with passion, a Vesuvian explosion that knocked out all my senses like an electrical shock or a power failure?

I was also reminded of an even earlier experience when I was a senior in high school, until now the only total sexual experience I ever had with a woman. Pili, her nickname for Pilar, was a seductive, mature woman I had met through some gay friends in my young years back in Chile. She was the product of the

dispersal and exodus of republicans, communists and anarchists who had escaped persecution and death in the Spanish Civil War. Pili was obviously a “fag-hag” with a keen challenging smell for conquering what appeared to be unattainable to a woman. She sensed that I was overcharged with sexual desire. None of the other unattractive young gays in our little group could ever hope to achieve what I would experience.

Pili was like a smart predator glaring in the middle of the night, getting the prize-winning succulent catch. She used to lure me into her apartment bedroom whenever her husband was away on a business trip. I remembered lying totally naked on her bed when she emerged from the bathroom in a long, rather revealing dressing gown. Just looking at her made me erect. Apparently she couldn’t resist the temptation to have immediate sex. Almost violently, she tore off her robe and mounted herself on my shaft. Her voluminous breasts bounced up and down, and she breathed hard as she had orgasm after orgasm. Finally, just as I was at the point of unloading within her depths, she leaned down and attempted to engage in a French kiss that amounted to nothing more than slobbering. She had reached her final climax, and her wet, lipstick-covered mouth left me almost nauseated and void of desire.

On that first encounter, Pili had literally attacked me like a swordsman brandishing the weapon of her luxurious impetuosity in order to possess my young body. However, that was pure sexual gratification, like eating when you are hungry. This time, I was enjoying an uncannily different feeling. Although Jeanne was obviously awakening in me a forgotten sexual debut with a female—thoughts and images rushed through my mind like one of those fast reels in black and white silent movies—there was the added attraction of Jeanne’s sensitivity, sweetness and candor, mixed with the melancholy of her marital misfortune, which emanated from her whole being. This time, I was the leader, and Jeanne responded with obvious consent, just as I had surrendered to Pili’s demands.

I kissed Jeanne passionately, caressing her breasts under her light gown and slowly moving down her body. I slipped her panties down to her ankles and off onto the floor. I couldn't resist gently kissing her niche, carefully separating the pubic hairs, and revealing the glistening wetness of her womanhood which my tongue anxiously penetrated. Her natural but inoffensive smell strongly aroused me. Jeanne was beside herself. Her slender and lithely petite body trembled with excitement. I could wait no longer and slowly glided my tongue the length of her body until it touched her firm breasts and wet lips. Raising my body, I guided my firmly erect rod into her warm niche. Jeanne moaned with multiple orgasms, while I was so excited upon penetration that I had a premature ejaculation. This actually prolonged the ecstasy as I was able to regain my powers for a prolonged second time until we both fell into the depths of a calmer sea.

After my successful sexual entente with Jeanne, I was left remorseful and even more confused. I needed to find the key to unlock this most unusual and terrifying riddle in which I had gotten myself involved. Down deep, I feared I was setting off repercussions difficult to foretell.



I became increasingly disturbed with Jacques' news of his impending return from London. Although making love with Jeanne had been mutually satisfying in spite of my mixed emotions, I feared the consequences. On the other hand, I became excited when I thought about submitting to Jacques' sexual demands. Jacques' fierce eroticism made him appear in my wildest imagination like Pan, the Greek therianthropic—half man and half animal, whose hairy torso had the lower limbs of a goat—whose bestial passion led him to pursue nymphs as well as boys without discrimination.

This new feeling of love for both Jacques and Jeanne was again turning the puzzle into a frightening mystery infused with fear, guilt

and confusion. Was I some sort of hermaphrodite, emotionally and sexually although not in physical form? In my younger years I had gone through a phase when I thought I was the only person in the whole world with what I believed were unusual, mischievous and forbidden inclinations, punished by law and condemned by the church and society, forced into a lonely corner of a world that was not mine. However, when I finally found my place among other gay boys and those upsetting thoughts gradually faded away, I never dreamed that I would feel again like some kind of unique and monstrous outcast. But this time it was even worse. Was I now condemned to a lifelong forbidden and lonely road, or would I eventually be able to pull out of the fires of hell? Could I ever regain a place within society, even if marginal, that would satisfy me as well as the intimate circle that surrounded me, or would I have to limp along a tortured and interminable path, rotting away until the end of it all? My thoughts were mind-numbing and spirit-crushing.

I could hardly pull myself out of my despair, but suddenly the proximity of Jacques' return on the following day soothed my soul. It was somewhat comforting to remember Jacques' strength and determination in helping me to abandon the confining country of my birth. The great thought of tomorrow and Jacques' arrival appeased me again. At least it was a source of comfort for the time being.



Jeanne kept quiet and discreet after Jacques' return to Paris, an attitude that I accepted with great relief. She may have feared Jacques' possible suspicion of her extramarital activities. However, in spite of the fact that for a long time only a marital friendship had existed between them, the aggravating factor was my involvement—her husband's best friend!

Jacques had engineered opportunities to see me intimately at the home of Hubert when the latter's father was out of

town. However, as time went by, these clandestine rendezvous made both of us nervous and only served to create a rather uncomfortable situation with Hubert, in spite of the fact that Hubert had suggested it himself. Hubert generously made the arrangements, without objection, each time Jacques asked him to do so. Nevertheless, my acute sensitivity could perceive in Hubert's eyes a disdainful look toward me. There was an obvious resentment of my continued postponement of Jacques' proposal that Hubert and I should share a flat together, and thereby provide a safe setting for Jacques' amorous affair with me, while at the same time allowing Hubert to leave his father's home that he so disliked.

I could hardly wait for the arrangement of a rendezvous with Jacques. Obviously, Jacques must have been equally anxious, because it didn't take long for me to receive the usual for-export-only casual call. The code after a few words of banal conversation was: "Talk to you later, I have a business matter to take care of at five this afternoon." Fortunately, Hubert's father was out of town and our secret escapade place was available.

After an effusive embrace, Jacques' first question was "Have you kept your promise?" His tone of voice reflected a mixture of roguishness and suspense. I looked at Jacques inquisitively, pretending for a moment not to recall that request. I knew I would have to lie. Knowing my ardent nature, whenever Jacques had to take a business trip, he always feared that I would succumb to Parisian temptations.

"Oh! I know now what you mean," I said, making an effort to project my voice firmly despite my tension. I could not block the images of my dangerous disloyalty.

"Of course I kept my promise," I said, assuaging my conscience, as in fact I felt I had actually kept my promise in the sense meant by Jacques—that is, not with another man but a woman—although I felt ashamed of the irony of that distorted thought. Jacques held me strongly in his arms and kissed me passionately.

"After this absence, my *raison d'être*, I am fully charged. You

are my lover, my friend, my brother,” Jacques said with a hoarse, deep voice. “I could hardly wait through my long, boring business hours to come back and touch again all of your smooth, silky skin and possess you more than ever. These separations, although short, are a torture for me. I love you today, tomorrow and for eternity.”

“I love you and miss you too, Jacques.”

My amazement at my feelings and sexual desires grew stronger and stronger. Jacques’ virility, strength and protectiveness filled my body and soul with the same intensity I had felt for the first time just a few days earlier with a delicate and sensitive creature of the opposite sex. I had been capable of playing Jacques’ role with Jeanne without reservation. This again brought about those disturbing thoughts that had invaded me before, but they soon fell into oblivion when Jacques lifted my naked body with his strong arms, as he had often done in the past, gently and carefully transporting me to the softness of the rather vulgar love-making place. He turned me face down in order to ravish me with unrestrained thrusts, emptying his saved manna within my deepest self, fulfilling my desire to be possessed by his sexual explosiveness.

After the usual soporiferous moments that follow the ecstasies of climaxing, I could not comprehend why I had felt the same deep affection and sexual fulfillment with Jacques as I had with Jeanne. Perhaps my strongest desire was for a *ménage à trois*, but I knew all too well that neither Jacques nor Jeanne could ever entertain such an idea. Although worldly enough to know about such cases, they were certainly not the type to share with me that kind of relationship. It appeared certain that I would have to make a monogamous choice. Being bisexual was obviously immensely more difficult than being homosexual. I tried to console myself, hoping that time would help me to sort out this most unexpected transformation.

Chapter XVI

One morning, I received a telephone call from the Hungarian gentleman and my young Chilean friend, José Rodríguez, to ask me if I would care to join them at an impromptu gathering at José's home the following evening.

José's father was out of town with his wife. Their cunning son habitually took advantage of these trips to give special, intimate gay parties on the sly.

When I arrived at the Rodriguez family apartment, Stefan opened the door and asked me to come in. He apologized for José, saying that he was a bit late in dressing and would soon join his guests. Meanwhile, Stefan introduced me to a tall and physically fit man, perhaps close to forty years old, with a broad and friendly smile. I could not grasp his name.

"Did I hear correctly that your name is Michel?" I asked him.

"Yes, that's right, but my friends call me Misha, and I would be more than pleased if you too would call me Misha."

The gentleman was handsome and appeared extremely refined. He looked at me intensely as if he were speculating, with his sharp but kind eyes, about the identity of this outlander who had suddenly entered into this informal gathering of gays.

Misha's overall appearance reflected great formality, which was a bit of a contrast to his surroundings at that moment. His straight, black hair was combed to the back and gave him a distinct air of elegance. His features were well defined, with a nicely shaped, but rather prominent nose, and thick, sensuous lips framing perfect white teeth. He had a good complexion with slightly olive skin, and, set in this face, his dark eyes were extremely expressive. They sparkled as he observed me. He immediately took an interest in me and was fascinated with the

idea that I had traveled across the globe to live in Paris. After asking me a series of questions concerning life in South America, he apologized for having monopolized so much of my time and asked me if I would like to go with him to the other side of the room to meet an English friend.

I was intoxicated by the number of nationalities represented in this crowded room. I had noticed the Englishman looking at Misha and me with an inquisitive sort of pucker on his chiseled face.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s Terence. He’s a fashion model,” Misha replied. Terence was tall and had a nice, slender figure, but perhaps just a bit too slender. His hair was blond and fell abundantly over his ears. He gazed in Misha’s direction, then turned away sharply, as if he were a bit wounded.

I understood immediately that some sort of relationship was going on between Misha and the English young man. During the course of the conversation I found out that Terence visited Paris off and on due to the nature of his work, but his permanent residence was London.

Terence’s approach to me was one of extreme curiosity, but in a rather cold and distant way, while Misha, who was obviously a natural flirt, was openly getting along with me—too well for Terence’s taste. I was flattered by the open interest I had created in Misha who, apart from his manly and handsome appearance, had an air of mystery about him.

I noticed that Misha had a slightly different accent when he spoke French. It was definitely not regional and most certainly not native.

“Where are you from?” I asked. “I can’t place your accent.”

“I was born in Eastern Europe, but I asked for political asylum in France when the communists took over,” Misha replied. “I was fortunate enough to obtain a position working in the French ministry of foreign affairs. I help refugees from eastern Europe find work here in Paris.”

“Your story sounds like Stefan’s,” I commented.

“With some variations,” Misha said, smiling to himself.

More and more guests arrived. Among them was Antonio, a well-known fashion designer of women’s clothing. He was tall, handsome, and impeccably dressed. Sporting a runner’s stature, his chiseled features and jet-black hair made him look younger than his thirty-five years. Friends of mine in Chile had told me about Antonio, who had left that country when he was young. He was currently enjoying a kind of discreet success in designing ladies’ *haute couture* in Paris.

When we discovered that we had mutual friends, Antonio and I exchanged addresses and telephone numbers. I felt an immediate kinship with Antonio, and knew instinctively that this person was one upon whom I could rely, without question. I made a mental note to follow up with a phone call, and not let the friendship lapse, as I often had in the past.

As the party progressed, Misha seemed to follow my every movement with his eyes. I couldn’t help but notice that while I chatted with Antonio, Misha’s eyes never left me. Neither could I avoid being attracted to that virile gentleman, who in spite of his masculinity, had exceptionally refined manners, almost startlingly similar to some of the nobility I had known throughout my life. When I had a chance, I asked Antonio if he knew Misha.

“Do you mean Prince Michel Broncu?” Antonio said, with a smirk.

I felt a warm wave spread over my body, and my heart beat faster. So, Misha was a prince! Meeting nobility and royalty was something that had always fascinated me. In Chile, the opportunities were rare, but Europe was abundant with such luminaries.

“Apparently Prince Broncu doesn’t like to be ostentatious, flashing his title about,” I said.

“He feels comfortable enough without that in this company,” Antonio replied. “When the prince is among the general society of Paris, believe me, he is extremely proud of being a direct

descendant of monarchs.”

As this gay little soirée progressed, I noticed that Terence continuously suggested to Misha, in a subtle way, that they leave the party together. The prince, however, seemed inclined to resist all of Terence’s efforts. At one point Misha broke off his conversation with the model and crossed the room to where I was chatting with three other guests.

Misha joined in the conversation and was not long in prying me away from the other three, using the excuse of exchanging addresses and telephone numbers.

“I really would like your number, you know,” Misha said in a low voice.

With a slight shake in my hand, I wrote my number on a small piece of paper that Misha held in his palm.

“I’ll call you—soon,” the prince said.

He walked back across the room toward Terence who waited for him, visibly perturbed. After thanking José for the evening, they left abruptly.

As the party drew to a close, Antonio offered to give me a ride home, which I immediately accepted. The two of us had found one another to be mutually simpático. As Antonio drove along, he commented to me that he had got into the habit of running every morning in the Bois de Boulogne.

“My work as a designer is relentlessly sedentary,” Antonio said. “If I don’t run, my poor heart grows lazy.”

“Walking is the only way I work out.”

“Shall we run together then?” asked Antonio.

The idea sounded like fun for me. Again, I felt life opening, rather than snapping shut, as it did when I pondered my relationship with Jacques.



Jacques had just returned from one of his business trips abroad and immediately telephoned me to see when we could get

together. I told him about the success I had had at José's party.

"Did you bring Hubert with you?" Jacques asked.

"Well, no," I answered. "Look Jacques, he's just not my cup of tea."

"But Patricio, that is to be the only way we can freely meet," Jacques said. "Have you got a better suggestion?"

I was silent.

"Have you?"

"You could come clean with Jeanne and start over," I said, opening the floodgate on my frustration with the relationship.

"That is impossible, and you know it. It would kill her."

"But Jacques, before I left Chile, you had a plan for us to run away together and start a new life in Switzerland."

"And you have started a new life. Admit it, Paris has been much more liberating for you than Santiago."

"But I don't have everything I want. I came here because I want you," I said, lowering my voice, fearful that Jacques might quarrel with me.

"And I want to be with you too," Jacques said. "But I don't want you living alone. You wouldn't like it. Remember how miserable you were when Alvaro left and you told me how hard it was for you to fill the hours?"

"But you weren't nearby."

"And now I am, and we are bickering and unable to meet. What do you propose?"

I grew silent again. I wondered if Jacques was having trouble handling the fact of my widening circle of friends.

"Patricio, what do you propose we do?"

"Let's start over. Let's get a room, even for a few hours at the Crillon, and see where we stand."

"I'll tell Jeanne I must go to London for the night."

"I only wish you would tell her the truth."

"Meet me in the lobby at six tonight," Jacques said.

The reunion that I had anticipated for several days was already marred, even before I hung up the telephone.

Chapter XVII

When Jacques left the Crillon the next morning, I felt a profound sense of disillusionment. I had been desperate to be in Jacques' arms again, but throughout the evening, our earlier disagreement crept repeatedly into the conversation. By the end of the night, I felt tired and overwhelmed by the stress and had little desire to be passionate. Jacques was exhausted from his trip, and so we fell soundly asleep with hardly more than a hug and a kiss.

I occupied myself more and more with the study of antiques. Now that I had read all of the volumes that the countess had in her apartment, I haunted various libraries and the Bibliothèque Nationale in my quest to learn more about this passion of mine. Louise was true to her word, and had taken me to several shops a small distance from home, bemused by my interest.

One day, however, the countess planned a different type of outing. She brought me to the *Marché aux Puces*, an enormous and very popular open-air antique market. This conglomeration of antique dealers was located on the most northern outskirts of Paris in a middle-class section of the city. It was open only on Saturdays and Sundays.

Before getting to the actual antique shops and stalls, we had to walk through a street full of humble vendors peddling everything from old clothing to wooden spoons and other everyday items of interest to people of limited means. Rubbing elbows with the common and ill-smelling people along this portion of the route was rather unpleasant, I thought. I wondered why the countess would bother to travel through this mass of humanity, and then I remembered her story of the war, and how she could rely upon the kindness of those who had virtually nothing to spare. I grew humble and took more of an interest in the deals that were flying

on all sides of me.

Once past that section, the area with the antiques was large, with a labyrinth of narrow passages exclusively for pedestrians. Rows of connecting shops on either side of the lanes contained an unending variety of antique items. Some things were better than others, and a few were frankly junk. Louise and I meandered through that fascinating twisted treasure trove.

The countess had decided to introduce me to this fantastic place full of collectibles and non-collectibles, that could be purchased reasonably, because she was concerned about the high prices I had paid for a nineteenth-century tea caddy and a fifteenth-century bible, filled with engravings, at the Village Suisse near the rue de la Motte-Piquet in central Paris.

I was more than delighted with this new discovery. The Marché aux Puces was a joy to my eyes and it wasn't long before I was able to find my way there alone by *métro*. I would get on at the Place de la Concorde station and take the train destined for Porte de la Chapelle, change at Marcadet-Poissonniers and get off at Porte de Clignancourt. To return home I took the Porte d'Orléans train, again changing at Marcadet-Poissonniers, but this time to the Mairie d'Issy line, and would leave the train at Concorde, which was not far from the countess's home. I felt utterly at home now, in almost every arrondissement, and Paris was opening its secrets to me.



On one of my visits to the Marché aux Puces, I ran into Alfonso, a young Chilean about my age, whom I had known superficially in Santiago through mutual friends. This young man had also decided to leave his country of origin in order to explore his talents in Paris. Alfonso had studied ballet with Ernst Uthoff and Lola Botka in Chile, but he came to the conclusion that what he really liked was designing theater sets for ballet performances.

We headed for a nearby brasserie and shared a meal of roast

chicken and rice, seasoned in a way that reminded me of a dish my mother used to prepare when the kitchen staff had their day off. Over a bottle of white wine, Alfonso told me about his close friendship with a rich and important Bolivian gentleman, whose wife was Chilean. They had homes in several parts of the world, including Paris.

His powerful Bolivian friend had connected him with the Marquis de Pueblas, another exile in Paris who ended his meteoric career by creating the Ballet of the Marquis de Pueblas. Now Alfonso worked for that ballet exclusively.

The Marquis was from an old aristocratic Chilean family of Spanish descent, but without money. With his artistic talents and his extraordinarily amusing personality, his friends decided that he was wasting his time in South America, and through joint contributions on his behalf, literally packed up this suave gentleman and shipped him off to Paris. They assumed correctly that Rafael de Pueblas' talents, combined with his social connections in France, would allow him to better his future in the Old World.

All of this took place in the 1930s. During those early years in Paris this gentleman met a Russian prince who had escaped from his country during the revolution of 1917.

"The prince had been clever enough to set aside substantial trust funds for himself in England as well as France, some time before the revolution," Alfonso said, drawing in all of the details. "This extremely handsome noble gentleman was married to a member of an important royal family, which made him even more voraciously sought after by Parisian *haute* society. You can just imagine."

Shortly a friendship developed between these two men, and the Marquis de Pueblas proposed they set up a business partnership dealing in antiques, geared toward the most prominent members of the Parisian social scene. The prince's name would lend a magic touch and attract the right people, and the Marquis de Pueblas' good taste and knowledge of antiques would do the rest.

The prince was not at all interested in any financial gain, and, as a matter of fact, disliked the idea of being associated with any type of trade venture, but decided to help him when he realized that this Chilean gentleman, who himself had noble Spanish origins, was in great financial difficulty. The marquis urgently needed a means of support. So the prince backed Rafael de Pueblas with a substantial amount of capital. He knew that the marquis possessed the talent to choose the most appealing antique items, as well as to get them at the most reasonable prices.

"The opening of the antique gallery, the creation of Pueblas and the Russian prince, was an instant success," Alfonso concluded.

"Where is this gallery?" I asked.

"The marquis' protégé runs it now. I'd be happy to introduce you."

That was all that I needed to hear. I knew, in that instant, that this would be a turning point for me.

I hardly heard the rest of Alfonso's self-important story about how the marquis decided to extract himself from the antiques business and establish the corps de ballet. I was imagining my future so furiously, so clearly, that I felt it would happen.



My sense of prophecy proved justified. Thanks to Alfonso, I did indeed meet the marquis' protégé. Within two weeks, I had taken a slightly remunerated position as an assistant at the antique gallery.

I told the countess of my plan, and received her blessing: she had heard of the renowned antique dealership, backed by the Russian prince, and she herself had shopped there. Gloria and Elena congratulated me on my move to the arts. So too did Antonio, who had become my official confidant from the day I revealed to him the true reason for my trip to Paris and my relationship with Jacques.

It was Jacques who was the unhappy one, however, and he

could not hide it, when he met me for a drink so that I could tell him the news.

"How can you simply leave behind such an important profession as yours?" Jacques said, almost as if he were chiding his child.

"Jacques, to work in the arts has been my goal as long as I can remember. I told you all about it. Didn't you listen? Didn't you take it seriously?"

"Have you told the professor?"

"He was surprised, no doubt, but he certainly didn't want to keep me on if I had a greater interest elsewhere. Believe me, he will find others to take my place in his pediatrics department."

"But it seems like a step downward to me," said Jacques, becoming the businessman. "It's not necessarily going to be lucrative."

"Neither is my profession, Jacques."

"I suppose not. But it is an important contribution to society. I cannot believe you are turning your back on it, to hang out with a lot of dilettantes who pretend to know more than ..."

Jacques looked angry now, and I too was becoming heated. "Jacques, you don't want me to meet anyone. That's what this outburst is about."

"I don't care who you—"

"Oh, yes, you do. You want to imprison me in an apartment with Hubert, so you can see me at your pleasure."

"Patricio, where did this attitude come from?"

Jacques' look of anger had changed to one of dismay, and I felt a pang of remorse. "Oh, Jacques, I'm sorry. But this new position means so much to me, it is opening up a new world for me. And I thought I could count on you, of all people, to be happy for me."

"Patricio, the way you talk, I feel like I'm just one of your many confidants in Paris," Jacques said sadly.

"Honestly, Jacques, because we have not been able to conduct our affairs as we once thought we would—remember those old days?—because we haven't done that, it seems we have drifted apart."

“Patricio,” Jacques said. He put his hand over his face and tried to calm himself. He waved the waiter away from the table.

“Patricio, we can salvage things. It hasn’t been easy for me either.”

I sighed. “I know that, Jacques, I know.”

“Patricio, I have so many thoughts and ideas about how we can conduct our future.”

“I don’t care about the future, Jacques. Something must change now,” I said, welling up with memories of my passion for Jacques. “I’m not ready to let go.”

“Patricio, I swear, things will change. Give me some time. I promise you.”

“Promise,” I said, idly repeating the word, as Gloria had, when I had told her about Jacques.

Chapter XVIII

I had not been working in the gallery for more than a week when I spied a man with a glamorous profile, poring over an old portrait on the wall, just inside of the window display. Its gilded frame was more interesting to me than the uninspired painting inside it, and I was about to comment to the man on the history of that frame, when Prince Broncu turned his head suddenly and stared into my surprised eyes.

“Michel,” I said.

“Misha, remember?”

Ever since our first meeting, I had mused about and eventually developed a strong attraction to this magnificent human specimen, whose noble background made him even more interesting. We stood talking in the store for a long time, before the next potential customer came in.

Michel, in an effusive mood, answered my questions about his ancestors, who apart from being the reigning heads of their principality, were historically involved in the political affairs of a much more vast territory. Toward the second part of the nineteenth century, two neighboring principalities joined together to form a unified kingdom whose reigning king was elected.

Prior to the outbreak of World War II, Misha had become a career diplomat and was assigned to his country’s embassy in one of the Scandinavian countries. On 30 December, 1947, after his nation became a socialist Soviet Republic and the reigning king went into exile, Misha was left without a country. His wealth and property were confiscated by the communists. It was a horror story for him.

His aging mother was placed in house arrest simply because she held the title of princess. At the time, few noble families

escaped this fate. This situation was even more tragic for Misha, because he was impotent to do anything about it.

“From my childhood, French was my second language, so I chose France as my country of exile,” he explained. “Fortunately, the French government recognized my diplomatic accomplishments, and offered me a position in the Bureau of Refugee Affairs.” The bureau offered assistance and financial aid to the thousands of Eastern Europeans seeking a new life in France at that time.

I almost wished the conversation would take a more personal turn, but Misha kept talking, a bit nervously, about his work.

“I was able to help José Rodríguez’ Hungarian friend, Stefan, find work in Paris, for example,” Misha said proudly. “One of the unfortunate conditions of being a refugee is having to content oneself with types of employment of a more menial nature than one deserves.” He was talking about Stefan, but I knew that he might well have been talking about himself.

Misha was able to find Stefan a job as a butler in the home of an important French noble family. Although the position was, to say the least, a bit of an insult to Stefan when one took into consideration his background, he had no alternative but to accept whatever work was available.

Misha was sympathetic to the Hungarian’s feelings concerning this rather desperate situation, and the prince always encouraged him with the hope of one day finding a more agreeable position that would be in keeping with his qualifications and intellect. However, time passed and Misha had not yet found anything that would extricate this unfortunate Hungarian from the misery in which he was engulfed.

“Perhaps it is because of this sad situation that Stefan clings so desperately to his friendship with José,” Misha said. “Unfortunately, José is a great tease, and flirts with everyone and anyone he lays his eyes on. Much to Stefan’s chagrin.”

Abruptly Misha looked at his watch and rather hurriedly apologized for having to rush off. He told me he had missed me and would contact me again. I felt an instantaneous and urgent

attraction to this nobleman, and hoped that his words were true.



My new mentor in the realm of art, especially old masters paintings, was François Augaud. The gentleman was a well-known Parisian antiquarian who had been recommended to me by a Chilean friend before I left my country. This pleasant and serious connoisseur of the arts would amuse his select group of close friends with charming evening gatherings in the rear portion of his shop on the rue du Bac. I spent many afternoons keeping company with François and picking his brain, especially about the Italian school of painting from the period of the Renaissance, which was Monsieur Augaud's specialty. Although I was eagerly learning about the old masters, when it came to purchasing something for myself I had to settle for items within the reach of my modest pocket. I had fallen in love with a small Italian painting of the XVII century that François had for sale in the shop. The subject was the head of a man from that period, which the antique dealer believed to symbolize Christ. The serene expression on the face fascinated me.

This painting had been done over a copper plate instead of canvas, which led both François and myself to think that it had actually been executed over an old engraving plate. The frame that surrounded the painting was from the same period, with elaborate carving, especially in the protruding corners which were all heavily gold leafed, but with a rich old patina. I was also strongly attracted by a small Italian bronze representing a mature and muscular man holding a round object that apparently was intended originally to hold a thick, broad candle.

François was aware of my keen desire to possess these two antique items, and even though I thought it may have crossed the antiquarian's mind that I just might possibly be a wealthy South American scion, his affection for me led him to offer the objects to me at a most friendly price. Without hesitation, I succumbed to

the delightful temptation and closed the deal. When I showed my new acquisitions to the countess she showered me with praise for my excellent taste and good fortune.

I continued to meet more and more people from the intellectual and aristocratic sectors of Parisian life. This worried Jacques, whose work was taking him overseas again, just at the time when I knew that he felt, and rightly so, that I had begun to slip out of his control.



During a bustling business day at the antique shop, I was amused by the blustering of two Americans, who were extremely interested in a piece of porcelain. Another assistant tried to help them, but it was clear that the two Americans didn't understand a word of French. At that point they both looked at me with big smiles on their faces and asked if I might be able to help them.

I answered them in English and offered to translate what the frustrated assistant was desperately trying to get across to them. This soon led to a conversation, and before long a sort of friendship was growing.

John and Mark, the two Americans, were typically middle-class and remarkably friendly. They appeared to be fairly well off and looking for ways to part with their money. I found out that John, at forty the older of the two, owned two renowned establishments for the elderly on the outskirts of Chicago. Mark, who looked to be just a bit older than I, had worked in the past in one of Arthur Murray's famous dancing studios.

After Mark met John and they established a stable relationship together, John had asked Mark to leave his dancing job, where he spent his days teaching exotic steps like the rumba and the bolero to bored housewives. He became a partner in his nursing home enterprise with a small, but profitable percentage of the stock in his name.

I couldn't help but notice that the two men were taken with

me and were impressed to find out that I lived in the home of a countess. Soon they showered me with invitations to dine at some of Paris's better restaurants, and I in turn took them around the city, pointing out the various sights of interest.

One morning Mark called to invite me out. John had discovered a nightclub near the Champs Elysées, thanks to a fellow he met on the street, paid by the club to entice clients into the establishment. These prospectors were always clever enough to demand a tip for themselves before leading anyone to their patron's night spot.

The club's apparent specialty was an exclusive show of transvestites. The performers were young boys, anywhere from seventeen to nineteen years old, all of whom looked like real females and were extremely attractive. John was so enthused about his new-found experience that he insisted that all three of us return to the club together.

I was madly curious about the show and could not help but accept their invitation. I wondered if it would be as wild as the show I had paid for in Cuba—and hoped it would not. I had never seen anything like transvestitism in my entire life. Even before leaving Chile I had heard about these types of shows being staged in cities like Berlin and Paris and some of the other more liberated cities of the world. It all sounded like a great deal of fun.

After dining at a sophisticated restaurant near the Elysée Palace, the three of us walked to the club, with John in the lead like an explorer. The establishment was located in a converted basement that gave the place a sort of pseudo-discreet appearance. John paid for the tickets at a small hidden window to the right of the entrance door. The price of admission did not include drinks, which were as weak as they were expensive. The inside of the nightclub was large and filled with tables that left little space to walk. At the end of the room was a stage, which at the moment was covered with thick, red curtains.

A waiter led us to a small table with a frontal view. The surrounding tables were so close that it was difficult to squeeze into the chairs at our own table. For John, the ordeal was

especially taxing due to his large body. Nevertheless, one could tell from his full, rather vulgar but pleasant face, that he thoroughly enjoyed introducing his friends to what, for him, was a thrilling experience.

Mark, too, was having a good time. He wasn't as tall as John, had a nice, slim figure, and a pleasant, but rather common face. The two of them made a nice team in many respects, I mused, especially where jewelry was concerned. Both loved to wear not one, but numerous ostentatious diamond rings, which made them appear even more vulgar and ordinary than they really were.

Suddenly, from behind the heavy curtains there appeared a middle-aged man in black tie who announced that the show was to commence by introducing the first star of the evening, who would sing one of Edith Piaf's most famous songs, "La Vie en Rose."

I got dreamy and journeyed back to my happier days with Alvaro. The lights in the room dimmed, the curtains opened and the spotlights focused on the stage. There was a feeling of great expectation throughout the club. A svelte blond thing with fair skin, arrayed in a spectacular black gown covered with shiny sequins, walked onto the stage. Her shoulders and arms were uncovered, and one could see the beginnings of impressive cleavage. Her skin was incredibly fair and without blemish, and her shiny, golden blond hair, which reached just over her ears, cascaded in undulating waves. She wore long, black earrings filled with rhinestones that dangled almost musically as this unusual creature bowed her head to the audience for the clamorous applause she was receiving.

The artist's overall appearance was, most decidedly, the antithesis of that of poor Edith Piaf. Her voice, however, resembled enormously, in its strength and warm tones, that of the famous singer. Even the movements of her fine porcelain white hands, with fingernails painted red, closely resembled those of la Piaf. Having always had a sort of fetish for hands, I immediately noticed traces of masculinity in that part of the artist's body, especially because

of their large size. I watched the show with riveted fascination. When she ended the song, the almost deafening applause drowned out all extraneous sound.

This act was followed by several other young misses, some of them having dark complexions and corresponding hair, while others were either blonds or brunettes. Some of them sang in English and Spanish, as well as French. When they had all gone through their individual routines, the entire troupe gathered on the stage for a joint potpourri to close the show. At this point the audience applauded more frenetically than ever, and some even called out special words of flattery directed at individual girls. When all of the shouting and applause had died down, the girls confessed publicly that they were really boys who had undergone hormonal treatment in order to develop their breasts like those of women, and then they all undid the top part of their dresses and exposed to the assemblage their turgescient bosoms. This grand finale was sensational, and the crowd simply went wild screaming, shouting and whistling, all of which brought down the house.

Even though one could consider it all degrading and abnormal from an anatomical standpoint, I was nevertheless extremely interested in the physical transformation that took place in these girls, as well as curious about the type and quality of private lives that they might possibly have.

At that moment I overheard the people at the next table saying that the public was allowed back stage after the show to meet the performers personally. When I informed Mark and John of this, the three of us got up and rushed to the back, where the stars were already assembled and surrounded by men of all ages and nationalities who were just as curious as ourselves to get to know a bit more about these ladies. We overheard one of them speaking in what sounded like American English.

She was of a fair complexion with light brown hair and rather pretty. John, who was not at all timid, immediately approached her with an invitation to have a drink with us at our table. This was allowed by the establishment, since it meant more business for

them. She accepted right away and was obviously glad to be able to see and chat with compatriots, but showed much more interest in me than in my new American friends. Apparently my accent in English caught her fancy. While our little parade of obvious foreigners laboriously worked our way through the narrow spaces between the tables, led by such a gracious and elegant lady, the club's patrons buzzed with chatter that was undoubtedly about us. We were causing a bit of a sensation for the spectators. Upon reaching the table and ordering drinks from our waiter, John and Mark asked the classic question that all Americans ask each other abroad:

"Where do you come from?"

"Pennsylvania," was her response. "And you?"

"We're from Illinois," answered Mark and John in unison.

She then turned to me and commented about my accent, which she had observed was neither French nor American when speaking English, and said she was having trouble guessing my country of origin. After clarifying my nationality, I rather abruptly dared to ask her if the physical changes that we had all seen were limited only to the development of the breasts, or whether she had also altered the sexual organs. She answered that since total sex change operations were not yet at an advanced stage, she and the rest of the girls in the troupe had gone no further than taking hormonal treatment for the development of their breasts.

"Tell me," I continued, "if you don't mind my asking, what is your sexual life like now?"

"Well, you won't believe it, but there are many men out there who enjoy having sex with a creature like me, and I mean heterosexual men. The rare physical combination that I now have makes me unique. This excites some men enormously, and they literally go crazy when they have sex with me."

John and Mark devoured every word. I continued my interrogation. The lovely creature told us that she lived with a black American, a designer of women's scarves, and proudly showed us the splendid scarf her lover had designed. I couldn't

help but notice the rather prominent Adam's apple on her neck. Although not obvious, it was definitely not a feminine physical trait. Her hands and feet were also too large to be those of a woman. The closer I looked, the more difficult it was to compute the picture before me.

At last the transvestite thanked us for the drinks and said goodbye to the American men. She nuzzled my ear and whispered, "I'm not finished with you yet."

I must have blushed, as I felt a warmth running down my face.

"Let me ask you another question," I said. "Do you feel happy and at peace with yourself with this change?"

"Oh, I would definitely have to say yes. It has really been the salvation of my life. Since I was a little boy people would point at me with an accusing finger, saying that I looked just like a girl, and, of course, that was the way I felt. I always enjoyed putting on my sister's dresses, which was easy to do since we were about the same age and her clothing always fit me. Would you like to try it?"

I shook my head shyly. She took my hand in hers.

"Won't you come with me for one last drink?" she asked loudly, over the band.

By now, because of the force with which she had me by the wrist, I was rising out of my seat. John elbowed Mark.

"She's stealing Patricio," John said. He laughed like a hyena, showing his sharp teeth.

I wasn't sure which was the worse of the evils—staying or going. I was about to take a chance when I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Mark, requesting that I join them at their hotel for a nightcap. Our time together was limited, Mark said with regret, since he and John were leaving Paris soon. I decided that it would be impolite to leave my hosts.

"Well, I have to change, honey," said the showgirl, with some bitterness. "I have to slave away for my living."



John and Mark were departing to continue their European tour, with stops in London, Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna and Rome.

“We would really like it if you could join us, for all or part of it,” John said.

The invitation was sincere. When I candidly confessed that I simply did not have the funds for a trip of that nature, especially the expensive hotels that they were accustomed to frequent, both of the Americans immediately and spontaneously offered to defray all of the costs if I would agree to travel with them. The offer was tempting and I thanked them profusely, but explained that I was currently unable to accept such a generous invitation since I was committed to my work at the antique gallery.

Besides, I knew perfectly well that taking such a trip would lead to an impossible situation with Jacques, whom I had not mentioned to the Americans.

Mark and John understood and gave me a kind of rain check by extending to me a formal invitation to visit them in the United States. With their usual flourishes, each presented his card with address and phone numbers in Chicago. Although at that time I truthfully believed it very unlikely that I would ever have the opportunity to visit the States and leave my beloved Paris, my cautious, conservative character told me that it wouldn't hurt to have a friendly connection in that powerful country.

Chapter XIX

My habitual Sunday dinner engagements with Jacques and Jeanne continued without interruption, as I had no polite excuses for not coming. Fortunately, Jacques had no foreign business trips on his agenda and had stayed in Paris for some time. This prevented the strain of seeing Jeanne alone at their home.

When the three of us were together, it was difficult for Jeanne and me to pretend to the same innocent friendship that we had before. Nor was it easy for Jacques to cover up our own intimate relationship. I could detect Jeanne's concealment through her gestures, her eyes slightly winking at times, hinting, suggesting, insinuating, or her half-words and her engaging poses desperately trying to elude Jacques' attention.

I feared that both Jacques and Jeanne might be developing some kind of rare sensitivity about capturing special meaning, even in minor mutual gestures, or tuning in on the exchange of silent messages through eye intensity, not unlike reverting to a primitive language of the senses that could replace actual words. I feared that some of my discreet furtive glances at one or the other of my lovers might appear too filled with suggestions of lascivious interest. Maybe it was just my imagination, but down deep I was panic-stricken that Jacques or Jeanne might capture a revealing gesture or look in my, her or Jacques' eyes that could create, if not suspicion, at least a certain amount of jealousy.

Actually, I dreaded being with Jeanne alone, even on our innocent outings while Jacques was tied up at his office. Every time I looked into her eyes, I felt I was looking into a deep reservoir of sexual desire. My lack of experience in playing the heterosexual made me think that I was probably just the closest male subject she had on hand to satisfy her sexually starved body

and lonesome, tormented mind, but perhaps I was wrong, and Jeanne was falling in love with me. This thought frightened me.

Could she be the type of woman who draws you toward her even though you know she is trouble, or was she just venting her soul about sin and society out of revenge for her apparent marital failure? Jeanne appeared protective of her maternal and housewife image, although sometimes she hated her curfew or balked at her chores; reclusive and proper one day, outward, daring, sensual and chatty the next. Was it moodiness or some psychological disorder? In spite of her strength and decisiveness, I thought that perhaps social expectations could suppress Jeanne's spirit and shut down her confidence. However, it was difficult for me to judge this, considering the differences between men and women, in spite of my new inclinations and sensitivities.

Another challenge for me was learning the difference between love and sex. Was my attraction for Jeanne just the latter, due to the novelty of the event? Did Jacques still represent the fulfillment of both?

My opportunity to continue my soul-searching arrived when Jacques announced another business trip, this time to Belgium. Jeanne didn't fail to call soon after Jacques' departure to invite me again to a tête-à-tête dinner at her home. I thought I should let myself acquiesce without cutting short this internal whirlwind that dominated my inner core, pushing outward with enormous force, like a newly born child abandoning its mother's womb to explore and discover the outside world. Maybe this would allow me eventually to find out what my true colors were. I could either be saved or end up burning in Satan's furnace.

After the servants retired, Jeanne led the way to the same room where we had our first sexual entente, and asked me to wait while she slipped into more comfortable clothing. Jeanne showed up sooner than expected in an even more daring outfit than the one she wore the first time. This transparent gown showed her most intimate parts in all their detail. We embraced then kissed. She undid my tie and unbuttoned my shirt, rubbing her hands against

the sparse hair on my chest. I leaned close to her as she slipped her hands under my shirt, caressing my back, while I was busy undoing the buttons of her blouse, and moving my hands toward her breasts. Circling her nipples with the tips of my fingers, I noticed a gradual hardening. This caused my rod to grow.

Throughout our foreplay and love making, I had a gnawing feeling of some occult presence. Could one of the servants be spying on us? With the door locked from the inside and the key obstructing any sight of the room, that seemed highly unlikely. Fortunately, this uneasy thought did not diminish my ardor, although I couldn't help remembering some wild ghost stories I'd heard during my youthful years in Chile. A chill ran down my spine, but I thought it was all sheer nonsense.



During the tender moments after lovemaking, my fears were renewed. What would happen if one day Jacques unexpectedly returned home? What Jeanne and I were doing was very dangerous, and it left me with a bad taste in my mouth. What would now become of my relationship with Jacques? If Jacques ever found out, it would more than deeply hurt him—it would crush and demolish him.

I was what Jacques had aspired to achieve: to possess his male lover and enjoy him for the rest of his life. Having me was like a key entering a lock and opening the door to the other half of himself in order to complete his being. It was like throwing ourselves together into a melting pot. After all, wasn't that exactly what I myself had been trying to achieve? I couldn't bear my sense of guilt, but for some strange reason I felt like blithely betraying my lover by committing adultery.

Nor was it only my prim moral compunctions that were overwhelming me in this latest sequence of events. My whole personal concept of life was falling apart. Until recently, my life had been a one-way street along which my true instincts traveled.

I had followed the commands of my body, my libido and the sexual excitement of eating forbidden fruit, clashing with the establishment and going against all what was expected of me, but only with men. What had gotten into me of late? It was as though some unknown demon had invaded my body, trying to take possession and turning me into a different person. This was not the Patricio I knew. Rather than religion and society, I was now dealing with nature.

Just as in my early youth when I realized I was gay, I struggled again to develop a sense of self-acceptance. My mind had the faculty to choose what my reasoning would tell me was right, but this seemed to mean that I would have to renounce the other side of my new dual self. If I succeeded, keeping only one half, would I be able to achieve the happiness I had now reached, or would I end up throwing myself into an unfulfilled, regrettable and irreversible embroilment?

I exhausted myself in these lengthy speculations, without succeeding in attaining my goal. I remembered the Biblical story about Solomon's predicament when two different women claimed to be the mother of a newly born child, and Solomon threatened to split the child in half. I felt as if I were in Solomon's position, trying to cut my own self in two. But which one of my two halves would cry out to stop the procedure?

Sometimes I was forced to consider that torture might never come to an end. Perhaps I was doomed to be converted into a demon or monster like the centaurs in Greek mythology, having the head and upper torso of a man and the body of a horse, living in the mountains and forests, brutish in habits, eating raw flesh, and abducting young girls. But then I remembered the centaurs who had gentler habits, like Chiron who was friendly and good toward men and protected Peleus, the father of Achilles. When accidentally wounded by one of Heracles' shafts, Chiron was in such pain that he exchanged his immortality for the mortality of Prometheus, in this way finding rest. I wondered if I could solve my own crucial puzzle and, like the centaur, reach some kind of

majestic peace.



When Jacques and I got together at our secret meeting place after his return from Brussels, I noticed that the expression on my lover's face was changed. He did not have his usual broad smile at seeing me again, neither did he hug me as soon as we were alone in the room. I nearly froze with the thought that Jeanne may have been tempted to say something naughty or compromising just to spite me for having avoided further sexual entanglement.

"Did anything go wrong on your business trip?"

"No, my precious lover. Is everything all right with you?" Jacques said with a worried look.

"Yes, as far as I know. What's the matter with you anyway? You look different and you're acting strangely. You better tell me what you have in mind," I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

"I hear that you have been so busy with your affairs"—Jacques' voice sounded ironical when he emphasized his last word—"and with your social life that you barely saw Jeanne once during my absence."

I could tell that Jacques was seething with anger, and that down deep he probably wanted to hit me, but he tried to keep his impulses hidden. I could tell that he felt duped. His face openly revealed his frustration and distress. Sensing the proximity of a dangerous explosion, I clumsily tried to change Jacques' mood, but my effort ended in total failure. I was well aware of what was involved. In a sense, it was a relief, because obviously my affair with Jeanne was not the issue. But I feared yet another bout of jealousy from Jacques over my male friends. My lover appeared to be full of skepticism, anxiety and mistrust.

Then I said, "It's true, Jacques, I have been busy with my work at the antique gallery, and I felt I had neglected for too long some of my Chilean friends."

I embraced Jacques tenderly, rubbing my cheek against his, but

suddenly I felt his strong fingers at each side of my neck, pressing too strongly to be interpreted as a joke. I became frightened and tried to pull away from his hands. Although the pressure decreased, I noticed a brilliance in Jacques' eyes and a strange smile that I did not like.

"You have a lovely, rather thin neck, my beloved," said Jacques, wanting to make it sound like a joke.

Without letting me go, Jacques firmly rubbed his hands around my neck, looking at me in a strange way. Menacing? Was this a sort of warning, or was it just my fertile imagination? Would Jacques be capable of having someone follow me to find out what I really did with myself during his absences? If I had been followed to Jacques' home, there was no danger, since he wanted me to see and go out with his wife, not only to keep her company but to exercise control over my comings and goings. However, if I had been seen with John and Mark, or any of my other male friends, I feared Jacques' imagination and tortured mind, frustrated at his inability to control my life, could endanger our relationship.

Then Jacques let go and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Patricio! Being tied up with my business dealings and my trips abroad has made me more crazy about you than ever before. I know I should trust you rather than letting my imagination go wild with silly thoughts. It would make me feel better if you would just agree to share an apartment with Hubert."

Jacques was more relaxed now, and his old affectionate self was reflected in his excited breathing while embracing and caressing me. I reciprocated with great relief, but avoided the issue of sharing a flat with Hubert.

"You know, Jacques, I really am deeply involved learning about antiques and antiquities. To tell you the truth, I worry about my future. I am sure you are aware that my financial situation is far from easy, and I am seriously considering a career in this field."

Jacques' jealousy had obviously clouded his mind to the point of forgetting his previous promises of arranging some kind of financial security for me.

"You are absolutely right to worry about your future, Patricio, and that is going to be rectified. As a matter of fact, I have to be in Geneva within the next fifteen days and I want you to come with me this time, so that we can discuss a plan to secure your future. Besides, we need to be together for several full days. I know I can resolve my business matters with just one single appointment, but I'll tell my office that I will have to be in Switzerland for at least three days. That will give us a short, but very much needed vacation. I am tired of these furtive little escapades."

I was ecstatic. At least a solution to the important financial part of my life would give me some peace of mind, and besides, I did love Jacques.

"Oh, Jacques, that's wonderful! More than anything else, I'm excited about spending time together, just you and me, and being away from Paris is the right prescription for both of us. But what about Jeanne? If she phones and learns that I am not in Paris at the same time that you are away, she might put two and two together".

"You can simply tell the countess that you have been invited for a few days to the country home of one of your Chilean friends."

"What if she finds out that we returned to Paris on the same date?"

"You are very astute, Patricio. That certainly didn't enter my mind, but I have another matter pending in London that I have to check into. Instead of making two separate trips, I shall arrange to fly from Geneva to London the day you return to Paris, and then you can call Jeanne to tell her you're back and you can have a get-together."

After settling the plans for the trip together, I casually undressed. Jacques followed suit. Caressing Jacques' hairy chest thoroughly aroused me. I lay down on the bed facing Jacques. He asked me to lie on top of him so that he could feel all of my weight over his body. Suddenly, to my amazement, Jacques positioned himself over my thighs and, moving forward, penetrated himself with my firmly erect rod. He panted heavily then groaned and

moaned louder than ever before until we both climaxed at the same time.

I was left in a daze after this first and very different sexual experience with Jacques. What I had enjoyed in my affair with Jeanne was the contrast between my dominant role with her and my submissive surrender to Jacques' masculine possessiveness. During the following days, I remained confused by this unexpected discovery of Jacques' sexual appetites. Was this just a whim, or had it set a precedent for a trend? I could only carry on. Time would tell.



Jacques was elated when he saw me emerging from the arrival gate at the Geneva airport. That evening, over cocktails and dinner, Jacques quietly delivered his plan to secure my survival should something drastic happen to him. He had it all arranged. The next morning Jacques was going to transfer funds from his private account in Geneva to another Swiss bank in my name. Jacques explained to me that Switzerland offered secret bank accounts, each with a number known only by the account holder. I was fascinated not only by the fact that I would enjoy some protection for my future, but also by the information I was receiving about these bank procedures, which was something totally new to me. Jacques explained that the amount was not exorbitant, but was the beginning of what would become over time, if left untouched and allowed to accrue interest, a good financial backing that in turn would allow me to be comfortable for the rest of my life. I was extremely moved by Jacques' thoughtfulness and generosity, although it did cross my mind that Jacques would also know this secret account number. What would happen if complications were to arise between us in the future? What is so generously given can also be quickly taken. Not to worry, I thought. I could simply withdraw the funds from the bank, close my secret account, and open a new one in another bank. But this was not the moment to

concern myself about such matters. There would be time enough to handle that little business transaction some other time. For now it was prudent to remain silent.

That night, Jacques reverted to his old macho image, which greatly comforted me, although I didn't know how long it was going to last. After the bank transaction was finished the next morning, Jacques announced he had rented a car and was taking me to the city of Lucerne, an old Swiss gem. We stayed at a charming hotel with a spectacular view of the lake and a Russian Orthodox church. During our entire stay I was happy and chatty, forgetting all about my life in Paris. Again I had that wonderful feeling of freedom, which Jacques enjoyed as much as I did. Our flights out of Geneva were just two hours apart.

I could hardly believe the turn my life had taken. It was indeed a good feeling to know that something was being done to build a more secure world for my future. However, not all of my internal problems were solved yet. The most crucial still dangled in the air, like a flying kite subject to the winds, with a doubtful master holding its strings.



Upon my return to Paris, I could not avoid another carnal encounter with Jeanne. Before leaving, I had met her for tea, and her obvious depression had led me to make this promise. When I saw her again, her allure was such that I could not help drawing her into my arms.

In the aftermath of our lovemaking, as Jeanne languidly leaned on my arm, touching my lips with her forefingers, she said, "I never dreamed I would have the audacity to tell you I liked you more than just as a friend from the first time our eyes met."

A prolonged silence followed, as I was overcome by the inertia that so often plagued me. I had been dreading something like this. How could I now disentangle myself from a situation that out of sheer egotism I had created for myself? In trying to find my own

true self, I had probably sunk this gentle and psychologically troubled woman into a more unstable mental state than she'd experienced before I showed up in her life. My feelings of betrayal toward Jacques had never been so strong, at a time when I appreciated him more and more. I admired his compulsiveness in everything, whether in business matters or our own private lives. Jacques was so decisive, so truly himself, so reassuring and rational, studying and considering all possible angles of whatever he undertook.

I now saw that the melting of three different metals into a solid piece was an impossible dream that, if prolonged, could end in tragedy.

"Maybe I should never have told you this," Jeanne said. She silenced me when at last I tried to speak. We said no more of it, but Jeanne looked disenchanted and depressed when we parted, so much so that I was surprised, meeting her again at the teahouse on the rue de Rivoli, by the daring makeup she wore on that occasion, by her wittiness, and above all by her flirting. I was surprised, too, that she didn't mind being seen by the odd acquaintance like this, so different from the Jeanne known for her gentleness, delicacy, shyness and innocence.

She carefully observed my reactions. When these didn't turn out to be what she probably expected, Jeanne became intermittently silent. I worried whether those lapses indicated jealousy, as if she suspected me of having an affair with another woman, or a pretended hostility. Then she pouted, frowned, puckered her mouth, and her brusque movements told me that she was extremely nervous. Finally, rubbing her hands together, she climaxed in a blustering explosion of "Why, why, why ...?"

I understood perfectly well her feelings. In the past, Jeanne had only to clap her hands to make me roll over or turn upside down. But now the power she thought she had over me was slipping from her grasp. I did my best to be conciliatory, charming and debonair. Jeanne became aware that she had raised her voice when she noticed that people were staring at her, and she soon

calmed down. When her countenance changed, I played to the fullest my sense of betrayal to my best friend. What she said next surprised me.

"The position I am in is different from yours, Patricio." She expressed this with the same melancholy in her eyes that I remembered from when I met her. "My role of having been not only Jacques' wife, but also his physical and emotional lover, his confidant, sister, friend and mother of our child kept me happy for several years. For a rather long time there seems to have been a deadly abyss between us, and sex has long not been a part of our union. Since I have no indications that he could be having an affair with another woman, do you think, Patricio, that his intense work and traveling schedule has erased his sexual libido? Perhaps you as his close friend could have the answer."

I was appalled. What I had done to this woman crushed me. I pretended to be in a deep, pensive mood.

"You have to understand, Patricio, that in a way you took Jacques' place. I couldn't help myself from being attracted to you, and I felt it was reciprocal. But I do see, and quite clearly now, that neither of us feels comfortable with this situation, and I am willing to work on myself, as much as I have noticed you are doing, to convert our relationship into a simpler friendship, an *amitié amoureuse*. At least, you can continue being my confidant, couldn't you?"

I could hardly believe what I heard. It was just the prescription I needed. The pressure I had been feeling in my chest and head started to fade.

"Of course, my dear Jeanne, I can and I fervently wish to be your close friend and hear about all and any thoughts or feelings that may cross your mind," I said with the greatest relief.

I realized then that Jeanne didn't love me. She just suffered from matrimonial deficiencies and sexual deprivation. All she probably wanted was to get even with her husband, although so far, she had failed to find a motive for his estrangement from her as a wife. The love she really wanted was Jacques,' and more than

ever, because being unattainable it had become a challenge.

“Now we can turn the page and talk about pleasantries, Patricio. We must continue being a happy threesome. To celebrate our amicable agreement, let’s go together to fetch Jacques at the airport. You may already know,” she said with a glint in her eyes, “he arrives tomorrow from London.”

I was startled by that unexpected proposition, but feigned comfort with the idea. I hardly listened as she described her plan in detail, explaining that she would drive the car herself. All I could think of was that I could not refuse Jeanne’s proposal.



I couldn’t get over Jeanne’s sudden change. Could she have something up her sleeve? Did she suspect that Jacques and I had more than just a friendship? Was this a trick to let her scrutinize Jacques’ reaction on greeting me in a totally unexpected situation? I was a little concerned as to how Jacques would react seeing both Jeanne and me picking him up at the airport, when usually Jeanne would send the bigger car with their driver and stay home planning a special dinner for his return. Above all, I had to act natural or trouble could develop. I only hoped that Jacques would follow suit.

Jeanne was in a chatty and joyous mood on the way to the airport. We arrived early, and I invited her for a *kir vin blanc* at the bar to explore the field and extract a sense of what she could have in mind. If there was something, she was a good actress, because I could not detect anything out of the ordinary.

When we spotted Jacques among the exiting passengers, I could not help but notice what I had feared most: his strong reaction of surprise. Being the clever person that he was, he immediately changed his expression into a broad smile. In spite of that, I could read in Jacques’ eyes that he was intrigued by this unexpected welcome. Although Jacques had been surprised, he made a point to greet his wife first with great affection. I noticed that Jeanne

watched intently as we kissed each other on the cheek in the same friendly way as in the past. Did she suspect the truth?

On the way home, Jeanne continued in her unusually excited and ebullient state of mind. I sensed that this sharp turn in Jeanne's mood had caught Jacques' attention, and I feared that he would question himself about it. Knowing Jacques' jealous character, I feared that my fling with Jeanne might create suspicion in Jacques' mind. However, there was always the possibility that Jacques would attribute his wife's change to her psychiatrist having finally succeeded in getting her out of her usual moody and often depressed state of mind.

Throughout that evening, I had to make an effort to act natural and nonchalant. I was relieved when I was finally released to go home.

Chapter XX

Although my successful social life in Paris drove Jacques to mad jealousy, I was grateful when life interrupted my intimacy with my first friend in Paris. I enjoyed these diversions, which amused me in some ways as much as the outings of my youth, with Alvaro, Gloria, Elena, and all of the others. I still professed love for Jacques, but even our intimacies, as wild and unrestrained as ever, bore marks of doubt, anxiety and uncertainty in the quiet moments that should have been an afterglow.

I had begun seeing Prince Michel Broncu frequently because Misha made a point of stopping in where I worked. The prince's possessive English friend had left on a European modeling tour, and it was obvious that the prince felt relieved by his absence.

After a couple of visits to the antique gallery for chats, Misha invited me to accompany him to a *vernissage*—a grand opening of an art exhibit. The prince was habitually invited to these events, but unfortunately this time it was sort of vogueish art. Even though modern painting was not my cup of tea, I enjoyed the opening enormously in the dashing company of my newest friend.

We soon visited the Louvre together, strolled through the Tuileries Gardens engrossed in conversation, and enjoyed wonderful, intimate dinners at various small restaurants in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where we once ran into Gloria and Elena, and struck up another extended conversation over many cups of coffee.

Following one of these pleasant evenings, I ended up in Misha's apartment, at the latter's insistence, on the rue Juliette Lamber in the seventeenth arrondissement. I had already given myself permission to pursue this relationship to any length, and harbored a secret hope that the prince felt as strongly for me as

I did for him.

I was almost embarrassed to see how poorly the prince lived in his humble and plain two-room apartment located in a very middle-class neighborhood. The tiny bathroom was old and outmoded, and there was no kitchen to speak of. Poor Misha had equipped a kind of closet or niche near the entrance to his flat, and furnished it with a minuscule electric cooker on a narrow counter over which he had placed some shelving for his paltry collection of plates, cutlery and cooking utensils. When not in use the area was covered with a curtain that helped to conceal the kitchenette from view. Apparently sensing my shock, Misha quickly mentioned that he had a few family pieces of porcelain and silverware that he kept in a chest in one of the rooms.

The prince told me about his possessions in a natural way. Although surrounded by simplicity, certain things revealed a noble heritage, such as old engravings of his ancestors, reigning princes of his land of origin. I also noticed several miniature portraits of other members of his family, as well as two icons of the Orthodox faith, and an excellent oil portrait of a gentleman. Misha told me that some experts had suggested that the painting might be a Velásquez.

In spite of his limited financial means, the prince could not bear the idea of parting with the painting at any price because it had been in his family for a long time. He had been able to retain these few family treasures thanks to the fact that they were with him in Sweden at the time the Russians invaded his country.

While I was living like a veritable king in the home of the countess, this noble aristocrat, a direct descendant of a former reigning dynasty, was forced to reside in a state not far removed from abject poverty.

“You were such a tremendous success the night of your party that we hardly had the opportunity to exchange more than a few words. That’s why I’ve decided since then to make an effort and monopolize as much of your time as possible.”

As he spoke, Misha held both of my hands and looked lovingly

into my eyes. Suddenly he grabbed me between his strong arms and kissed me passionately on the lips for what seemed like a blissful eternity to me. I offered no resistance at all and abandoned myself to those warm, sensual lips. Misha led me by the hand to the adjoining room, his sleeping area, which contained, among other pieces of furniture, a wide sofa-bed covered with cushions and pillows in varying sizes so that it could be used as an additional sitting room during the day.

He gently pushed me down onto the bed and soon I felt the warmth of that enormous and wonderful body over mine. The prince's skin attracted me on a chemical level, with its fragrance of soap, light perfume and manliness.

By this time the prince was thoroughly aroused and his kisses were even more passionate. Suddenly we were interrupted by a knock on the door. Misha placed a finger on his lips, whispering to me at the same time not to make a sound.

The knocking continued, more persistent than before. Misha remained still, hoping that whoever it was would get tired of banging on the door and go away, but such was not the case. The noise got louder and louder until finally he was forced to walk to the door and learn who was making all the noise.

Whoever the intruder was, he answered in a language that was not French. Misha immediately opened the door, and he and the untimely visitor became engaged in rapid and excited conversation in that strange tongue. I got up from the couch and slowly walked in the direction of the front door, where I saw the prince talking with a man of medium height, straight black hair, a prominent nose and eyes so filled with fear that they appeared ready to pop completely out of their sockets. Misha, whose face now looked rather shaken and worried, said:

"Patricio, I want you to meet my cousin, Prince Ferdinand Rutianu."

Prince Rutianu looked at me with a panic-stricken face and made a slight but silent movement with his head. Immediately afterwards, Misha asked me if I wouldn't mind leaving them alone

for a moment.

“My cousin has a rather serious matter to discuss with me. Please forgive us. It won’t take but a few minutes. There are magazines in the other room that might interest you.”

“Misha, under the circumstances, I think the best thing for me to do is leave. We can see each other tomorrow.”

“No, I won’t hear of it. Please go in the other room and wait. I don’t want you to leave. Believe me, it will take but a few minutes and I’ll join you.”

Reluctantly, I surrendered to Misha’s request. I went into the other room and discreetly closed the door. I could hear the voices of the two cousins, but when I tried to listen carefully, I realized that they were speaking in the same strange language. I guessed that it must be their native tongue. The voice of Prince Rutianu was extremely agitated and kept getting louder and louder. Although I didn’t know what they were saying, I could guess that Misha was desperately trying to calm his cousin, but with no success. The cousin finally broke down in a crying fit, and ended up sobbing hysterically.

All of this lasted for a minute or two, during which time I could hear Misha’s quiet and rhythmical voice obviously trying to alleviate the dejection that so deeply afflicted his poor cousin. Apparently Misha’s soothing must have worked its magic on Prince Rutianu, because I soon heard the two voices conversing in a more peaceful tone, followed by the sound of the front door opening and closing.

I quickly grabbed an August issue of *Point de Vue* from the table in front of me, opened it and feigned deep interest in an article covering the Treaty of Rome. When Misha appeared in the room, he began explaining the situation at once, sparing me from having to further augment my knowledge of international economics. Misha explained the situation at once.

“Like most of us, Ferdinand lost all of his material possessions when the communists took over. Life without money, unfortunately, was something he could never adjust to, and the idea of actually

working for a living horrified him to no end.”

Ferdinand had found his solution in romancing rich, lonely, empty-headed middle-aged women, although these friendships were purely platonic. These friendships enabled him to live the kind of life he was accustomed to. His latest relationship was with an American lady who had been led by boredom and frustration to devote herself to drugs and alcohol. Ferdinand regularly injected her with the drugs. Last night she had begged him to give her an injection, claiming she was in great pain due to her acute arthritis, and he had done so.

This morning when he went to her room in the hotel where they were staying, there was no answer. He returned to his own suite and repeatedly telephoned her for half an hour. Receiving no answer, he called the front desk and explained the situation. A chambermaid opened the door and found her lying on the bed, apparently unconscious. She was dead.

“Every time he recalls that injection, he feels like a murderer,” Misha said solemnly.

“Is it a matter for the police, Misha?” I asked.

“Yes. Ferdinand was taken to the Central Police Headquarters where they subjected him to intense questioning. After signing his declarations, he was released on bail until the final results of the autopsy. They advised him not to leave the city. Apparently they are watching his every move, because he told me that he had the feeling that somebody followed him all the way to my home.”

“My God, Misha, what if they follow me too when I leave?”

“Stay, then. Spend the night with me here.” Misha tried to contain his own urgency.

“But that won’t solve anything. They would just follow me tomorrow morning when I leave. Besides, if I stay, it will create a situation at the countess’s place.” My frustration with the life of pretense I was forced to live rose up suddenly. “God, I hate these complications.”

Misha understood and insisted on taking me home.

Before reaching the *métro* station, we both had the sensation

that we were being followed. We didn't speak a word until we had purchased our tickets and walked toward the train platform. Our short conversation was strictly banal as we hurtled toward the Concorde stop, as if nothing unusual was happening. After we left the station and were on the street level, we again had the feeling that somebody was following us, but at a good distance behind.

It was a relatively short walk from the Place de la Concorde to the block on the rue de Rivoli where I lived. I pulled the key out of my pocket to open the large entrance door, and, once I was safely inside, Misha said good-bye, telling me that he would telephone soon.



Meanwhile, I finally replied to a series of invitations from José Rodríguez and his Hungarian friend, Stefan, which I had politely put off in hope of concentrating on my friendship with Misha.

Stefan called me for several days in a row, wanting to get together in a coffee house or outdoor café and talk about his misunderstandings with José. In desperation after a few of these conversations, Stefan called on me in the antique gallery.

"I know for sure that José is unfaithful," Stefan said, oblivious to the other customers. Yet he did not seem to want to admit this notion even to himself, clinging to the relationship like a shipwrecked person hanging on to a piece of driftwood.

I felt uncomfortable, both because Stefan was making a scene at my place of business and because I knew that José was currently having an affair with another fellow. In a way, I was sympathetic to the situation, especially after listening to stories about the Hungarian's limited life in Budapest under communist oppression, followed by the revolutionary movement he had embraced, and the loss of all his personal belongings occasioned by the escape from his country.

"Perhaps, Stefan, you should not spend so much energy worrying about what José is or is not doing," I said kindly.

“It’s all I have to think about.” Stefan had not only lost his material effects, but also several family members and friends had perished. To cap his misfortunes, after having been a lawyer at home, he was now in a foreign country, alone and trying to make a living at the servile job of a butler. It was not lost on me the way that Stefan looked around the antique gallery with plain envy before I closed the door behind me.



Stefan’s unfolding drama only served to make me more grateful for the life I had carved out for myself, with the help of so many others.

Misha, aside from helping to ease the mind of his cousin, was also desperately looking for a job opening that would be more in line with Stefan’s intellectual capacity, but with no success as yet. This was very depressing to poor Stefan, and if his affiliation with José one day broke, he would end up having nothing to hold on to, and that would surely be worse than the end of the world for him.

With great patience and kindness, I listened daily over the phone to all of Stefan’s tribulations and encouraged him to continue struggling until the right opportunity came along.

Chapter XXI

Around this time of strain, I considered giving another party as a way of reciprocating the many invitations and expressions of affection that I had received from my now numerous circle of friends. I asked the countess if she would be agreeable to another gathering at her home, substantially larger than my previous parties.

The countess diplomatically asked me if I wouldn't mind giving her again a general idea about the friends I planned to include in this gathering. I promptly indicated that, apart from the few friends that she had already met, I was going to invite, among others, Prince Michel Broncu. This immediately made a favorable impression on Louise. There would also be friends from the Chilean embassy and other friends, including José's latest flirt, a French aristocrat. I made a mental note not to ask Stefan, because José had asked me, as a friend, not to.

Gloria and Elena, my two very dear Chilean friends, had asked if they could bring Françoise Colin, the lady who owned the building where they lived. Françoise was a well-known journalist who had been on several dangerous missions abroad, on one of which she had been shot in the leg and seriously wounded. Since then she had a rather morose tendency to display her scars whenever she recounted her story, as badges of honor. She had taken me on a couple of car trips, and it was painfully obvious that I was the object of her affection.

Another neighbor of Gloria and Elena, a young Bulgarian woman known by the nickname Bouba, would also be on my guest list. She was an extremely attractive brunette, gracious and sweet natured. She lived alone and was a great mystery to everybody, including her two Chilean neighbors. Occasionally, however, poor

Bouba suffered from a rather strong hint of body odor.

I also wanted to invite my ex-sponsor in pediatrics, Dr. Seuratôt, whose great fondness for me had not dissipated, despite my untimely departure from his tutelage. Naturally, my best friend and confidant, Antonio, would also form part of my party, and was to bring with him a model who worked at his studio. Then, of course, there was Alfonso, the stage designer. He had promised me that he would bring along the Marquis and Marchioness of Pueblas, whom I knew from one brief visit at the antique store. In addition, I also hoped to meet the elusive Russian prince, whose name Louise had recognized immediately, the first time I had told her about my opportunity in the antique trade.

The guest list kept growing, however. When the appointed date approached, I grew increasingly nervous. In my enthusiasm I had ended up inviting far more people than I had anticipated. Louise, nevertheless, was totally agreeable to my grand-scale affair, and when I inquired about the possibility of contracting her maidservant the night of the party, she not only said yes, but went as far as to suggest the necessity of a second staff member for such a large party. She offered to ask her neighbor, Madame Duclos, if she would be kind enough to let me employ her butler for the evening.

“Perhaps you could also invite Madame Duclos herself,” Louise said, gently nudging me. “She won’t come, but the gesture would be welcomed.”

The countess had even gone so far as to go personally with me to Fauchon, one of the most sophisticated food emporiums in Paris. This culinary delight was wholly dedicated to the production of gourmet delicacies for the discriminating palate of their exclusive patrons. Louise was a tremendous help to me in choosing a variety of delicate hors d’oeuvres, as well as a good brand of port that would be served that evening.

On the night of the party, Mario, Madame Duclos’ butler, arrived dressed in an impeccable uniform, and Anik, the countess’s maidservant, wore a borrowed uniform belonging to a cousin who

worked for a duke and duchess. Louise moved excitedly here and there around the flat advising the servants how to arrange the canapés on her fine solid silver trays, and instructing them where to put her best long stemmed crystal glasses, which she graciously placed at my disposal for the special port we had ordered from Fauchon.

The countess promised me that she would help me entertain my guests throughout the evening and not leave early as she had done before. I was thrilled and honored that she wanted to play a role in the production of my *soirée*. One could tell that it was all enormously exciting for her. She told me that she was most curious to meet the different characters and personalities I had described to her in such detail.

At the appointed hour, the countess and I stationed ourselves near the front door in the large entrance hall, and formed a receiving line for the arriving guests. Louise was dressed in a handsome creation of beige silk with matching shoes. Around her neck hung a magnificent strand of pearls. As I introduced her to my friends, the gentlemen all bowed and made the elegant gesture of kissing her hand.

The formality broke as Bouba passed by, and the countess looked at me as if to say, how can someone so lovely have such an unfortunate problem with body odor?

“She is like the lantana flower: greatly admired for its beauty and diverse colors, but never for its fragrance,” I said. I was in high spirits.

When everyone had arrived, Louise and I proceeded to the area of the three *en suite* salons where we joined the guests, mingling and chatting with one another and enjoying the superb port and delicious little canapés.

I sincerely regretted the fact that Jacques had declined to accept my invitation. He had excused himself, saying that he didn’t think it would be prudent to attend. Perhaps he was afraid of giving away a hint as to his true feelings toward me, or maybe he feared a spontaneous explosion of jealousy on his part upon

seeing me surrounded by so many others whom he imagined to be worshipping followers.

Françoise Colin, the intrepid journalist, was the first to demand my attention. She took me by the arm and led me to the corner.

Françoise was a woman much on her own. She had never married, was then about forty years old, and lacked any trace of good looks. Her face was too narrow, her eyes too closely set, and she displayed extremely thin lips and tiny teeth beneath a prominent aquiline nose.

“What is it, Françoise?”

“I am so excited about the work I’ve been doing lately, I had to tell you.”

“Whatever is it?” I said, with some detachment. Even her figure was no saving grace for an unfortunate face; she was short and rather plump.

“Patricio, along with a colleague, I am getting close to uncovering some of Europe’s missing art treasures. I knew you’d like to hear about it. In fact—”

“Did a big collector die?”

“I’ll say. Adolf Hitler died quite some time ago, and we’re still finding things,” Françoise said. “He was the commonest of thieves.” She paused. “But as a looter, no worse than Napoleon, I suppose.”

In spite of myself, I could not help being drawn to her. Her personality was brilliant and gregarious, coupled with a marvelous sense of humor. Yet I knew well that she was falling in love with me; it was clear from the way she regarded me.

“Come with me next week to Versailles,” she said, impulsively yet seductively.

“Is that where they’ve found these works?”

“No, just a place where I want to be with you, when you see it for the first time.” She burst out in a nervous laugh.

I surveyed the room and found Antonio and Misha huddled together in another corner. I had not seen Misha since our mutual shock over the Ferdinand situation, and I welled up with affection

as Françoise chattered on.



“Good evening, my two best friends,” I said when I had escaped Françoise.

Misha looked at me sadly, and I was shocked by how drawn he appeared.

“It’s not going well for Ferdinand,” Misha said. “But Antonio here is keeping me together.”

“He’s extremely good at that,” I said, with a surge of affection for my fellow Chilean. Antonio was becoming as well known for his wisdom and counsel as he was for his fashions. “Cheer up, Misha, it’s a party. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Please,” Misha said, without much life in his voice.



The countess and I did our best to be superb hosts as we mingled among the guests. I could easily tell that my friends who were visiting Louise’s apartment for the first time were most impressed by the luxury and good taste in which I now lived. The gracious, aristocratic and amusing character of the countess was a most definite compliment to the way I had arranged my life in such an elegant manner in a city as important as Paris.

Close to midnight, Alfonso approached me and whispered in my ear that the Marquis of Pueblas had expressed the wish to share a few minutes with me.

I immediately accepted and followed Alfonso. We walked toward the salon that was farthest from the main group of guests, and where the marquis had purposely remained alone waiting for Alfonso and me. This distinguished gentleman stood at one end of the room as we entered, smoking a long, thin cigarette set in a short gold holder. He greeted me with an ever so slight smile and inclination of his head.

"I hear you are now the resident expert in everything up to the French Revolution," he murmured.

"Why, thank you. It is a pleasure, every day, to be surrounded with so much history and such splendid pieces. In fact, for me it has become as demanding as a doctoral education. I've gotten hold of Speltz's *The Styles of Ornament*, and now I can tell you if a nail came from the door of the University of Salamanca or from the Japanese castle of Himeiji."

"You make me wish to come again and see you in your element," the marquis said.

His hands, with long, thin fingers, darted about in a flare of artistic gestures. On the little finger of his left hand he wore a gold signet ring, which was customary for descendants of titled families. I reflected on the fact that most of the men at my gathering, including Alfonso and myself, had such rings.

"Won't you come to one of the rehearsals of the ballet troupe?" The marquis asked Alfonso to bring me to a rehearsal, where we would have the opportunity to lunch together during the midday break. I was delighted with the invitation, and the marquis established a specific date, which I immediately accepted.



Anik and Mario, dressed in their impeccable uniforms, performed with the utmost elegance and efficiency within their métier. Each of them moved among the guests graciously and discreetly, carrying the handsome silver trays laden with a wide assortment of hors d'oeuvres and glasses of the fine port.

While I busily mingled and chatted here and there, I felt that my life had been building toward this kind of moment—in an international city, surrounded by friends and loved ones, nobility and those with accomplishments all their own. I could easily wade through this great sea of guests, sharing my time, affection and attention with my old and new friends. In my rather humble perception of my self-worth, I evaluated my personality as not

extremely ingenious or sharp; however, I thought I was gifted with a considerable degree of kindness and consideration toward people, and under those precise circumstances, I had a great sense of being the host. On the other hand, I tried to persuade myself that gregariousness and the art of flirting were not foreign to my character.

When I shared a few moments with the Russian prince, who seemed to be in his late sixties, my heartbeat rose as I regarded the prince's strikingly handsome features. In spite of his age, and with a trace of femininity in his countenance, he was an impressively tall and proud figure. The prince was extremely sophisticated and his French was excellent. Apart from his supposed connection with Rasputin's assassination, however, I was not particularly impressed by the Russian prince. It was a bit shocking to notice the orange tinge of his undoubtedly dyed hair. Nobility was still only humanity, I reminded myself, although I loathed letting go of an old illusion.

Misha exerted a far stronger attraction over me, but when I went to find him, I realized that both he and Antonio were looking for me to say goodbye. My lust would have to be contained. I well understood how strong a role absence played in affairs of the heart, as tenuous as they are once they commence.

This *soirée*, well organized with the help of the Countess, was a great achievement for me. Louise contributed greatly to its outcome, not just by her generosity in letting me use her luxurious salons, as well as her maid and some of her precious possessions, but most of all by her charming and outgoing personality. Much to my delight, her bubbly personality emerged during the evening as naturally as a butterfly from its chrysalis.

Although I had generously compensated both Mario and Anik for their assistance, I felt, nevertheless, that I should personally thank Madame Duclos, Louise's neighbor, for letting her butler help me with my party. The countess informed me that I would soon have the opportunity to do this, since Madame Duclos was preparing to open her salons, filled with valuable paintings of the

French Impressionist period, for her annual party.

"I hope you don't have another engagement that day, Patricio, because, if you will agree, I would like to take you with me to Madame Duclos' soirée. Her apartment is larger than mine and is filled with precious period furniture, interesting paintings, as well as a magnificent oriental art collection that she and her late husband accumulated during their extensive travels. You'll love seeing it all. So, will you go with me?"

I was moved by Louise's invitation, and to show my sincere gratitude for including me in this important affair, I kissed her on both cheeks. I also took the opportunity to extend a special thank you for her help with my party. Her cheeks became slightly flushed with such a spontaneous outburst of affection on my part. My perception told me that she had developed a great deal of fondness for me, a young man who had arrived shrouded in an aura of mystery, from a faraway country so foreign to her own geographical knowledge.



A few days after my soirée, Stefan telephoned me in a rather weak and uncertain voice, with an alarming tone to it. He stressed that he urgently needed to see me.

When we met at an out-of-the-way café, I could tell by the Hungarian's face that he was profoundly sad and suffering from extreme exhaustion. His tall, slim body was bent, as if he were crushed by some invisible weight over his shoulders. His eyes, irritated from crying, appeared smaller than usual, and as we talked, became misty now and then.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Patricio, but, even though you may not believe me, you are the only one I can confide in."

"Don't worry, I'm here to listen to you and help you in whatever way I can. I have friends that have done the same for me, and believe me, Stefan, I have a great deal of affection for you. You look positively exhausted. What on earth is the matter?"

“Well, to begin with I’ll say that for a long time I have suspected that José was having an affair with a young French aristocrat. Yesterday we had words concerning this subject, and José reacted so cruelly that for a moment I hardly recognized him. He told me that for quite some time he had grown tired of me and my unfortunate situation, and that my attitude depressed him. He went on to say that he had only continued his relationship with me out of pity, confessing at the same time that indeed he was having an amorous liaison with the young Frenchman.”

I could hardly hear Stefan, whose effort to speak about this seemed too great an undertaking. Stefan sighed wearily and confided in me that his lover persistently mistreated him and often rebuffed him when he tried to make love.

Stefan continued, speaking in a tired whisper: “Deep down I know he’s glad we had an altercation because he was fed up with the whole circumstance. Now he only wants to be free to devote himself entirely to his alliance with the Frenchman. I feel as if I’ve come to a dead end stop, with no hope in sight. Last night I didn’t sleep at all, Patricio.”

Stefan was in sad shape. He even looked untidy. It was obvious that he had not bathed in a couple of days, and he looked totally dejected. I knew that I should search for the most positive arguments to help lift the heavy weight that crushed this unfortunate human being.

Taking one of Stefan’s enormous hands between my own, I told him that this was certainly not the end of the world for him, stressing that many people had gone through adverse events similar to his, or even worse. I advised him to face facts and grab the bull by the horns and keep on fighting. I told him that I was convinced that Misha would soon find a decent job for him. I mentioned that Misha and I got together frequently and that he always spoke highly of him. I assured him that he was always in the prince’s thoughts and that he sincerely worried about him. I pointed out that nothing is permanent in this world.

“I’m aware of that.”

“You see, the political situation in your country may change in a way that will eventually allow you to return. Cheer up, Stefan. You must make an effort to overcome this circumstance, and attempt to reach inner strength. That’s the only way you’ll conquer this depression.”

“Thank you, Patricio. It’s no wonder I like to talk to you. You’re always so understanding and kind. But this time I’ve reached the end of my rope, and right now my physical state is almost as deplorable as my psychic state. To be truthful, I feel so bad that I would like to consult a physician, but I simply don’t have the funds. I’m wondering, Patricio, if you could possibly lend me three hundred francs. I promise that I’ll return the money just as soon as I get paid.”

There was a look of profound pain on Stefan’s face that he attempted to camouflage with an artificial smile. Was he suffering real physical pain, or was it mental, or possibly both? My scientific background took over, tempered by a deeply felt compassion and concern for this human being, who had suffered such a long chain of misfortune.

“Of course, Stefan, you can have the three hundred francs,” I said, as I handed him the money, “but I beg you to consult a physician as soon as possible. You worry me. Call me as soon as you know the results from your medical consultation.”

Stefan started to get up from the table and acted slightly impatient, suddenly in a rush. The expression on his face changed dramatically, almost as if he felt more sure of himself now and more determined.

“Thank you, Patricio, for everything. You have really helped me sort out my thoughts. I’ll call you soon.”

I paid for the two coffees, and we walked toward the *métro* station where we parted company, each taking a different train to our respective destinations. I was left with an uneasy feeling concerning Stefan’s future.

A comical letter from John and Mark, written in their typical alternating paragraphs, described new cohorts they were teaming

up with in normally staid Vienna, breathing new kinds of trouble into the air of that city. For the first time in a long time, I laughed out loud. My levity, however, lasted for only a couple of days.



After an urgent telephone call from Misha, I hastened to his apartment. When I reached the prince's home, I couldn't help but notice that my friend was not his usual self.

"Misha, what's wrong? Has something horrible happened to your cousin?"

"Sit down," Misha said, pointing to a chair at his table. Misha took a seat with his back to the wall and leaned his chair back on its rear legs, like a boy who wanted to get away from something. "As a matter of fact, things aren't going well for Ferdinand, but what I have to tell you concerns Stefan."

I felt a chill run through my body. "Misha, tell me quickly. What has happened?"

"Early today I received a call from the Marquis de Granville," Misha said, visibly overcome. "He's Stefan's employer, and he called to tell me that when Stefan did not show up for his duties this morning, he had gone to his room and found him unconscious. He immediately called the ambulance. To make a long story short, they found that he had already gone into a coma, possibly irreversible. On his night table they discovered an empty bottle that had contained sleeping pills prescribed by his physician. Stefan had taken them all, a colossal overdose that had already been in his system all night long. That is why the doctor who diagnosed the case thinks that there is no hope of saving his life. I went to see him and was told that he is not expected to survive the night."

My hands trembled.

"Patricio, you take all of this too hard, or maybe there is something in your dealings with Stefan that you haven't told me?"

"I loaned him three hundred francs two days ago," I said, and told Misha the nature of our conversation, as I strained to remember it exactly.

"I have nothing to hide, Misha," I concluded. "My only feelings toward Stefan were of friendship. That's all. He confided in me all of his trials and tribulations, but I never dreamed that this troubled soul would use the money I loaned him to attempt suicide. It makes me feel awful."

"Don't feel that way, Patricio. You have no responsibility in this unfortunate affair. If you hadn't loaned him the money, he would have asked me for it. Stefan has suffered from deep depressions, and the fact of the matter is that he did not have the will to live. You have no reason to blame yourself."

"I believe, Misha, that what drove Stefan down a dead end street was the collapse of his relationship with José. Stefan told me on that last day when we got together that José had broken up with him."

"That could well be, but I also strongly feel he could never get over the tragedy of the Hungarian revolution and its devastating effect on him as an exile here in France. What a sad life."

"I would like to see him, Misha. Can we go together?"

"Please don't even try to visit him, Patricio. The poor man is dying and unconscious, so you would gain nothing by seeing him in such a deplorable state. It's better if you are left with a memory of Stefan when he was alive, although lately it was sad being with him."

"I can imagine how José is going to feel about all of this, or do you think he already knows?"

"Yes, he knows, Patricio. I informed him myself, and believe me, his reaction was disgustingly indifferent. That boy is worthless. He is only interested in himself. If you want my sincere advice, don't waste even a trace of friendship on him. Forget that he exists."

Misha was quiet. I had a moment to reflect upon José's leering wolf face at my party. He looked like he wanted to suck the very life out of his new French lover in his own quest for pleasure.

I thought about Stefan, whose appearance the last time I had seen him made me think that he had willed himself to die. He had stopped eating, bathing, combing his hair—every single thing that might tie him to the order of a normal, human life. I still wondered at how a person could lift the poison to the mouth, that small simple action—just as the woman on the ship from Chile had done. I imagined that they did it calmly, quietly, with resolve, not in a frenzy of desperation, but in a moment of firm decision, their last. My own possession of poison pills now seemed a romantic excess. The chilling thing I had learned from Stefan was that death could be utterly desired, more desirable than any person, or place, or hope.



Misha leaned his head back against the wall and exhaled deeply. I felt a frostiness as if the temperature had suddenly plunged.

“This day, Patricio, oh, this day,” Misha said, coming out of his own trance. “As if Stefan’s misfortune was not enough, I’ve had more bad news from my cousin, Ferdinand.”

The results of the autopsy on the body of the American lady had shown that she may have died from an overdose of drugs. Fingerprints found on the syringe in the medicine cabinet of her hotel suite matched Ferdinand’s. There was a possibility that the physician might be implicated too, because of his drug prescriptions. No doubt the police would soon issue a warrant for Ferdinand’s arrest.

“How is your cousin going to manage to defend himself with no financial reserves? You told me that his only source of revenue came through the largesse of the American lady’s purse, and now she’s dead.”

Misha went through the short list of people who could possibly help—and their excuses. From Misha’s behavior, it was clear that he was sunk in a state of deep concern and worry.

Still, Misha moved me with his regal carriage and refined

accent, even while relating such grim tales. I made an all-out effort to cheer him up by spicing the conversation with a bit of optimism.

Misha decided to take me out for dinner because he was not in a state of mind to cook at home. I gladly accepted but wondered if there would ever come again a propitious moment for lovemaking in the midst of these ceaseless sorrows. I longed to escape all of my own worldly matters and melt into a blessed forgetfulness, letting passion burn off the miseries of the real world.



When Misha attempted to organize a small religious service in the church of Saint Séverin, a Catholic temple near the Boulevard Saint-Germain on the rue de la Harpe, he was utterly dismayed to learn that the Catholic religion at that time firmly condemned suicide and would not allow any form of church service whatsoever for the deceased. However, through the generosity of the Marquis de Granville, Stefan's employer, an offering of prayers was held in the small private chapel at his home for the soul of the deceased.

The small urn with Stefan's cremated remains rested on a simple wooden table outside the small chapel. Given the circumstances of Stefan's death, the Catholic Church allowed a religious or memorial service, but only if the remains of the deceased were not present. A white rose stood out against the dark wooden base where the remains of the tormented Hungarian rested.

The service was short and sparsely attended. Antonio accompanied me, always willing to support me with paternal affection. José, Stefan's former lover, was seated beside his new French lover. There were other members of the marquis' household staff, and a couple of Eastern European origin who owned a Hungarian restaurant that Stefan used to patronize.

In Misha's eulogy, he emphasized that the unfortunate incidents brought about by the Hungarian revolution had an enormous impact on the life of the deceased, and actually were

an extenuating factor in the cause of his death.

José had a look of deep remorse and walked with his head down and shoulders bent. I wondered whether he was taking advantage of the situation by feigning grief in order to give vent to his theatrical flair, or if he really was sorrowful about the tragedy. In any case I couldn't help but think that I wouldn't want the weight of José's guilty conscience on my own shoulders.

Chapter XXII

It was during one of our escapades at Hubert's home that Jacques set forth his intricate plan before me. While I was broadening my circle of friends, these secret meetings grew further apart, much to Jacques' chagrin. He knew well enough, however, to give me all the time and space that I seemed to require.

He had not mentioned his plan earlier, sensing my preoccupation, as I was embroiled in the emotional turmoil of my new acquaintances. Jacques could wait no longer and sensed that I needed him a bit more now, and was more willing to see him, because Stefan's suicide had lingered in my mind and frightened me.

Jacques puckered his eyebrows and looked at the floor in deep concentration as he spoke. "Patricio, I have something serious and important to discuss with you."

I went cold, not knowing what to expect. A deep sensation of uneasiness spread all over my body, and I found it difficult to articulate a single word.

"I almost don't know where to start, but I can say that it is something positive that I personally believe in strongly, because it could end up being the solution to our future life together, without any criticism from the outside world."

I started to calm down and said, "Go on, Jacques, please get right to the point. I'm dying to know what you have in mind."

"Well, this is the situation. We are close friends with an old and prominent family who have a daughter Claire. She is a bit younger than you and a close friend of my wife. She is a sweet girl, intelligent and affectionate. She confides in Jeanne, and the two of them get along marvelously well."

I could already guess what was being concocted in Jacques'

sharp brain, and the whole affair was profoundly repulsive to me. However, I made an effort not to show my true feelings and continued listening to what he had to say.

"I know that this may sound a bit strong, Patricio, but Claire, who is single, is expecting a baby, and the other responsible party in this situation, a young man much below her own social status, no longer wants anything to do with her. As a matter of fact, when he learned of her condition, he enrolled as a mercenary in the Foreign Legion and is no longer in the country. The poor girl has told Jeanne that she doesn't dare tell her parents about her pregnancy and lives in terror that they or other relatives will find out." After a long pause, he added, "She is in a horrible state of depression."

When Jacques reached the point about the pregnancy, I realized that the whole affair was getting more complicated than I could have imagined, especially with the introduction of a child into the picture.

"The other day as Jeanne was talking about Claire's problems, it suddenly occurred to me that if you were to marry her, even if it were just for the reason of giving the child a legal name, you could then become a French citizen through marriage. Although it might not be important to you now, this would allow you to validate here in France your Chilean university degree, and thus be able to practice your profession in Paris. You could make a steady income, some real money, in that profession."

Again Jacques made a long pause. This last argument was totally unexpected. I was momentarily perplexed and flickered a gesture of surprise; then I stiffened and frowned. I stomped and hustled about the room ready to blurt out my disgust and disapproval of this unexpected and outrageous plot. I felt locked into a deadly fate, like a small winged creature trapped in a spider's web, bound by those sticky threads to be stung into unconsciousness and finally serve as food for a more powerful force. Yet the new idea tantalized me as well. I had never before thought about solving my working situation in France so easily.

I said only, “Jacques, I am terribly shocked. Please let me think for a moment.”

Jacques was quiet for a spell and then spoke slowly. “I don’t need to tell you, Patricio, what advantages such an arrangement would hold for you and me. The four of us could go out together everywhere without the slightest worry as all normal couples do. Just imagine the active social life we could have together without anyone ever suspecting our personal intimate relationship.”

I thought about what Jacques said. At the same time, I had sunk into a deep abyss lined with my own thoughts and doubts.

“Patricio, what I would like to know is if you are at least willing to meet Claire. I am perfectly aware of the fact that all of this is coming to you rather abruptly, but I’m begging you to give me the opportunity to at least invite you and Claire for dinner at my house. I also realize that this is an extremely serious matter and that you will need time to think about it. What do you say?”

I was still mulling over this latest news, and still in a kind of stupor from the events of previous days. I could not see a clear and easy way out of accepting Jacques’ insistent proposal for a meeting.

“All right, Jacques, you can plan on a dinner gathering at your home for me and your friend, but I want to make very clear to you that I am not committing myself to any promises.”

“Thanks, Patricio. I guarantee that I won’t read any hidden meanings into the gathering at my home. I want you to take all the time you need to consider this proposition.”

Jacques embraced me with palpable emotion, and I was touched that he was still, after all this time and all my own difficulties, so willing to make a go of things.



As far as our own relationship was concerned, I sensed that Jacques was more eager to satisfy my thirst for physical love than his own. However, my highly developed sexual appetite seemed

to fill Jacques' body with the same ardor. We both fully shared the pleasurable moments, touching and feeling each other's bodies until the sweat oozed out with an exciting odor, the entwining of arms and legs, the murmured words of love, the crescendo of frenetic stroking and finally the glorious end, exhaling guttural sounds like the explosion of thunder, then falling on a calm sea of profound tenderness, soon blessed by Hypnos, the god of sleep.

I wished to possess Jacques as much as he wanted to have me. Even though I realized that Jacques' married life was greatly estranged, sometimes I felt a rather sickening jealousy toward Jeanne and even Jacques' daughter. The situation of my lover's family life, although not a real husband-wife relationship, made me fully aware of my own moments of solitude and my horror of finding myself in the far future all alone in my waning years. Jacques' proposal of marrying Claire was not exactly the solution for me, as I wanted Jacques without the interference of second or third parties. Down deep, I didn't believe in passing adventures such as one-night stands, releasing one's physical and erotic desires but always leaving one with an after taste of profound emptiness and loneliness.

I was an inveterate dreamer of romance, wishing to share my life with a faithful companion. Was this an exorbitant fallacy, a fairy tale that could never be? Was there no way to escape the difficulties and impediments of practical life, imposed upon us by society's rules? Every day I saw those around me being polite, flattering, submitting to unpleasant working demands, lying, conniving, perverting and plotting situations in order to get ahead in life. How many had the courage to be their true selves and fight for their goals, as migrating salmon struggle to swim upstream and to escape the jaws of hungry bears? I had to make strong efforts to dissociate myself from dreadful and depressing thoughts that had made me fall time and again into a black hole of despair and deep confusion.

In these moments of loneliness, the difference between love and sex often assaulted my mind. I thought that not everything

about sex had to be moaning and groaning, panting, sweating, rubbing and having an orgasm. Shouldn't we dismantle sex from its narrow limits and archaic, mostly Christian concepts of sinfulness that priesthood imposed upon it? I had heard it said that sex is the first sign of love, that only this marvelous and brilliant integration, this tight fusion of two elements, repeated time and again, brings on the aftermath of consummation: the will to share goodness and adversity through all the trials of mundane survival. The only ones who did not reach this understanding were those who saw sex as rigid and avaricious, or who succumbed to its voracity.

I would also speculate often about the mental or spiritual aspects of love. I would ask myself whether this psychic feeling was like a disease, as when bacteria or viruses cause the immunological system to react by elevating the temperature of the body to kill the invaders. Or was it a sort of inebriation of the senses, producing in the mind a state of *élan* that made one vibrate with each look at the loved one, or even a slight touch?

Was love a fierce gladiatorial battle, wrestling without actually hurting the flesh, but playing out the phases of conquering and surrendering? Or was it the joy of peace and tranquility, the intimate perception of reciprocity, remembering, when separated from the loved one, the quality of the sound and inflections of his voice, the expressiveness of his eyes, the smile on his face, the gracefulness of his demeanor, his complexion, the touch of his hand, the feverish warmth of his lips and the so many other imprints on one's memory?

Lovers also expressed oneness in the coincidence of their thoughts, the similarity of their reactions to the stimulus of the world, their mutual admiration of individual accomplishments, their common goals and ambitions, their firm standing in causes they believe in, their valor in confronting adversity together, their spirit of survival.

Indeed, it appeared difficult to dissociate the love of the soul from the love of the body. But I was fully convinced that all of those

elements played a strong role in my relationship with Jacques, contrary to the few I could detect in my relationship with Jeanne. However, I could not dismiss the possibility that one day I could meet a woman who could cause in me all of the reactions I now felt for Jacques. This was my most disturbing thought.



I remained stunned during the following days, and the countess, as well as several friends, noticed a change in me and asked if something was wrong. I finally decided to discuss Jacques' proposal with Antonio, my Chilean friend and confidant. On the terrace of Antonio's lovely and elegant flat in the Quai de Montebello, with a view of the Seine and the magnificent Cathedral of Notre Dame, we sipped cocktails while I unfolded my latest tale to Antonio.

He listened attentively and then submerged himself in his habitual deep thought. I admired my friend's cool head. I felt better after confiding in Antonio, and was enlivened by the breezes that lifted from the Seine. I bit into the bitter lemon of my cocktail and savored its extreme flavor.

Eventually, Antonio calmly offered his opinion.

"Your friend's proposition is, to say the least, extraordinary. It is obvious that Jacques is devoted to you and that he truly is seeking a solution to his relationship with you, but a solution that will be, above all, acceptable to the society in which he lives in order to avoid any problems for him or his family.

"You, on the other hand, stand on totally different ground. To begin with, you are free, single and recently arrived in a foreign country where you plan to live. If you take the time to analyze the entire situation, you will soon realize that everyone approaches life's events from an egotistical point of view. Jacques is a well-known man in the world of business, as well as Parisian society, and has a charming wife and daughter. For him the risks in your relationship are far greater than yours, so it is perfectly

understandable for him to want to cover his secret and forbidden sentimental life with a veneer that would be acceptable to the outside world. One cannot blame him for that.”

I nodded. I could not deny that Antonio was right.

“Even though I would advise conservative caution in this matter, you too must consider the opportunity Jacques is offering you. You can legally form a union with one of the most prestigious French families. That is not something to sneeze at. This would make you a French citizen instantly, and thereby allow you to work and live here in the way that you choose. If you wanted to return to your professional practice, you would have at your feet as patients the best elements of Parisian society.”

I smiled, considering the option.

“Nonetheless, you have to consider the fact that you would also have to play the role of Saint Joseph by eventually giving your surname to Claire’s child.”

I laughed at the way Antonio put it, but my fellow Chilean looked at me gravely.

“This in itself implies a serious responsibility. Also, as time passes, no one can say what Claire will expect from you, or what financial consequences all of this could cause for you, especially if Claire decides one day to seek a divorce.

“The other little matter that you have to take into consideration is the one concerning conjugal duties, which might be totally alien to your true nature. This is really a situation full of complexities, Patricio.”

“Frankly, Antonio, lately I have been living in a state of bewilderment. I have to confess that my first reaction to the whole matter was one of repulsion,” I said, gesturing widely with my hands. “I just can’t see myself acting a role that goes against my principles. The way I feel about Jacques started changing when I learned through Hubert that Jeanne, his fragile and defenseless wife, was seeking help for her problems through a psychiatrist. You have no idea what a horrible guilt complex I have had ever since, because I’m certain that I am the cause of her malady, even

if she doesn't know it. At any rate, the poor woman must suffer from a horrible sense of inadequacy, without the slightest idea as to its source or solution."

At that point, and after great hesitation, I gathered the courage to confide in Antonio my affair with Jeanne. At first Antonio stared at me in disbelief, his mouth half opened, without uttering a single word. Then he confessed to me that this was the first time he had ever known a gay man undergoing such an odd change.

"The whole affair is turning into a nightmare for me," I said. My intuition told me that for some strange reason Antonio was not interested in elaborating on that particular subject any further. I slumped down in my chair.

Antonio got up and gave me a warm hug, saying, "Come now, my friend, you must not take this turn in your life so intensely. You should rather try to let yourself simmer gently into your thoughts. Just sleep on it all for a while and you will see that the puzzle will sort itself out."

"But tell me, Antonio, what would you do in my place?"

Antonio looked at me with an expression that showed profound understanding for my dilemma. "Forgive me, my dearest, but I have learned in my long life not to make decisions for other people, but only for myself. My only advice is for you to try to resolve your problems, and there is no point in torturing yourself either, since you won't gain anything except loss of health. Eventually you will realize that time is the greatest healer and will surely bring you all of the answers. If you are faithful to your inner thoughts and follow them with actions that you truly feel, you will never be wrong, even if that doesn't bring you enormous material benefits. Be yourself. It's as simple as that."

I looked up at him. "What would I do without you, Antonio, in this big city where everything is new to me? Talking with you always makes me feel more comfortable. Just being able to talk about things helps me to get my mind away from this whirlwind boiling inside of me. Many, many thanks, my dear and very much loved friend."

I embraced Antonio firmly, placing my face against his cheek.



“Patricio,” Misha said in surprise, opening his door.

“I can’t believe my luck. You’re home,” I said. “I’ve just had the best talk with Antonio.”

Misha beamed at me, unsure what the visit meant.

“I’ve decided that the time for grief is over,” I told him. “For both of us.”

Misha understood immediately and asked me to take a seat on the sofa. Its pillows were quickly thrown to one side, creating, hours early, the prince’s bed.

Chapter XXIII

The much-anticipated party at Madame Duclos' home finally arrived. Dressed in my best gala clothing, I was in a frenzy to see the works of art that Louise had told me about.

The moment I was admitted to one of the large salons, I was impressed by the quality of the paintings. Raoul Dufy, reflecting both the Fauvist and Cubist influences, was especially well represented by several of his works, but there were also paintings by such famous artists of the French Impressionist School as Pissarro, Renoir, Monet and Manet. However, the droves of guests—among them artists, members of the French government, ambassadors and other outstanding members of Parisian society—made it difficult to take in a full painting at my leisure. I only saw glimpses of canvas from behind the crowd of backs, necks and coifs.

I was also excited to meet Madame Duclos herself. Most likely past eighty, she moved slowly and with great dignity. The fabric of her dark purple dress appeared to be some sort of thick velvet, over which she wore a large and ostentatious diamond necklace that contrasted prominently with the vivid color of her gown, and matched the long elegant earrings hanging down to her cheekbones. Her abundant dark brown hair, with a definite purplish-red wash, was gathered in a bun at the back of her head. The color of her hair could not possibly be natural at her age. Perhaps it was a wig. Her face was covered with white powder, applied in an old-fashioned style, and she had painted her lips excessively in a color to match her dress. In general, her appearance was theatrical, definitely harking back to another century.

Her manners were unpretentious, in spite of her appearance,

and at the evening's end she promised that she would soon extend to the countess and me an invitation for a more private gathering.

"There is no doubt in my mind that Madame Duclos liked you, Patricio," Louise said, as we walked along the hallway. I felt that I had been to another world, not just another apartment under the same roof that sheltered me. "I assure you that you will thoroughly enjoy getting to know her better. She offers so much for one to see, apart from the French Impressionist paintings; there is her extensive collection of oriental art, much of which dates from before the Christian era. In other words, antiquities."



Not more than three days passed before Louise and I received a dinner invitation from Madame Duclos. Needless to say, we accepted immediately.

What a difference to be able to see her treasures without the presence of a large crowd. Madame Duclos had an interesting mixture of English, French, German and Spanish furniture, but all of her four magnificent receiving rooms were divided into categories. One of the salons was decorated exclusively in the Biedermeier style, another with chairs and tables of the Chippendale, Queen Anne and Hepplewhite periods, while the third salon was decorated in the spectacular opulence of the Louis XVI epoch, and the fourth room was filled with the more severe, heavy furniture of Spain. In this last setting I noticed a fabulous pair of *bargueños*, Spanish secretaries dating from the XVII century. The contrast between these antiques of different nationalities and the Impressionist and post-Impressionist paintings was rather shocking at first glance, even though some of the canvases were classic in their subject matter. I immersed myself, examining the pieces at length, feeling as if I were hurtling between centuries every time I came to a new object.

All of these works reflected Madame Duclos' rather

unconventional nature. I was surprised, however, when she told me that the entire decor of the house had been greatly influenced by her late husband's taste. It immediately became obvious, from Madame Duclos' conversation, that she wanted everything to be left untouched as a memorial of sorts to the man whom she had greatly admired. Madame Duclos made a point of showing us a small concealed rotating door just off the *toilette de visite* that led to a small sort of secret room used by her husband for his insect-collecting hobby. He had been an amateur entomologist, and the room had been left as it was when Monsieur Duclos died.

With my professional knowledge, I could not help but notice a bottle labeled Chloroform. Madame Duclos explained that her husband used it to anesthetize the insects in order to manipulate them with greater ease throughout the various phases of his work.

It was like a small laboratory with little instruments such as scalpels, tweezers, scissors and pins, scattered here and there over a long, narrow working table. Above this table, a fantastic display of specimens was reflected in mirrors behind the shelves of large wall cabinets, bringing a touch of nature to this grand apartment.

When I saw the dining room I was breathless. An enormous crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. The room was unusually spacious, rectangular in shape. The dining table was extremely long, with a huge Chinese rose medallion bowl filled with fresh flowers in the center, flanked by two imposing silver candelabra on either side. Four magnificent side tables were covered with silver and Chinese export porcelain. All of the furniture was of the purest Chippendale style. Several small classic marble columns, topped with handsome bronze figures, decorated areas near the walls. Most of the paintings in this room were English landscapes from the XVIII century, and they acted almost as windows, bringing the hills of England to Paris.

The heavy, rich draperies were crowned by elegant bronze *dorée repoussé* cornices. A gigantic Chinese carpet in contrasting

colors of deep navy and fuchsia covered the floor. I was intrigued by an unusual feature of this handsome rug: it had been made with rounded corners, which brought to my memory the similar feature observed in Chinese picture frames.

Madame Duclos took her place at one end of this enormous dining table, with me on her left and the countess at her right, carefully observing social protocol which indicates that the person with the highest rank and age is seated at the right of the host or hostess. Mario the butler moved one of the fabulous candelabra close to us so that we could dine by candlelight as well as the soft light from the tiny bulbs of the chandelier. The quiet, toned-down voice of Madame Duclos and the flickering light on her face gave this dramatic atmosphere an almost mystical quality.

Madame Duclos, like so many people of her age, enjoyed talking about the past, especially her own past. During the long evening I was able to glean from our hostess's slight conversational indiscretions that her late husband may have been a Nazi sympathizer. Louise seemed oblivious to the comments that aroused my suspicions, and I could not tell if she was being polite or simply did not choose to understand the implications.

When I tried to ask for details concerning the acquisition of such a large number of paintings of the French Impressionist School, Madame Duclos became vague in her comments and quickly changed the subject.

When dinner ended, we adjourned for coffee to another magnificent room, the library, furnished totally in the Louis XV style. One could scarcely see the books themselves due to the accumulation of small and ancient oriental *objets d'art* covering each shelf. Madame Duclos found a most receptive student in me as she initiated me in the artistic expressions of the various Chinese dynasties represented in her collection. Louise also tried to assimilate as much information as possible from our hostess's mini-course in oriental art.

This was the beginning of a rather unusual friendship between Madame Duclos and me, which augmented the education I was

receiving from the art and advice of Louise, and more so from my antique dealer friend, François Augaud.

For me, a friendship with Madame Duclos was a perfect opportunity to learn about a field of art that I found intensely attractive and rewarding. For her part, the elderly lady appeared to derive immense pleasure having such a young person as an audience. Indeed, we were an excellent combination. Throughout the following weeks, Madame Duclos invited me alone to her home in order to continue my exposure to ancient Oriental art, and that in turn served to strengthen our rather odd relationship.



One day, after promenading with me through her marvelous collection, Madame Duclos said, “An interesting aspect of Chinese art is the array of wonderful objects used by Chinese scholars, especially during the Wanli reign of the Ming Dynasty, which spanned between 1573 and 1644, because of their aspiration to a contemplative life. That small group of highly educated men who pursued the art of painting, calligraphy and poetry, was inspired by the Confucian ideal of living in peace within a reasonable amount of affluence, and therefore, hardly having to work. Time could be spent devoted to the arts and the harmony between art and nature. For this select group of Chinese literati, life in general was an art, even when burning incense or preparing tea. You can find information about the exquisite taste of these sophisticated men in a treatise published in the seventeenth century whose title could be translated as *On Superfluous Things* or *Things of This World*, Patricio. This treatise deals with matters such as where to live, giving preference to the countryside, followed in descending order by the suburbs and the city, and what to live with, such as antiquities. That is just what my husband and I did. In other words, surrounding oneself with what is refined and elegant. This was their concept of taste, which was for them an extremely important concern.”

This extraordinary old lady spoke with a sort of melodramatic voice, sometimes over-emphasizing certain words. Often, she would half-smile at me, showing an inscrutable face with a roguish glint in her eye. She was still much of a mystery to me.

“Madame Duclos, you have the ability to put me in a state of ecstasy. What you have just said matches to perfection my inner feelings about life. I wish I could have lived a few centuries earlier and been a Chinese scholar. My ambition would be to achieve that degree of refinement right now rather than being encased in the scientific world that I truly don’t like.”

“Well, you could always change, Patricio. You are still very young. Where there’s a will there’s a way, you know.”

“That is true, Madame Duclos, but at the moment I don’t think I am equipped financially to make a full move in that direction.”

I thought for a moment that it would not be a bad idea to discuss this conversation with Jacques. Maybe it was part of my destiny and could eventually change the course of my life. Jacques was very perceptive of my feelings. Once I acquired enough experience at the gallery and knew the sources, perhaps I could encourage Jacques to sponsor me in an antique dealership, just as the Russian prince sponsored the Marquis de Pueblas. I thought that I definitely should find a propitious moment to bring up this subject with Jacques.

Madame Duclos continued her story. “Actually, paintings and calligraphy were preferred to objects by Chinese scholars, and the ancient was preferred to the new. Stones, bronzes and trees ranked high in their estimation as compared, for example, with objects made of porcelain, since the great majority of those things were utilitarian rather than decorative. Even articles made of other materials representing human figures, for example, were considered common and even vulgar. The aristocratic literati actually felt disdain for worldly possessions.”

“As far as I am concerned, Madame Duclos, that is going too far. I enjoy possessing things that I have chosen because I find beauty in them, and delight myself every time I look at them.”

“You may be right at that, because my husband and I always felt that way about our acquisitions, and as you can see, that feeling is all over this home of mine. I never tire of walking through the different rooms looking at every object, remembering or trying to remember where and when we acquired this or that, and even little anecdotes attached to some of the items. They were indeed happy and exciting moments, those spent searching for what would appeal to us, along with the pleasures of world travel.”

“I hope one day I can do the same as you and your husband have done, even if it is on a miniature scale as compared with this magnificent home.”

“Because I am perfectly aware that you have been brought up with refinement, Patricio, your training in the elegance of the Chinese scholarly world will not be difficult. However, you must at the same time try to acquaint yourself with modern art, and also the values of the *nouveaux riches* as a form of contrast, in spite of the fact that I can detect in you an instinctive feeling for things of taste. It assures you of the right things and how to display them harmoniously. I know you are a sure candidate to acquire the essence of the Chinese scholar’s aesthetic.”

I left Madame Duclos’ home with a wonderful feeling of appreciation for the interesting paraphernalia used by the Chinese scholars of past centuries, trying to remember the many objects I had been privileged to see at this lady’s home, such as carvings in wood, bamboo, soapstone, rhinoceros horn and jade; brush pots, brush rests and brush washers that the Chinese scholars used when painting with watercolors; paper weights, censers, scroll weights, table screens; wine pots, wine cups, ink sticks, ink stones, seals and even unusually shaped porcelain cricket boxes with pierced lids to preserve the life of the insects that they captured and fed in order to hear the exotic chant-like sound they emit. I was also left with a feeling of happiness for the ideas that Madame Duclos’ conversation brought to mind: that is, the thoughts about my possible future in the antique business that I was planning to present for Jacques’ consideration at the next opportunity.



One night I returned home late after an amusing costume party given by my two Chilean girl friends, Gloria and Elena. Traveling alone by *métro* late at night, I always carried a penknife that had belonged to my grandfather. In case of attack, at least I could scare any possible assailants. After safely getting back home, I felt that it would be considerate not to take the noisy elevator at that time of night, and I elected to use the stairs.

When I reached the second floor, I couldn't help but notice a light coming from the direction of Madame Duclos' apartment. The door was ajar, and I heard voices. Thinking that perhaps something had happened to my lady friend, I cautiously drew closer to the noise of what now had reached the level of an agitated discussion. The sound appeared to be coming from one of the rooms at the other end of the flat. I couldn't resist the temptation to step into her entrance hall, but immediately felt that my impulse was silly, because I had no right whatsoever to mingle in Madame Duclos' private life. However, the excitement of searching, peeking and intently listening reminded me of stories about Sherlock Holmes.

I soon found myself inside the large adjacent receiving room and couldn't help but distinguish the unmistakable voice of François Augaud.

I was shocked. I had never had the slightest indication that there was any connection between my antiquarian friend and Madame Duclos. Furthermore, François knew perfectly well where I lived, but had never mentioned that he knew this lady, neither had he been in attendance during the party given by Madame Duclos for the opening of her salons.

My curiosity peaked as I silently moved in the direction of the hallway leading to the area of the salons, at the same time attempting to listen to the voices. I wanted to be sure that I was actually hearing my mentor, François Augaud. Suddenly the discussion became louder and more agitated. At that point

there was no doubt in my mind that one of the voices belonged to François Augaud.

I could also distinguish two male voices speaking in German, a language that I understood. At that distance, however, I could not grasp the contents of the conversation.

I couldn't resist the thrill of feeling like a spy and drew even closer so that I could find out what the commotion was about. I told myself that if I were caught I would merely explain that I had stopped in to see Madame Duclos when I heard voices and saw the open door.

I knew I should leave when I heard that certain paintings entrusted by the Germans to François' care had never reached their intended destination, Argentina. The antiquarian protested vehemently, saying that maybe something had gone astray during transport by ship, but he persisted in assuring the Germans that he had personally packed and consigned the canvases, just as he had successfully done many times in the past, when things always reached their intended destination.

It was then that I heard a rather weak, feminine cough originating, without doubt, from the throat of Madame Duclos. I heard nothing more than her cough, which indicated to me that the lady of the house was present but not saying a word.

My blood ran cold at the thought that François Augaud and Madame Duclos were involved in some kind of business dealings that were obviously on the shady side. I was becoming frightened, and my heart raced when suddenly and without warning, two strong arms grabbed me from behind. One arm held me firmly, while a coarse, rough and smelly hand covered my mouth, which quickly shattered my attempted shriek. I strived to extricate myself, and tried prying my attacker's hand away from my face, but the grip was too strong. I could hardly breathe, but was able to emit muffled cries. The arm that pushed me forward held me so tightly around my waist that I felt as if I was trapped by a gigantic boa constrictor. My attacker was so strong that he lifted my body slightly off the floor as he quickly carried me along the hallway.

I was forced into the adjacent powder room just off the large entrance hall. The man then opened the secret rotating door by making it turn with one of his legs and pushed me into the late Monsieur Duclos' lab room. It was clear that my abductor was familiar with Madame Duclos' home.

Still covering my mouth with his right hand, the assailant suddenly released his left hand and grabbed a small knife lying on the table under the long wall cabinet that contained the insects. It was one of the scalpels I had noticed on the day Madame Duclos had shown me her husband's secret room. The man pointed the cold steel of the scalpel at my neck and ordered me in German-accented French to keep quiet, or else.

My captor moved with incredible speed, and naturally slow as I was, I didn't have a chance, especially in the arms of such a powerful man. The whole scene was visible to me in the back mirrors of the cabinet's shelves, and I watched with horror as the blond German kept the tip of the knife to my throat while at the same time removing his hand from my mouth, which allowed me to breathe normally again. Feeling the knife touch my skin was a terrifying command not to make the slightest move. I desperately pleaded in German, explaining that I was a neighbor and friend of Madame Duclos, and that I had entered her place because I thought something had happened to her. I reasoned that speaking to the man in his native language would be a plus, but my efforts were of no avail. My whole life raced before me at incredible speed, but all in reverse, just as if I were rewinding a reel of film. Apparently, my last moment had arrived and under the most unexpected circumstances.

My anguish abated somewhat when, in the mirror, I saw my abductor reach for a glass flask with his free hand. I recognized the bottle of chloroform. The man removed the cork stopper from the bottle with his teeth while firmly holding on to the container. He then sat the flask and cork on the table and grabbed a piece of white cloth lying nearby, which he placed over the bottle opening.

I was about to be anesthetized. Quickly I drew into my lungs as much air as possible, and held my breath just as the cloth was being placed over my face. After closing the bottle, the man pressed the impregnated rag against my nose and mouth, holding it firmly for what seemed an eternity. Finally I had to exhale and could no longer keep from taking another breath, so I pretended to be losing consciousness and slowly relaxed in my captor's arms while at the same time tilting my head away from the knife. I hoped that my abductor would loosen up the offensive cloth, thinking that I had already inhaled a substantial amount of the drug. Instead, the German placed the knife on the table and seemed to press the rag even harder against my face. Unable to resist any longer, I was forced to gasp for air. Since I have no recollection of what followed, I obviously lapsed into unconsciousness.



The next thing I remember was hearing voices near me as I started to come around. I was slumped over, resting face down with my right cheek touching the lab room floor. My arms and chest ached from the pressure the stout German had inflicted upon my body when he forced me down the hallway. My face and nose also felt sore, but I concentrated on keeping my body still, especially my eyelids which could easily tremble, giving away the fact that I was conscious. I had no idea what I was up against until I heard the voices of two men apparently standing in the now open secret door. I listened carefully to what they were saying.

"What happens if he wakes up before we get him down to the laundry truck in the courtyard?" one of the men said in German. He chuckled crudely, in a voice that had known too many cigarettes and too much booze.

"Don't worry. I gave him enough chloroform to last at least until we can get him out of here."

"Then be sure to give him another strong dose before you throw him in the river at Nanterre. That way, if the body is found,

it will look like he committed suicide.”

“You don’t have a thing to worry about. We’ll stuff him in one of the sacks we use for the paintings.”

A wash of horror came over me, but I carefully continued to feign unconsciousness. Obviously, the rogues were convinced that I had heard their compromising arguments and I had to be killed. I felt trapped, helpless. I tried to keep panic at bay, hoping for a stroke of luck or a brainstorm that could spare my life, but I couldn’t think of any strategy that gave me the faintest hope of escape.

I took a mental survey of what I had at hand; not much, but there was the penknife in my pocket. Most likely I had been searched and the knife was gone by now. Even if I still had it, how could I use it? I was up against two physically powerful men.

I gathered they had brought the sack when one of the men lifted my body while the other opened the large bag wide. After they got me inside, they tied the top with a rope. I no longer heard the voice of François Augaud, nor any sound from Madame Duclos. The only voices I could make out were those of the two men speaking German.

The motion told me they were transporting me through the stairway toward the courtyard and the waiting laundry truck they had mentioned. I heard a muffled noise as the rear doors of the vehicle opened and they pushed me inside as far as possible. I could now only wait for the next course of events. I felt a firm hand against my body through the folds of the bag when I heard a voice whisper:

“Gerhardt, don’t shove it in any further. There’s plenty of room for the other bags with the paintings. Come on, let’s go and get them.”

“Do you think it’s wise to leave him alone?”

“Sure, nothing will happen. The boy is unconscious. It’s past three in the morning and no one ever comes around at this hour. Don’t worry. Come on, hurry up, but be quiet about it.”

I made a strong effort to collect my wits. This unforeseen

situation appeared to offer me a chance to escape. As soon as I heard the sound of their steps getting further away, I attempted to search my pockets for my knife. It was difficult to reach my jacket pockets because of the manner in which I was bundled up inside the sack. Luckily the knife was still there. With difficulty I removed it from my pocket and opened the blade. It was then I realized the Germans had no reason to search me for a weapon. Madame Duclos must have identified me as nothing more than her innocent young neighbor who had stopped by at the wrong place, at the wrong time. What I might have overheard was sufficient reason to kill me. It horrified me to think that the Madame, whom I had grown to admire so much in just a short time, had forsaken me. My heart beat wildly. I knew that this was my only opportunity to escape. I slit the bag just enough so that I could slip through the opening. My movements seemed too slow, but I was trying to avoid any noise.

When I was free of the sack, I got on all fours inside the semi-darkness of the vehicle, feeling with my hands the area where I was confined. There were other bundles closer to the driver's seat, made of a softer type of cloth than the sack used to carry my body. The bundles were of a soft and fluffy consistency, so I assumed that they were filled with dirty clothing that would eventually be taken to some laundry shop in the city. I hurriedly stuffed several of these smaller laundry bags inside the sack from which I had just emerged and then arranged the bag so that it would look as if it contained a body. I carefully concealed the portion of the sack that was cut on the bottom.

My breathing had become labored by this time, and I was covered with sweat. Finally I scrambled to the back of the small truck where, fortunately, both doors had been left ajar. Quietly I slid out of the vehicle.

I ran to the edge of the parking area where it was darkest, and then sped in the direction of the street. I carefully opened one of the big double portals with the utmost care but it creaked, luckily not loudly. To avoid further noise, I did not close the door.

I could scarcely believe that I had reached the arcades of the rue de Rivoli. There wasn't a soul in sight. I knew I would need all the reserves of energy I possessed. Giving myself a few moments to think and knowing that the one place I could not go was my home, I was by now on the verge of total hysteria. I was suddenly taken over by a maniacal force that made me run as if a mad dog were biting at my feet, disregarding the pain in my shoulders and the spreading ache inside my chest. I felt as if I were flying rather than running, with my feet barely touching the pavement. With my scientific knowledge, I well knew that a shot of adrenaline was spreading throughout my fast circulating blood. In a few minutes I reached the Place de la Concorde. I turned left in an attempt to keep myself from being seen. I ran around the Jeu de Paume and the Orangerie. I crossed the Pont de la Concorde toward l'Assemblée Nationale, turning left again to reach the Quai Anatole. All of these landmarks suddenly loomed with unknown hazards. The friendly city had turned on me.

I ran faster and faster, in a frenzy of fear. I knew I was not far from a train station that handled local trips to the outskirts of the city. I could either hide there, or take one of those trains, if any ran that late at night, but exhaustion was steadily taking over my body, and I was increasingly short of breath. I didn't see how I could avoid collapsing unless I soon reached the train station, but I couldn't risk slowing down. Finally it loomed into sight. I charged into the d'Orsay train station out of breath. My chest felt crushed as I tried to take in large gulps of air. If I had reached this public place just one minute later, I felt sure I would have ended up collapsing on the street.

The train station was almost deserted, except for the occasional street walker or drunk sleeping here and there on the benches of the large waiting room. I chose an area close to the stairs leading down to the trains because it seemed to be out of sight for anybody entering the station.

I tried to catch my breath. I realized that subconsciously I had taken an escape route that was identical to the one I habitually

took to reach the flat of my good and faithful Chilean friend Antonio, who lived nearby. I knew Antonio's telephone number by heart, since we often spoke by telephone. I searched my pockets to see if I had enough change to use the public phone. Luckily my right pocket was full of coins because I always kept a good supply for the *métro*, my usual mode of transportation in Paris.

I decided to wait a little longer to be sure that nobody had followed me. The station was totally quiet. I gathered up my courage and walked toward one of the public telephones. I dropped a coin in the slot, nervously dialed the number and listened as Antonio's phone rang. Once, twice, three times. What would I do if my friend wasn't home? Finally a sleepy sound that didn't even appear to be Antonio's voice answered the call. My mouth was so dry I could hardly articulate.

"Antonio?"

"Yes, who's calling at this ridiculous hour?" replied the voice.

I finally gasped out a cry for help: "It's Patricio, Antonio. Please forgive me for calling at this late hour, but I'm in deep trouble, and I desperately need your help." My desperation must have been clear to Antonio.

"What's wrong, my dear boy? Where are you?"

"I was almost murdered this evening and my life is in danger. I ran away from my assailants, Antonio, or they would have killed me. Please, can I come over to your apartment?"

"But where are you?"

"At the Gare d'Orsay. I don't think it would take me too long to get to your flat, if I still have the strength to run."

"No, don't move. I'll slip into my robe and drive over to get you. I should be there in about ten to fifteen minutes, so be on the lookout for my car at the main entrance to the station. I'll double park, so come out fast and get in. We'll come straight here."

"Thanks, Antonio, but please hurry."

I hung up and looked around. I returned to the same place where I had been hiding. From there, I had a full view of the large waiting room. After a few minutes, I crept out of hiding and

cautiously walked closer to the main entrance. Suddenly, two men passed by on the street next to the wide glass doors. I froze in my tracks then dropped to my knees to avoid being seen and crawled behind a large metal frame containing an advertisement for cigarettes. Although I was afraid even to move, I peeked over one side of the display board. The two men were too far away to distinguish their facial features, but I could clearly see that one of them had blond hair, just like the German who had pushed me into Monsieur Duclos' laboratory. My heart nearly stopped. I was paralyzed with fear and covered in sweat. I ducked down behind the advertising panel. Then my worst fears were realized: as they entered the building I heard them speaking in German. They decided one of them would stay outside the station's door to survey the street while the other one investigated the waiting room. I knew this man would find me. There was no escape or place to hide. I remembered my terror when I had been stopped at the customs barrier at the Santiago airport, caught up in Alvaro's dirty work. I had thought that was the worst day of my life, but now my naïve decision was about to cost me my life itself.

Although I couldn't see the man, I sensed his footsteps as he approached my hiding place. Suddenly, when everything seemed lost, I heard the voice of the other man call to his companion in German:

"Come on! Police! We've got to leave right now! Move!"

I couldn't believe my luck, but now I had to gather up all of my courage and get over to the main entrance. Antonio would be arriving any minute. Almost crawling, I slowly made my way to the front entrance. Just at that moment a car pulled up in front and stopped. I recognized Antonio's car and ran to it. The passenger door was already open, and as soon as I got in, Antonio took off.

Without exchanging a word, Antonio touched one of my legs as a sign of affection and moral support. All of a sudden, Antonio turned right at the rue Bonaparte.

"Antonio, this is not the way to your home. Why did you turn here?"

"It's just a precaution, my dear. In a minute I'll take the boulevard Saint-Germain to the rue Saint-Jacques until we reach the Quai de Montebello and my home. I took this route just to be sure that nobody is following us."

"Antonio, you are brilliant. I'm so upset that I would never have thought of doing anything that smart. All I want to do is get to your apartment and be with you. Then I'll really feel safe. This has been the most hideous night of my entire life."

"Calm down, little one. We're nearly home. Fortunately, there is hardly any traffic at this hour."

Antonio took a look at the clock in his car and added, "Do you realize, Patricio, that it is now exactly 4:25 in the morning?"

Antonio parked his car in his assigned space located in the *cour intérieur*—inside courtyard—of his building. He took a flashlight from the glove compartment and the two of us quickly climbed the stairs to his flat. We looked like two ghosts floating about in the middle of the night. Antonio looked a bit grotesque with his long robe draped over his short body. Suddenly everyone and everything looked malignant to me.

Antonio carefully closed the various locks and bolts on the old entrance door to his apartment, and asked me to sit down while he went to the butler's pantry for something to drink. Soon he reappeared carrying a tray with two glasses and several crystal decanters filled with gin, vodka, and scotch.

"What you need, my boy, is a strong drink."

"Thanks, Antonio. I think you're right."

Antonio made himself a drink as well, and then, with extreme agitation, I proceeded to unravel an almost incredible tale to my friend, who patiently listened while slowly sipping his drink. At times I dithered about the details, or gripped my temples with both hands and must have looked at Antonio with a terrified expression.

"Calm down, calm down," said Antonio, affectionately reassuring me.

When I had finished my story, Antonio leaned back and looked

up at the ceiling, deep in thought for a moment before he began to express his opinion. He then spoke with a rather crafty, cunning face:

“Undoubtedly, Patricio, you have gotten yourself into a complicated, dangerous situation. All of the circumstances would seem to indicate that Madame Duclos and François Augaud are involved in the illegal transportation of, most likely, old masters paintings apparently stolen by the Nazis. Obviously, the Germans are now using a French connection to ship them to South America where many Nazis took refuge after the war. The fact that they now strongly suspect that you have that information, and have escaped from their hands, leaves you in a very uncomfortable position, to say the least. To begin with, don’t say a word about all of this to the countess, or for that matter, to anyone except me. If you do, it could complicate matters even further.”

“Don’t worry, Antonio, I know it would really mess things up and I assure you that I won’t say a word to a soul.”

I then asked my friend to set the alarm clock for nine, so that I could call Louise and tell her I had spent the night with friends. I had promised always to let her know if, for some reason, I decided to stay out overnight.

“I think that she is sincerely fond of me and likes to play the motherly role,” I said, suddenly growing more agitated. I had not heard from my own mother in several weeks, and I had sent more letters, all of which were ignored.

Antonio willingly agreed. Then he said, “Now, let’s talk about you. I think that it could be risky for you to stay in Paris during the next few days, and I just had a brainstorm.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Actually, for some time now I have been feeling rather fatigued from so much stress in my work and have been seriously thinking that I should take a few days off to rest in my country home near Fontainebleau. You haven’t been there yet, and this is just the right moment to get out of Paris. So, when you telephone the countess, tell her that you were with me last night and that I

have invited you to spend several days at my country retreat. You can add that both of us will be over later so that you can pick up some clothing for the trip.”

“Thank you, Antonio. What a marvelous idea. What would I do without you? I realize that I will have to go back home to get some things to wear, but I have to confess that the mere idea terrifies me.”

“I know, Patricio, but don’t worry. I’ll be with you. Also, the countess will see that you really do have a legitimate invitation, and speaking of that, when you talk on the phone don’t mention the location of my country home. If she inquires as to its whereabouts, I’ll invent someplace that is in the opposite direction, and if she asks for a telephone number, I will simply state that there is no phone, since I like to remain incommunicado when at my place of leisure. This won’t sound unusual.”

I was deeply moved and comforted by all these signs of Antonio’s concern.

Then Antonio said, “I think it best that you sleep with me in my bed tonight. This is no time to be left alone, especially in your state of nervousness. You’ll feel a lot better with me at your side to protect you.”

Antonio’s close human warmth was just the right prescription for my current state of mind. I quickly undressed and tucked myself into Antonio’s bed, wearing only a T-shirt. After first checking the alarm clock to make certain it would go off at the correct time, Antonio turned off the light and lay down beside me, placing a protective hand over my body. It wasn’t long before I felt Antonio’s entire body close to mine, not in a sexual way, but in a return to the comfort of childhood under the shielding arms of one’s parents. Soon we were both lost in the unconscious world of dreams.



At the prospect of going back home, a horrible fear crept over

me, stoked by the terror of my narrow escape the previous night. When we reached the rue de Rivoli, I became extremely nervous. Antonio urged me to calm down, pointing out that it would not be wise to let the countess see me in such a state. I soon regained my composure thanks to the moral support of my good and faithful friend. Fortunately, from the moment we entered the now opened big double doors into the courtyard until we reached Louise's third floor flat, there was no one in sight except the vigilant concierge.

I quickly picked out a few bits of clothing and stuffed them in a small piece of luggage that I used for weekends. I didn't have to introduce Antonio to Louise, since she had met him previously at parties I had given in her home, and it was not at all surprising to me that she neither inquired as to the location of the country place, nor asked for a phone number. People of her social status simply did not do that sort of thing, and, apart from that, the countess, in general, never interrogated people she did not know well about their personal affairs. On the other hand, though, she was always receptive to any gratuitous information given to her.

Chapter XXIV

Antonio's country home was not far from Fontainebleau, but actually close to Le Châtelet-en-Brie. It was like a small fortress in stone, and had been built in the seventeenth century. I felt echoes of the way that the countess must have felt during her recuperation outside of Versailles.

A carefully manicured park surrounded the entire estate. One entered the property through a magnificent old portal made of intricate iron grille work, with a gatehouse on one side, inhabited by a middle-aged couple. Claudette was in charge of keeping the manor house in optimal condition for Antonio's arrival at any time, and without prior notification. Robert's job was garden maintenance, as well as light repair work in the house and around the property. This husband and wife team, keepers of the abode, greeted Antonio and me without any sign of surprise. Antonio later explained to me that these two faithful servants were used to his unexpected visits.

The entrance driveway, about a quarter of a kilometer long, curved gracefully before us as we drove up to the magnificent home, hidden from the view of the outside world by tall, ancient walls.

I was impressed by the beauty of the place, but when I was taken inside this old yet well-preserved château, I almost gasped at its magnificent decor. Although Antonio had some excellent old paintings and *objets d'art* in his Paris flat, I never imagined the richness that I saw here.

Without doubt, Antonio's taste was impeccable, and he obviously possessed the funds to purchase period furniture signed by known cabinet makers, as well as other treasures abundant throughout the house. Gobelin tapestries covered many of the

walls, mixed with spectacular paintings by famous old masters. The wide, elaborately carved gilded frames that surrounded these unrivaled paintings were also breathtaking. I felt immediately refreshed and revitalized as I paused to consider the riches before me.

After installing ourselves in our respective sleeping quarters, which were connected so that I would not feel alone at any time in that large and imposing edifice, Antonio requested his housekeeper to set the table in the main dining room, since it was my first visit to his country home. After freshening up, Antonio suggested that we go outside for a walk so that he could show me the grounds.

The gardens were extremely formal, with parterres and lovely sloping terraces embellished by classical statuary. After walking for a while along one of the pathways, covered with fine gravel and lined with small topiary shrubs meticulously pruned into three levels, we arrived at a small rectangular pool. Antonio described how a bounty of white water lilies would bloom and cover the surface in summer. The pool was surrounded with a broad border made from antique-looking tiles imbedded with small pebbles. Behind this small pond could be seen the facade of a perfectly scaled Greek temple, its triangular pediment supported by Doric columns. I contemplated this classic beauty in total ecstasy and had to make an effort to return to reality. When I finally recovered, I told Antonio how much I appreciated the imposing architectural beauty of the temple, adding that classicism deeply moved me and was precisely my cup of tea.

“Antonio, why didn’t you ever tell me about this earthly paradise you own?”

“To be blunt about it, I never tell anyone because I enjoy enormously seeing the look of surprise on the faces of the outside world when they see my retreat. But I have to confess that there aren’t too many people who know about this hidden refuge of mine. Here I am able to line up my thoughts and put them in perspective, and at the same time I can recover my strength in order

to go on fighting for the satisfaction of justifying my existence. It pleases me a great deal to hear you express your enthusiasm and appreciation for what I have created here. When I acquired this piece of property it had been abandoned for years, and required extensive repair and restoration work to bring everything back to life. I purchased the Hellenic frontispiece just six years ago from the gardens of a manor house nearby that was being demolished after many decades of neglect. With the help of an expert, it was carefully disassembled, transported, restored and reconstructed on my property. It also took me several years to restore the main edifice, the gate house and the gardens, which were overgrown with weeds, but it was a marvelous project and kept me busy and out of mischief for an extended period of time.”

I wandered further along the path, imagining the pleasing palette of spring flowers, which I envisioned would be layered in ways to reveal their glories.

“Now I see where you get your serenity and wisdom. I can’t congratulate you enough, Antonio, for your flawless taste. In my opinion, you have fully succeeded in restoring and decorating the place, and I will always be grateful to you for having given me the opportunity to appreciate as well as enjoy this splendid endeavor of yours. I’m certain that it has to be a continual source of immense satisfaction for you.”

The first two days passed quickly for me as I explored the house with its innumerable interesting objects. I also enjoyed jogging each morning with Antonio through the gardens that surrounded this grand manor house. My host took me on short drives through the nearby countryside, full of fertile fields dotted here and there with charming little villages.

Claudette was an expert in French cuisine, but she was also gifted with the rare ability to decorate the serving dishes in order to make them more desirable and appetizing. In addition to his outside duties, Robert also served as butler. Dressed in a simple white jacket and dark trousers, he would serve in the most absolute, correct manner with impeccable sureness, and then

prudently disappear as soon as his services were not required. When Antonio wished to summon one of the servants, they appeared as if by magic.

Eventually, Antonio had to confess his trick to me, as I had noticed the coincidence of Robert's appearing in the dining room exactly when his services were required. Antonio had installed a rather ingenious bell system in both the formal and informal dining rooms. The bells were connected to the kitchen, so that the ringing could not be heard in the dining areas. Antonio simply pressed a hidden button positioned on the floor within reach of his feet.

Despite the new sensations of this extremely private and luxurious environment, the consequences of my recent terror had left a deep imprint on my mind. Even though the intensity of the event's impact was decreasing, there remained a profound fear, almost as if a huge fire had been partially extinguished, leaving small, stubborn areas burning here and there. I longed, in equal part, for Jacques' strength and calm, and Misha's warm body.

During the third night I had a horrible nightmare. I awoke screaming with a cold sweat trickling from my forehead. Before actually realizing that I was fully awake, I saw Antonio in the sullen darkness of my room moving quickly toward my bed. Since my arrival at Antonio's home, we had mutually agreed that the door connecting our rooms would be left open during the night. Antonio turned on a light and sat at the edge of the bed, gazing affectionately into my eyes as he wiped the perspiration from my brow. Without saying a word, he surrounded me with a tranquilizing embrace and gently patted me on the back.

I soon calmed down, and Antonio, without uttering a word, slipped tenderly under the covers and held me lovingly in his arms. Our two bodies lay closely interlaced and silent. A pleasant sensation of tranquility and protection spread over me. Warmth exuded from Antonio's body. His legs entwined with mine while sensuous, probing hands explored my body. I wore nothing but the top of my pajamas that night, and Antonio deftly unfastened

the buttons of my night shirt. His hands slowly moved over my bare chest and arms. Soon Antonio had taken off his clothing too, and I could resist his warm caresses no longer. Our two naked bodies were enveloped as one. I surrendered myself completely to the voracious lust of my friend, who not only gave me true devotion, but unalterable friendship as well.

The following days were gentle and appeasing in that secret and charming retreat. While Antonio inspired himself, creating new high-fashion designs in his study, I spent long and pleasant hours in the château's library, browsing through some of its thousands of current as well as antique volumes, or zealously devouring the illustrated art publications to which Antonio subscribed.

Camelot does not last forever, and I grew restless, thinking about my unfinished business in the city. The antique store probably had contacted Louise, and I could easily excuse myself to the proprietor, who did not always need me there. Jacques, on the other hand, was not accustomed to absences from me, so I feared more problems for my already tormented mind. The matter of seeing Misha again could be dealt with delicately but forthrightly, I decided. I would ask Antonio to invite him to this paradise.

"Wouldn't it be nice to see Misha again? Perhaps he could come for a visit," I suggested as casually as I could over breakfast. I peered at Antonio with anticipation.

Antonio gave me a bemused smile. "So you know."

Puzzled, I said nothing. I smiled weakly in return.

"I was wondering when he might tell someone else," Antonio said. "I have had no idea what our liaison, if that is the proper term, has meant to him. I confess it has meant a lot to me."

I nodded as a reflex. So Misha and Antonio were lovers. What next? I racked my brain to recall any signs that my two friends' relationship had flowered, but could not. I was in a state of utter confusion.

"We could have Misha come here, but as you see, it might not be the best idea, given what we have just shared, my friend," Antonio

said. "I was going to tell you sometime. But love ceases to be a pleasure when it ceases to be a secret—I heard that quotation somewhere—I believe it."

"Perhaps we should just return to Paris," I said.

Later that day, we packed our bags and returned to see what awaited each of us in the City of Light.

However, I lost the marvelous serenity that had so pleasantly sustained me during the previous days as Paris loomed larger and larger. Antonio noticed my anxiety and understood that the time was ripe to analyze my situation in its unadorned reality.

Antonio assured me that, as far as the German conspirators were concerned, I was safe. They understood that an attack upon me would provoke an investigation that might expose them all. Besides, if I did go to the authorities, they knew I could not prove a thing. In addition, the Germans were likely to dissociate themselves completely from their connection with Madame Duclos and François Augaud, who had proven untrustworthy. They would simply seek new contacts in France.

Still, Antonio felt it would be prudent for me to take a taxi, instead of the *métro*, when I returned home after dark.

"With a small tip," Antonio advised, "force the driver to accompany you right up to the countess's apartment. If he protests or acts like your request is strange, tell him that recently there was an incident on the stairway that has left you worried. Of course, if I'm with you I promise to give you first class, portal to portal service."

Antonio also thought it likely that I might receive an invitation for dinner from Madame Duclos, who might have been instructed to find out how much I really knew about the affair.

"Oh, my God, Antonio, you must be joking. What should I do if that happens?"

"I know how you feel, my dear, but you must be diplomatic in your rejection of any possible invitation, and always qualify it with a plausible excuse."

When I thanked Antonio again for all his help, he replied, "I'm

certain, Patricio, that many of your other friends would have done the same had they known of your plight. In case you don't know it, you are extremely popular."

"It's nice of you to say all of that, Antonio, but I assure you that I will be grateful for the rest of my life."

"Patricio, don't be naïve. You know perfectly well that I have a special affection for you. All of us have a tendency to be selfish and to base our actions on self-gratification. My existence, in general, has been circumscribed by solitude, until recently."

Antonio paused, obviously savoring his memory of Misha.

"Having your company, and being able to share your troubles, has brought a great deal of satisfaction into my life," Antonio continued. I shook my head at the irony of these intertwined love affairs. I certainly could not begrudge Antonio his lust or love for Misha—I felt the same way. While the car rolled along, however, I began to swell with resolve to confront my own desires and wishes concerning Jacques, whose genuine love for me never seemed to diminish. This fact made Jacques all the more attractive over time.

I daydreamed back to the early days in Lima, and suddenly found myself intoxicated again. Perhaps Jacques would leave his wife and child after all. Jeanne could grow stronger in the truth, rather than in the mockery of that marriage. Or perhaps I would try marriage myself. After my brush with death, I was loath to rule out anything that might lend my life more stability and security in the lunatic world around me.

Before we knew it, we were back in the city. We had been engrossed in such animated conversation that time flew by, and now we approached the rue de Rivoli. The traffic got heavy as we approached the Place de la Concorde, until it finally came to a complete halt.

At first we thought there had been an accident. It looked as if it might be right in the block where I lived, but on closer inspection we saw that it wasn't a traffic accident. In the distance were two red fire engines that could be seen above all the other vehicles.

When the traffic slowly began to advance, I was shocked to realize that the problem emanated from the building where I lived. The thought that something might have happened to Louise terrified me. I asked Antonio to let me out, explaining that it was easier for me to proceed on foot at that point, and suggested that Antonio join me in the countess's flat as soon as he found a place to leave the car.

Although it was difficult to make my way through the crowd of onlookers, I finally reached the entrance to the building where I lived. My heart pounded as I asked the policeman in the portal what had happened, hoping with all my might that Louise was not hurt. Before answering my question, the gendarme told me that, for the time being, only residents of the building were permitted inside, but that soon the fire fighters would finish their job and the entrance to the building would be clear.

"I reside here," I said.

"There's been a serious fire," the policeman said. "A woman perished from smoke inhalation while attempting to save some of her paintings."

"The countess?" I cried.

"Madame Duclos."

I pulled back in shock. I inquired if anyone else in the building had died or was injured, and to my relief the answer was no. The policeman then let me pass.

What a strange sensation to be going again up those stairs down which I had been taken just a few days before under such horrendous circumstances. When I reached the third floor I was much relieved to see the countess standing at the head of the stairs, watching the last few fire fighters clean up. She was so engrossed in the whole spectacle that at first she didn't notice me, but when she finally saw me her face lit up. She came down to greet me with a big hug. I held her for what seemed a long time until Louise said:

"The fire fighters arrived too late to save Madame Duclos, Patricio. When they got here she was already dead. You know

how much she liked her Impressionist paintings. Well, she insisted on trying to save them. She was successful in retrieving a few, but against the protests of her butler and the maids, went back into the front salons even though the smoke was dense. Finally the servants had no other recourse than to abandon their mistress—they too would have perished. The irony is that it was all more smoke than flames. Damage to furniture and paintings was minimal, far from irreparable.”

Louise dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief that she had been holding over her mouth and nose. The smoke still hung heavily in the air.

“Let’s go inside,” she said, shaking her head. “Madame Duclos will be a great loss for me because, as you know, so often we kept each other company.”

In a sitting room, beneath her own grand portraits and landscapes, the countess paused to collect her thoughts and then continued reminiscing:

“Both of us lived through the horrors of German occupation during the last world war and, even though she and her husband apparently were not affected, I often opened my heart to her, telling about my own harsh experiences that culminated in the count’s execution.”

After my recent experience with Germans, as well as paintings, I couldn’t help but reflect on the possibility that Monsieur and Madame Duclos had collaborated with the Nazis during the war. They were most likely responsible for the capture of Louise’s husband. If this were true, then in an indirect way they were also to blame for his death, and perhaps also for Louise’s ordeal. When her husband became a suspect of the Gestapo, it was possible that the countess had also fallen under some sort of surveillance, and probably both husband and wife were being watched in the hope of leading the German secret police to other resistance members. As luck would have it, Paris was liberated just before the countess could be taken. So many theories, and now Madame Duclos’ death had forever closed that chapter.

Fortunately, her demise had also brought to a close my own episode as an unwilling participant. It was nothing short of a miracle that I had survived that nightmare. All during the war, so far across the calm oceans in Chile, I had felt that any brutality was almost fictional, as daily life in Santiago continued unperturbed. My mother's own family, half German by descent, had always expressed horror regarding Nazism. Now, years after the end of the war, I had almost become another casualty, another statistic of the atrocities of that tragic period, but life would continue in Paris as it had in Santiago, with me or without me.

Suddenly the thought crossed my mind that possibly Madame Duclos' death might have been planned by her German partners. Perhaps they thought she had passed the point of being useful to them and had become a bit of a nuisance. Would they still try to get me? After all, they undoubtedly knew where I could be found. But I was heartened by the fact that they had obviously succeeded in removing from the flat a large quantity of contraband paintings.

With Madame Duclos no longer alive, all of her possessions would go to her family, except for some of the paintings she had bequeathed to a museum, and I could only assume—and hope—that that smuggling connection would be finished. Perhaps Madame Duclos was the last of the collaborators.

But no, there was still Augaud. He knew perfectly well where to find me, and what would keep him from having me silenced? Did François Augaud realize that I knew of his involvement? The thought not only terrified me but would haunt me.

These thoughts absorbed me even as Louise recounted the details of the fire over cups of her superb coffee, served to me and Antonio in her apartment. When she had finished telling what she knew, she said, "Now tell me, did you enjoy yourselves in the country?"

"Yes, we had a wonderful time," we both answered in unison, and then laughed at having answered at the same time.

"We have missed you, Patricio, and I say we because I have a long list to give you of friends who have called during your

absence. You have conquered *tout Paris*.”

She went over the long list of presumed admirers.

“Although it no longer matters, the most persistent person in asking for you was Madame Duclos. She insisted on trying to find out where you were, but of course I couldn’t say because I didn’t know the address of your friend’s country place. Her reaction was rather bizarre, as if she didn’t believe me, or perhaps she thought I was hiding it from her. Also Prince Michel Broncu called several times, and wants you to call him as soon as possible.”

I couldn’t help but notice a look of surprise and perhaps jealousy on Antonio’s face when Louise mentioned the prince.

“In a moment I will give you the memos from all of your other friends who called. I have them in a notebook next to the phone in my sitting room. I needed a notebook to write them all down.”

“Thank you, Louise, and I am sorry that you were inconvenienced with so many calls,” I said, feeling the embrace of normalcy after the terror and then the serenity of the country. “I never dreamed that so many people would phone inquiring about me.”

“Not at all, my dear, it was no trouble. Those calls brought some life into the house.”

Antonio then said good-bye, and, turning to me with a slight look of sadness in his eyes, asked me to call him soon.

When the countess gave me the long list of callers, I couldn’t help but notice Jacques’ name, and I immediately felt somewhat uncomfortable with the thought that I had practically abandoned the first person I knew in Paris. I also felt bad for not having contacted Jacques at all since the unfortunate incident at the home of Madame Duclos. Suddenly I developed an extremely guilty conscience, thinking about the close relationship I had with Jacques. After all, it was he who had been responsible for my coming to France, and he was the one who had helped me establish myself in Paris.

With all of these thoughts going through my head, I called Jacques immediately.

“I had an unexpected invitation to the country with a dear

friend,” I began.

Jacques was quiet. He obviously wanted to hear what I had to say.

“Dear Jacques, I had intended to call, but everything developed so quickly. The house where I was staying has no telephone. And I felt transported back through the centuries, it was so peaceful and quiet there I didn’t want to leave or establish contacts in the twentieth century, you know? So I spent several quiet days in contemplation. In fact, I did a lot of thinking. I am sorry I was so inconsiderate, however, and I wonder how I can make it up to you.”

When I eventually finished with my apologies, there was a long pause at Jacques’ end of the line, a dead silence.

I stumbled and mumbled some more, adding that there were several other guests present at the country place. Again there was a prolonged silence. By now I realized that my story had lost its plausibility instead of becoming more convincing. However, Jacques agreed to arrange for a gathering at our hiding place, as he knew Hubert’s father was out of town. It was obvious that he wanted to give me another opportunity to talk. I was rather shaky as I hung up the phone. I was well aware that Jacques was not buying my story about being with friends in the countryside. It was actually a repeat performance of what I had decided to tell Jeanne as a justification for my absence from Paris during the trip to Switzerland with Jacques. I greatly feared a severe scene of jealousy.

The moment we got together at our clandestine place, I knew my instincts were correct. With dread I saw the grave expression on Jacques’ face. Other than a rather cool greeting, Jacques was short of words. I made an all-out effort to keep my composure, expressing myself in a calm, natural way. In an effort to downplay the importance of this trip, I told Jacques that it was a reunion with Chilean friends living in Paris, as if it were the most innocent thing in the world.

“You remember Gloria and Elena, my friends from

childhood?"

Jacques arched an eyebrow in an expression of incredulity that verged on outright distrust. I stumbled along with my fictions.

Progressively, our intimate gatherings were becoming encounters of stormy weather, full of mayhem and misunderstandings. I sensed that Jacques was penetrating the eye of the storm. He looked at me with a leering grin, and I lapsed into silence. I didn't know what to say, and was afraid to elevate the temperature by acting angry and sulky. Nor did I wish to run into unwarranted words that might come back to haunt me.

Suddenly, Jacques flew into the most severe rage I had ever known in my lover. I could foresee violence and danger. I tried to grab Jacques' hand to calm him down, but Jacques was overwhelmed by his own feelings and pushed me away with a fierce, threatening look on his face. He was beside himself and obviously blinded by thoughts of betrayal. Suddenly he made a move toward me. I thought he was going to break down in my arms and cry for forgiveness, but I was wrong. Jacques grabbed my neck with both hands, as he had done once before, but this time he pressed hard, hurting me. Panic-stricken, I could not breathe normally and my voice came out in gasps as I tried to plead with Jacques. The memory of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde came to my mind, but all of a sudden Jacques released his hands and broke down sobbing.

"My God, what got into me! Patricio, forgive me. I don't know what possessed me. Never again, I promise! Tell me you forgive me. You know I love you more than anything else in this world."

I was so terrified that I paused a long time before I could answer. I breathed deeply several times and told myself to relax. I made a strong effort to remember the happy moments spent together, in order to get myself back into a more propitious state of mind to utter sensible words. My mind went back to the scene when I saw Jacques for the first time in the elevator of the Bolivar Hotel in Lima, piercing my entire body with those incandescent eyes like an invader conquering some new land, and the passion

that followed without interruption throughout my time in France. This helped to bring Jacques back into focus, and his image became familiar again.

“You know I love you, Jacques. You just have to get used to trusting me under our unusual circumstances. After all we are not husband and wife, and we have to learn to accommodate in order to love each other under the shadows of a condemning world.”

That evening, as after a storm, the sky cleared and the crescent of a new moon timidly made its appearance among a conglomeration of brilliant stars that invaded the background. The darkness of the universe’s infinity submerged us into the most furiously enjoyable passion ever attained in the past. Reconciled love seems to bring a much-needed blessing to the soul.

CHAPTER XXV

After several days, I received a call from Jacques, urgently asking me to meet him at Café Minó. I thought something was wrong, but guessing Jacques was calling from his office, I decided not to question the motive. I assumed our clandestine place was not available. When I arrived at the coffee shop, I saw a rather perturbed expression on Jacques' face, but happily, it became decidedly less sullen as I approached the table where he sat.

When I asked him what was troubling him, he abruptly said, "Do you or do you not want to be introduced to Claire, Patricio? We can forget it entirely, or you can meet her at my house."

Not wanting to antagonize Jacques any further, I thought that meeting this young lady certainly wouldn't compromise me in any way.

"All right. When can we do this?"

My words appeared to appease him, at least for the time being, and the expression on his face changed.

"How is Jeanne? And Claudine?"

"Oh, much the same. Claudine asks after you."

I attempted to show some interest in hearing what Jacques had been doing socially, as well as in the business world, since we had last seen each other.

Jacques' response about his work, however, was vague and rather uninterested.

He abruptly changed the subject and rambled on about some sort of terrible misunderstanding he had recently had with Hubert.

"We're no longer speaking," Jacques said.

"What in the world happened?"

"I still cannot figure it out, honestly," Jacques said. When

I attempted to clarify the issue, Jacques averted questions by saying that he didn't think that it was worthwhile delving into the matter. Jacques looked very agitated. This gave me the inkling that this new circumstance would preclude our intimate meetings at Hubert's house.

I grew certain that Jacques must have succumbed to Hubert's whining advances, and then called it all to a halt. With lovers of my own accumulating, I could hardly blame Jacques for seeking comfort elsewhere.

I smiled and nodded at Jacques, as if to say, "I understand."

Jacques straightened in his chair.

"Patricio," he started. "I really need you."

In a tone of voice that verged on begging, Jacques suggested that we get together in my room that night.

At that point, I had a strong inner feeling that I found I could not conquer. It had nothing to do with my recent relationship with Antonio, since I really didn't think that I was in love with my compatriot. That affair seemed to be more of a friendship that had turned pleasantly into a comfortable compatibility of similar tastes and sensitivities, coupled with a satisfactory sexual contact. Furthermore, it had nothing to do with my affair with Prince Broncu, as lustful and apparently light as it all seemed right now.

For once in my life, I made a quick response to Jacques' request.

"Jacques, I'm sorry, but having sex at the countess's apartment is simply out of the question. Louise has developed a motherly love for me. She enjoys my company and practically follows my every movement around the house. She knows where I am in the flat at all times, possibly because she is so lonesome. I would never dare to risk such a thing as you have in mind."

"Then we have to find an apartment. Even if you live alone, at least we will have the freedom to see each other intimately whenever we want. You know that I am more than willing to defray all of the expenses involved in a rental contract."

I couldn't bear the idea of living alone in some small, isolated apartment. I was suddenly overwhelmed by the sensation of claustrophobia that had arisen when Jacques had tried to run my life. I couldn't imagine detaching myself totally from the countess or the feeling of space and luxury in her home, plus the company and affectionate devotion of that noble lady. However, the most important argument for not wanting to change addresses was the fact that I understood, no denying it, that I had misgivings about my relationship with Jacques.

Subconsciously, this sensitivity had grown and become stronger during the five days at Antonio's country house, even as I, upon my return to Paris, had tried to talk myself back into love with Jacques. It all stemmed from a feeling of serene objectivity I had experienced during those days of blissful detachment. I was now able to analyze things in a different light.

I sadly understood that hearing about Jacques' family situation when I lived in South America, and actually seeing these two females in the flesh, were two entirely different things. The silent and frustrated love that Jeanne felt for her husband had converted my situation into a totally different affair, one that deeply perturbed me and would have to be scrutinized in depth.

On the other hand, the strong pressure exerted upon me by Jacques to meet Claire, with the possibility of a matrimonial alliance that could bring material benefits, as well as create a perfect front for Jacques in the eyes of Parisian society, made me shudder with disgust. To continue leading a false life, as I had done in Chile, losing my freedom by pretending to be something that I was not, was definitely not on my agenda.

I looked deeply into Jacques' eyes. I had never seen more hope, more anticipation in them.

I inwardly cursed myself, knowing that I would go through with this elaborate charade, and that one side of my nature—the one that could not disappoint a friend—would conquer the other, which wanted only to secure my freedom.



The next day, I exercised just that portion of my soul that longed for liberation. I called Prince Michel Broncu.

Misha was extremely happy and affectionate on the phone, and told me that he had missed me very much.

“And how is your cousin, Ferdinand?” I asked.

“Horrendous, but I will tell you all about that when I see you. How does a simple dinner sound, a typical French cassoulet, tomorrow in my flat at eight?”

“Wonderful, Misha. I’m anxious to see you and interested in hearing all about Ferdinand.” In advance of the call, I had told myself firmly to refrain from asking any questions about Misha and Antonio, who were entitled to their privacy. Certainly I would never dream of discussing with Misha the ups and downs in my relationship with Jacques.

The next day, I waited anxiously for eight o’clock to arrive. My impatience did not stem as much from a curiosity to know more about developments concerning the problems of Prince Rutianu, as it did from the strong attraction I felt for Misha. Misha represented to me the freedom in a relationship that I sought now, not the sorrowful bond with Jacques that weighed on me like chains. I also greatly admired Misha’s royal background. He had adapted himself so well to the cruel reality of his rather meager lifestyle, compared to the totally different circumstances of his royal birth. In short, Misha was the embodiment of my new ideal.

When I arrived at the prince’s humble abode, a delicious smell emanated from the tiny kitchen area, which was practically in the entrance way, and titillated my olfactory senses. Misha greeted me with a firm embrace then, holding me by the arms, gently pushed me away and took a prolonged look at my face.

“You are better looking than ever and you seem so rested. You must have had a marvelous time in the country,” Misha said as he winked an inquisitive eye, with a big smile on his face.

“Come on, Misha, don’t let your imagination go,” I said too quickly. “It was only a reunion of exiled Chileans living in Paris. I confess I really had a good time.”

“I can see that, my dear. A feeling of well-being radiates from the surface of your skin, or at least from the visible parts of your wonderful complexion. Come on, let’s remove that jacket. Your tie seems a little tight.”

Misha helped me out of my jacket, and then removed my tie. He unbuttoned the top of my shirt.

“Make yourself at home, Patricio. Look at the way I’m dressed.”

Misha was barely covered by a thin robe that seemed to be almost transparent, revealing an obviously naked body. The open part at the top exposed his hairy chest, and the sash around the waist of that extremely suggestive robe was gradually becoming undone as he moved around, making more and more obvious a certain anatomical part between his legs.

I couldn’t help but notice what was happening, and at the beginning it made me a bit nervous, but I soon calmed down with the warmth of our conversation.

“Misha, I’m anxious to know the outcome of your cousin’s affair. Please tell me everything.”

Ferdinand’s fate had taken a most unfavorable turn. The family of the American lady had arrived from the United States after hearing the tragic news, and immediately discovered that all of her valuable jewels were missing. In view of the mysterious circumstances of her death, they had decided to take legal action against Ferdinand, who was the last person to see her alive, and for whom they had always had a strong aversion, since they considered him to be a gigolo, using his princely title as a kind of bait to get by in life. Ferdinand was under police surveillance, and Misha himself had already been questioned concerning his cousin’s visit to his flat on the evening of the woman’s death.

“Misha, do you suppose that the police will question me also because I was here on the night your cousin came to tell you about

the death of the American lady?" I asked in a worried tone.

"I don't think so, but if that should happen, you must act natural and keep calm. Just state the truth and tell them that you are my friend and met Prince Rutianu for the first time in your life that evening. You must also add that you didn't understand a single word of our conversation because it was all spoken in a language totally foreign to you, and on top of this, you were in another room."

"Yes, you're right, but I hope that I will never be called for questioning. Just the thought makes me nervous."

Misha got up and, holding my chin gently with one of his powerful hands, gave me a warm kiss on the lips. Then he picked up my empty cocktail glass and walked toward his little kitchenette for refills, saying to me over his shoulder:

"You really don't have anything to worry about. If up to now you haven't been notified about a possible inquiry, I am convinced that the police will never contact you. What you need now is another glass of kir, my favorite drink, as well as my specialty, which I already know you like. Another specialty of mine, if I do say so, is the nicely spiced cassoulet here. Bits of duck, pork, beans—what more could anyone want?"

Misha returned with two glasses of that delectable mixture of Crème de Cassis and white wine, better known as a *kir vin blanc*.

"Let's go into the other room, Patricio, where I have the record player. We can spread out comfortably over my sofa-bed and listen to Edith Piaf. I know how much you like her."

I didn't have time to answer before one of Misha's strong arms pulled me up from my chair and he escorted me into the other room. When I sat down on the edge of the wide sofa, Misha lifted both of my legs onto the bed with a captivating smile. After putting on one of Piaf's records, he lay down at my side and whispered: "The cassoulet isn't ready yet. Do you mind? Are you very hungry?"

"No, not really."

Actually, I wasn't telling the truth. The heavenly aromas emanating from the kitchenette permeated Misha's apartment, and by now worked their effect on my stomach, but there was something else in the air that was extremely interesting and exciting.

I felt the warmth of something swelling in size next to my body. Gently and persistently the prince unbuttoned my shirt and took it off as he caressed my skin. While Misha unbuckled my belt, I closed my eyes, barely lifting my legs so that he could remove my trousers.

"Mon cher, you're so thin," Misha breathlessly whispered. "I'll have to remedy that by having you over for dinner more often. I've got a feeling that you don't eat enough, but your body is fabulous just the same, and your skin is like velvet when I touch it," he gasped. "*Je t'aime*, Patricio, and I have from the moment I first saw you. All I wanted to do was devote myself to you."

I felt flattered and in fact wanted to hear that Terence and Antonio did not figure much in his life, but more than anything at that moment, I felt an irresistible physical attraction for that strong, virile and sophisticated aristocrat, who conducted himself with such grace.

Neither of our two passionate bodies was conscious of the passage of time. Suddenly all we heard was the monotonous and repetitive sound of a needle on the spent record endlessly spinning.

Chapter XXVI

I often took long peaceful walks along the Seine, stopping at the stalls of the *bouquinistes*, where I would occasionally find undiscovered treasures hidden among the stacks of engravings and the like. The Left Bank was a place I could be alone with my thoughts, to contemplate without Jacques' influence, or any one else's for that matter. Even though it was a cold January day, I needed the escape to become introspective after all that had recently occurred. As I watched the river boats navigate the frigid waters, I realized how lucky I was to be alive. My life had taken me in so many directions in the year and a half since my arrival. I was fortunate to have met so many good friends and was anxious for what the future had in store for me.

My life shortly returned to normal. Grateful for the lack of inquiry about my country holiday, I returned to work with renewed vigor at the antique gallery. I enrolled at the Sorbonne for coursework in art history about the antiquities that continued to capture my imagination. Meanwhile, as the days passed, I suppressed my lingering fears about François Augaud, by telling myself that Augaud had more reason to fear me than vice versa.

Likewise, I resumed my activities with my Chilean friends. Shopping sorties with the countess were also renewed, interspersed here and there with various gatherings among my comrades, particularly Gloria and Elena.

Out of the blue, I received a letter from Alvaro in Venezuela, and rather than succumb to potent old memories, I answered my friend immediately with musings about the art and antiquities that I had devoted myself to learning about. Slyly, I also commented on my own circumstances: "Every genius, from whatever period in art history, differs only from the mass of humanity in that he

has found freedom to exercise that greatness. The greatness is omnipresent, in every man, even in children. What our civilization does, be it here in Europe or in South America, is to smother such greatness. Dignity, what I call dignity, in a human being is inevitably the result of an established order. Although I believe all fundamental principles of nature to be orderly, humanity needs a fine, sure freedom in which to express these principles. When they are expressed freely, we find grace, wisdom and even joy. If one cultivates fruit, for example, we allow the fruit to grow in its own way and do not expect to control an apple tree or a peach tree, nor do we expect them to function in the same way as they bear their unique fruits. Each is allowed its freedom and the result is a perfection of growth. The time must come when freedom extends to the artists, and perhaps to everyone in general to develop according to their inner nature. Because then the body acts as a channel for the expression of purpose, emotion, labor and thought. The truest sign of reason to me is freedom.” This lengthy letter allowed me to organize my thoughts on the subject. Upon re-reading it, I decided to type it in the typewriter I had purchased in Panama on my way to Europe, and made a carbon copy, possibly to share it with someone who would understand my sentiments. Antonio came immediately to mind.

It was only several hours later that I felt a pang of remorse: Jacques would also have been a good person to share my thoughts with.

My lack of action regarding Jacques manifested itself in a strange antidote. I found a pen and paper and wrote to my mother one more time. I had given up on learning about my father’s identity. The time had come to tell her about my change of profession, and I put into my own words the inspiration I had received from a book by the American artist Robert Henri, about the art spirit:

“There are moments in our lives when we see beyond the usual. For me, these are the moments of my greatest happiness. They are the times of our wisdom, if we allow ourselves to appreciate

them. Trying to recall these visions, these moments, is indeed hard and we need assistance. In this hope of recollection, the arts were invented. The arts assist me every day to seek greater knowledge, mother. I have decided to make a profession of my love and respect for the visual arts, as opposed to the scientific arts. It took a trip around the globe for me to see that this new direction is the proper choice for me, and I hope you understand.” I concluded the letter with several paragraphs about small incidents of my days, but felt that my message would not be lost. With some trepidation, I mailed what I vowed would be my final letter, and waited for my mother’s response.



When the meeting with Claire finally came, it was almost farcical. Throughout the evening, I wished only to get out of the situation and forget about this diabolical machination. Claire seemed as indifferent as I.

Her general appearance was rather plain and simple. She was of medium height, with very white skin and straight, blond hair. An extremely plain dress made her look totally washed out and uninteresting. She had not made the slightest effort to look even a little bit attractive. Her taciturn humor did not help either. Her face, a bit sad looking, was evasive and directed toward the floor more than in my direction, and seemed to reflect shyness or perhaps shame for what was transpiring.

Jacques and Jeanne made a great effort to brighten up the evening, but with no success whatsoever. As I could have predicted, they forced me into offering to accompany Claire to her home, in one of their cars with their driver. When I said, at her parents’ door, “I will call you,” I was utterly relieved to see the look on her face, which clearly said, “I have heard that before.”

As the driver headed toward my home, I could only think of how I longed for the form of commitment that Gloria and Elena shared. I had tired of my divided heart and felt strangely as if the

love of my life, whom I thought was Jacques, was perhaps a man whose face I had not seen. I thought of Misha, my rendezvous with whom were turning into habitual affairs, and of Antonio, with whom I shared all my random ideas and feelings. I felt that if I could merge these two beings, I would truly have my soul mate.

When the car stopped, I asked the driver to accompany me right to the door of the countess's home, just as I had requested of taxi drivers, and stay with me until I had opened the door to the apartment.

Jacques' driver looked at me in disbelief, as if he had not heard, forcing me to repeat the request, adding as an excuse that a short time ago I had encountered a suspicious individual inside the building on the stairs. Everything was so still that night. I did not hear even the slightest noise other than that of my own steps and those of the driver. Nonetheless, I did not feel foolish, just sad that my life in Paris had become even more complicated and peculiar.



In an effort to circulate more and widen my circles in Paris, I accepted a luncheon invitation from Alfonso, the stage designer. Antonio and I went together, even though we were not at all keen to befriend Alfonso. We both thought he was a great snob. On the day of the luncheon Antonio drove with me to Chez Nicole, a chic restaurant in the sixteenth arrondissement. Alfonso was waiting for us at the bar. He was elegantly dressed in a gray flannel suit, obviously British. When he spoke, the expressive movement of his hands, with their extremely elongated fingers, resembled the flapping of a bird's wings.

After we had briefly commented on our shared loss of Stefan, and the worries and joys of our other mutual friends, Alfonso, an egocentric creature, embarked on what we knew would be a long monologue. Speaking with great enthusiasm, he wagged on

about his next project designing pompous costumes for a grand masquerade ball to be held in the chateau of a prominent French family outside Paris, to which he and the Marquis and Marchioness of Pueblas were invited. Alfonso was always fascinated by any big social affair that warranted prominent magazine coverage.

When his dissertation was finished, he immediately launched into a new subject. He was doing well at selling the old masters paintings that he routinely bought at auction from the gallery Drouot, as well as from private individuals and reputable dealers.

"In fact," he droned, "the best market for selling the paintings is New York. I have created a select clientele there. But I must tell you that I am extremely upset. An important source for my buying has closed its doors."

"Oh, where?" I said with tepid interest.

"On the rue du Bac."

I felt my heart almost stop.

It took all of my courage to ask Alfonso for the name of that business.

"Why, François Augaud Antiques, of course!"

Antonio and I looked at each other without saying a thing.

Alfonso, apparently noticing the silence, asked, "Did you know of this business?"

Both Antonio and I denied any knowledge of François Augaud or his establishment, and Alfonso quickly steered his conversation along a new and equally uninteresting direction.

As soon as we had parted company and Antonio and I were inside the car, we exploded in a torrent of chatter, each wanting to be first to comment on the Alfonso-Augaud affair.

"Why would he close? That makes it all the more suspicious," Antonio said.

"Perhaps they threatened him too. They killed Madame Duclos."

Antonio raised his eyebrows and cocked his head forward, "Patricio, the fire could just as easily have been an accident."

“Antonio, how can you be so naïve? You know as well as I the Germans set the fire.”

We continued debating this subject all the way to central Paris and Antonio’s flat. Once settled on the comfortable couch, strewn with cushions, in a small sitting room next to the salon, we speculated on the possible implications.

“Could Alfonso have purposely initiated the subject of the paintings in order to observe our reaction?” I asked.

“There is always that possibility,” Antonio said, with his customary clinical detachment. “Alfonso might know more than he was telling, and may have purposely brought up the antique dealer’s name in the hope that either you or I would reveal our involvement to a fellow countryman.”

Was Alfonso knowingly involved with the illicit trade in valuable paintings that included François Augaud, or was he just another naïve buyer as I, myself, had been in the past? Could François Augaud have been cheating his partners by selling some of the paintings for his own benefit, and pretending later that they went astray during shipment to South America? If so, then he was probably eliminated by the Germans once they uncovered his scheme, or maybe he had time to flee before they caught him.

When the Alfonso topic exhausted itself, the conversation turned to Claire and my meeting her at Jacques’ home. Antonio was not at all surprised with the outcome of that stratagem, or my negative feelings. By now, Antonio was familiar with most of my idiosyncrasies, and knew very well that I was not the type who could fake my inner feelings, much less fraudulently involve myself in a relationship for ulterior motives.

“As I have said to you so many times in the past, Patricio, if you follow your true feelings, you will never be wrong.”

“I agree, Antonio, but what happens when you have real and critical misgivings about yourself, as well as doubts concerning matters that are really serious?”

“In that case you have no alternative but to think things through until all of your doubts are resolved.”

“That might be easy for you, but by nature I am so desperately slow to react and decide something firmly that sometimes it makes me sick. I guess what I need is a little push.”

“I’m sorry, Patricio, but I don’t agree with you,” Antonio said, playing devil’s advocate, as he often did, to get at all sides of a story. “In the first place, I am convinced that just unleashing your thoughts with someone you trust helps to clear things up. Then you and this person of trust can jointly analyze the details in an objective way, so that later you can apply the logistics to the facts by yourself. Most likely this simple exercise will open up several options for you, but, to repeat your own words, without anybody pushing you, or laying out a course of action for you.”

I nodded.

“And if you add to what I have already said a dash of time, you should end up with the birth of a decision. The time factor is important, but you should not abuse it either, Patricio. If I might express an opinion based on what you have already told me about you and your past, I would tend to agree that you do prolong things excessively.”

“Antonio, as usual, you’re right. You have a wonderful ability to reduce situations to their essence. Looking back on my life, I can see that incertitude has always been one of my biggest problems. However, I still cannot figure out whether my indecisiveness is alone the problem, or if it’s fear, or a mixture of both. Sometimes I believe that I also have a tendency to avoid confronting problems face to face, which perhaps constitutes cowardliness. I like to think that somebody or something will solve matters for me. Virtually the only time my reactions were fast was when my life was in danger.”

“Don’t torture yourself, Patricio. We all have our weaknesses, and we all make mistakes.”



The letter arrived in a thin envelope, with my mother’s clear,

impressive handwriting on its face. Louise had handed it to me, with no idea of the anxiety and heartache that I had been feeling because of my mother's continued silence.

"Would you like to have a cup of coffee with me?" the countess asked me, oblivious to my emotional turmoil.

"Certainly," I said, clutching the letter too tightly between my fingers. Louise chatted about some small events of the day, and I drank the interminable cup of coffee. I longed for a moment of privacy. Finally, Louise abruptly left the room, and I tore into the letter.

"Patricio, dear son," it began. The writing was lucid and measured, as though she might have recopied it. It betrayed no great emotion, but the words amazed me.

I am forced to confess to you your true origins, and I only wish that I could look you in the face as I tell you this. You are certainly old enough to understand, so I guess I am old enough to tell you without shame: the German nobleman visiting the family from time to time is a prince and your real father. He was married then, and still is: apart from you, he also has a daughter and another son. In our sporadic correspondence throughout the years, he always asks about you, and knowing now about my decision to reveal to you the truth, he has decided to acknowledge the fact that you are his son and would like to eventually meet you. Whether this recognition might follow some legal bond, I do not know, but I will leave that to you to pursue. Now, Patricio, the sad part: Heinrich has asked that you not contact him because of his familial situation, but rather he will try to find a propitious time in the future. I hope you can understand and forgive my past reticence; you know the fires of scandal blaze high here. So my dear son, you were correct in assuming that indeed your blood is royal, and I hope I have cleared up what must have

been a terrible mystery. I simply married the wrong man when I was at a tender age. The church, my family, this society all conspired to keep the marriage intact in spite of the fact that we did not share the same roof. Needless to say, it was never the rich relationship that I had with Heinrich. I think my love for Heinrich was the quiet river flowing below my skin that kept me calm. I am not explaining this well, but I hope that you can understand in your heart the strange ways of love and its inevitability. I will refrain from asking you about your own matters of the heart; I know you will tell me, son, when you are ready.

I put down the letter shaking, yet buoyed by a strange joy. My mother knew all about me. I could feel it, feel her understanding. She didn't have to question me, and I didn't have to tell. I felt as if I were shaking off old shackles as I read the letter.

About your decision to pursue the arts, Heinrich would have been so proud to know this. You might remember him as something of a naturalist, but he also painted marvelously. He gave me several of his paintings over time, and I will put them aside for you. I suppose you come by your temperament honestly. Good luck to you, Patricio, and continue to bring home your triumphs to your mother. I will always love you.

I closed my eyes so that the tears would not fall on the letter. I was so grateful to be understood, finally, by the woman who raised me.

Chapter XXVII

It took no great degree of perception for Jacques to realize that the Patricio-Claire plot was a total failure, since I never showed the slightest interest in again seeing this unfortunate young woman. Claire herself was still in love with the man responsible for her pregnancy, and she had decided to face the facts of her difficult situation with her family without even trying to get any further outside help, much less entertain the idea of an abortion.

Jacques was disenchanted with the failure of his plot and utterly upset when I definitely decided not to move out of the countess's home. I still resisted the idea of isolating myself in a nondescript abode, and the idea of spending the occasional evening in sordid hotels was not encouraging to a love relationship such as I had with Jacques.

Usually when Jacques and I got together our meetings were rather uneventful, but on the last few occasions Jacques seemed to be somewhat agitated and spoke nervously about being secretly "followed." I assured him that it was a case of a guilty conscience. This rekindled my own sense of culpability over the fate of Jeanne and Claudine.

On another occasion, as soon as we met, I smelled alcohol on Jacques' breath. He confessed that the unnerving sensation of being followed had disturbed him to the point of taking to the bottle more than usual.

"It feels so real, Patricio. I just don't know what to do about it," Jacques said.

This was an added burden for both of us; another challenge to be surmounted, a different monster to be confronted and another battle to be won. I was extremely worried that Jacques could turn aggressive again, and I was frankly alarmed concerning his sanity.

If this situation intensified and he became an alcoholic, he could turn into a person without allegiances to his work, to me or to his family. The scenario appeared grim.



On an unusually hot spring evening, I received an alarming and desperate telephone call from Jacques. He practically begged me to meet him in a café near my home. When I tried to find out why he was so upset, Jacques would only say that he didn't want to talk about it over the phone. I realized that something serious was happening to him and agreed to see him.

I was the first to arrive at the meeting place and picked out a table in the far corner, well out of earshot of the other patrons. When Jacques came through the door he seemed profoundly perturbed as he walked quickly to the table where I waited. His hair, which had always been so neat, looked poorly groomed, and his brow was furrowed in despair. His jaw was firmly set and his once sparkling, black eyes seemed to wander in an icy stare. There was a sadly distraught look on his face, almost as if he were in a daze. He was obviously exhausted, and what alarmed me most was the fact that he had visibly aged since our last encounter.

"I understand now what is happening," Jacques said. "About the people who are following me."

I was nearly certain that my lover was losing his mind. Jacques had spoken of having this feeling of being watched whenever he left his office in order to meet me. He felt as if someone were stalking him. He obsessed about it, blaming it all on our secret assignments in third-class hotels. With each passing encounter Jacques had become more and more obsessed by this alarming sensation of being followed, to the point that our future together was no longer the main topic of conversation. It seemed like a case of paranoia. The last time we had spoken, Jacques was convinced that even in the *métro* his tormentors were watching him, hidden behind newspapers that they pretended to read.

Seeing him in this state only served as further confirmation that Jacques was not just paranoid, but tottering on the edge of schizophrenia. The idea that he might become aggressive and violent frankly terrified me.

I called on my deepest feelings of love for Jacques to help him conquer this new demon invading his body and soul.

"You must tell me everything," I said, as calmly as I could. We ordered coffee and then Jacques slowly began to unravel the skein of his troubled mind.

"I'm sure that you think I am suffering a delirium of persecution, Patricio, but you're wrong. The sensation that someone has been pursuing me was not just in my head: I was followed!"

I was now more convinced than ever that Jacques was paranoid.

"This afternoon I was forced to deal with the worst reality ever to confront me in my life."

I took a deep breath. My pity was mingled with fear and a touch of aggravation.

"Jeanne has uncovered our secret relationship!"

"She what?" My eyes opened fully and my mouth fell open.

"Apparently she suspected for some time that I had homosexual tendencies. Her doubts grew then turned into certainties when she hired a private detective who confirmed her suspicions. She said to me that it had all been an ugly, blatant pretense, a horrid deception, and that she felt that she had been used for some kind of devious abnormal experiment."

I put my hands flat on the table between us as if to steady myself. "How did this all come to light, Jacques?"

Jacques explained that he had realized for some time that he was on the verge of a mental breakdown, and decided to discuss his fears about being followed with Jeanne while they were having lunch. His wife listened to what he said but showed no trace of surprise. Instead, she calmly continued eating and when she finally looked at him, her eyes penetrated him with an ice-cold stare.

Jacques had never before seen this defiant aspect in Jeanne's character. As if struck by lightning, he sensed that Jeanne was responsible for all of his woes. He had been attacked and, without doing battle, had lost, almost like the Roman gladiators whose fate, once defeated, depended on just one word: life or death. Jeanne prolonged his agony as long as possible without saying a word until Jacques felt that he had to say something just to break the spell.

He asked her if she had had him followed, and she admitted it, without remorse. In fact, she attacked him furiously for betraying her with me, scarring her psychologically and ruining her as a woman. Nor was that all she told him, Jacques said.

I froze. This was exactly what I feared might happen.

"Yes, Patricio, she told me that you had an affair with her behind my back, while I was away on my business trips," Jacques said with a deeply pained voice, "and to make things worse, she stressed the fact that you weren't loyal to anyone. She was almost violent when she said that you could perform with a female, but that she realized that that was not your predominant inclination, as it was not mine either. Although she thought you had an affair with her out of curiosity or pity, she said that just as you were disloyal to me with her, she was convinced that you have had affairs with other males during your relationship with me. She thinks of both of us as abominable and abnormal specimens that are not totally one thing or the other, and that we will never be able to have a true, full relationship with anybody."

I was appalled. I couldn't help but remember my sexcapades with Misha and Antonio. Perhaps Jeanne had had a detective follow me as well. It took some time until I could articulate.

"I don't even know what to say, Jacques, because there is no excuse for what I've done. I don't know what got into me. It was an impulse I couldn't stop. It was as if I gradually turned into a different person. Jeanne appeared so fragile and wounded to me. At first I was compassionate for her feelings, but later on I started dreaming of having a triangular relationship with both of

you, blending the three of us together. I simply could not choose just one; it was like being on a giddy height. I used to have wet dreams imagining sexual explosions of the three of us together, entering each other through all viable orifices. Sometimes when I awoke in the morning, I would lie in my bed looking at the ceiling, thinking and questioning myself about this most unexpected transformation. But I soon realized that it was an impossible situation that was eroding our own relationship. I realized that it is you whom I truly love.”

Jacques seemed to be in a stupor. He tried to suppress his hurt, but it was evident that his mind was in turmoil. He had the painful look of a Saint Sebastian being pierced by arrows, with an unusual opacity showing in his tormented eyes. I knew that my lover had listened intently to my words, but his whole being appeared absent. Suddenly his eyes became moist when he said:

“At this point there is so much destruction, Patricio, that life appears worthless to me. The fact is that I am a married man with a daughter whom I adore. How could I expect Jeanne, a young woman, to become celibate and suppress all of her most intimate needs and wants for the rest of her life when she had known better during the earlier years of our marriage, while I was fully granting myself all the pleasures that satisfied my inner feelings and inclinations? It was indeed easy for me to have my cake and eat it too, disregarding the disarray that surrounded me. Your situation is different, Patricio, without the heavy weight of the responsibilities of a legal union.”

I realized that what I had feared from the beginning of my relationship with Jacques was turning into reality. Jacques was crushed by a feeling of culpability, with the added burden of Jeanne having discovered our homosexual relationship.

He continued. “Jeanne was right when she said that I should never have married her, with my inclinations, and that I used her to satisfy my own ego. Now she wants to leave me. She wants a clean break. She will take Claudine with her—and she threatens to expose me if I object.”

I knew that the revelation of my own affair with her had combined with Jeanne's cruel intentions to leave Jacques in a sort of no man's land. Obviously Jacques felt unloved, unrespected and unneeded. Although I still claimed a deep attachment to him, Jacques probably wondered about the proportion of my newly discovered bisexuality. Was this new inclination going to last, and if so, for how long? Would the different proportions constantly shift and change throughout my life? What would my future be like?

"I don't have your inner strength, Patricio. I admire you for being courageous enough to do combat against established family and social concepts. You don't seem to care if those around you know that you are gay, but with me it's different. I couldn't face the world if everyone knew."

Jacques looked at me with a lonely and despondent face as he nervously rubbed his hands. Finally, I broke the silence.

"Jacques, if you had never met me, none of this would ever have happened."

Jacques disagreed. "It wouldn't be fair to think that way, Patricio. I alone am responsible for my actions and decisions. What finally happened was almost like a pressure cooker that blows up. Even though it was a terrible experience, I think it's a good thing that it happened."

I struggled to put words to my feelings. "I want you to know, Jacques, that the friendship that exists between us hasn't changed."

Jacques looked as if he would cry.

"Whenever you need to talk to me, Jacques, I'll be available to listen."

"Friendship?" There was a look of desperation in Jacques' eyes that I had never before seen. "But I still love you. You have been the only true part of my life that ever gave me any hope of finally finding the real me trapped inside. Now, my darling, is when I need you more than ever."

"Jacques, I also love you, but believe me when I say that I'm

more than willing to give you all of my friendship and moral support during the trying times you are going through, especially since I'm involved in your problems."

I turned away from Jacques' eyes for a moment, then looked into them deeply. "Why don't you make up your mind, Jacques? It appears as if destiny is opening the door for us to fully recapture our love as it was in the past, but better still: we could live together!"

Jacques' reaction to my words was one of deep doubt. I knew by the look on his face that he had liked the first part of my sentence, but the second only left him hopeless. It bothered me to see my tortured lover in that state. He became fidgety and nervous, as if he were extremely uncomfortable. When he called the waiter, I thought he was going to order another cup of coffee, but instead he asked for the check.

"I appreciate your words, Patricio, and I am willing to seriously consider what you have just said, but I feel that under the present circumstances, it's premature to undertake such a delicate matter."

Jacques' words offered me hope, but I felt depressed and deeply worried about what I guessed was Jacques' state of mind. I had desperately tried to lift my lover's spirits, but I was afraid I was not succeeding.

"I have to go, Patricio. It's late and tomorrow is another day."

As he got up from his chair he looked dazed and somewhat lost. I slowly stood up as I said, "You'll call me soon, won't you? You promise? I'll be anxious to find out how things are going for you, Jacques. I know everything will work itself out. You know that you can count on me not mentioning a word of this to anyone. I'm convinced that you will feel a lot better now. You needed to talk about it." I knew all about the therapeutic benefits of pouring out one's problems into receptive ears.

"Yes, Patricio, I promise that I'll call you," Jacques responded in a vague tone of voice. I saw a glint of forgiveness flicker across his face before we parted.



Early the next morning the countess knocked on my bedroom door to say that I had a telephone call. I thought that it was probably Jacques, but when I picked up the receiver I heard a woman's voice that I soon recognized. Jeanne!

I braced myself for the onslaught of verbal abuse that she would undoubtedly cover me with. Instead her voice faltered and I could barely hear her.

"Patricio, I'm afraid I have something sad to tell you. Jacques ..." There was a long pause. I waited for her to continue, without uttering a sound. "This morning I found Jacques dead."

Her voice sounded strangled. The anguish I felt at that moment was more than I could bear. It was as if I had suddenly been shaken by a violent earthquake. I sensed a thickening in my throat and began to shudder. I went from languor to amazement to horror. I felt so helpless. Along with alarm, I experienced a tingling in my extremities, as if my legs were going to collapse. It took all of my courage to gather up my wits and try to respond.

"How did it happen, Jeanne?"

"You had better come over here as soon as possible. I don't think it would be prudent to talk about this over the phone. Be at my house in an hour, but not before. I need time."

I decided not to ask any further questions on the telephone, but assured her I would come.

At first, all I could think about was last night's meeting with Jacques. However, the only truth of the whole matter was that Jacques was dead. All kinds of disheartening thoughts crossed my mind. How did he die? He must have had a severe heart attack in the middle of the night, or at least that was the only explanation for such a sudden death that I could come up with. Because of the violent confrontation with Jeanne, Jacques had become a veritable human wreck. The emotional strain could have been too much for him.

Instead of standing there by the phone speculating, I realized

after many minutes that I should be getting ready to go out. I hurriedly washed and dressed, and left the apartment to catch the *métro*. If I arrived too early I would walk around the block to fill in the time. The exercise and fresh air would help clear my mind and hopefully relax me.

I needed time to think, just as Jeanne did. From what Jacques had told me concerning his rather violent altercation with Jeanne, I suddenly feared that she might exact revenge for his untimely death. Yet the idea of finding out second-hand that Jacques had died, and never knowing exactly how or why, would have been too much to bear. At least Jeanne had informed me.

I strolled up and down the street until it was finally time to knock on the door of Jacques' house, which now seemed sinister and gloomy. My body cramped with apprehension. Suddenly my heart nearly came to a standstill when I saw two men in white uniforms remove from the house a stretcher on which I could clearly make out a human form, though it was covered with a sheet. They placed the stretcher in the ambulance parked in the driveway and it immediately pulled out into the street amid a wailing of sirens. It was soon out of sight.

The sound of the wailing siren fading in the distance left me a crumpled wreck. My heart was an open, bleeding wound that left me with an emptiness within. But I was a fighter by nature. A new anger developed, giving me sudden courage to walk toward that fateful door and ring the bell. I dreaded crossing the threshold into what certainly would be a world of misery and emptiness, to confront that temptress who had so well disguised her wanton desires under a cover of sweetness and kindness mixed with flirtatious allure and sensuality. At that moment, I felt as if this was the beginning of a diminished life for myself.

As I walked slowly toward the house, my soul was racked with anguish. My heart pounded and I shook all over. I had to stop for a second and try to get myself together. I felt that my dream of forging a life together had been a chimera, a utopia that Jacques and I had stubbornly concocted in our own minds, an idealism that

perhaps human nature would never allow to be. I finally reached the house and knocked. The door was opened by the butler who greeted me with his usual courtesy. I was ushered into a room I had never before seen. It was rather small, windowless and with a huge desk. With a grim face, the butler said that Madame would join me momentarily.

I didn't have to wait long. When Jeanne entered this small room, the first thing she did was to close the door tightly behind her, giving me the impression that I was about to be confronted with unpleasantness.

Jeanne languidly extended her hand, and I made the gesture of kissing. I immediately got the message loud and clear: "Don't you dare try to kiss me on the cheek. That belongs to the past."

Jeanne sat down imperiously at the large desk in the corner and requested I take a seat facing her, almost as if I were in a court of law being interrogated on the witness stand. Obviously, sitting in an elevated chair and looking at me over that monumental desk, she deliberately placed herself in a position above me.

"I'm sorry not to have calculated a bit better the timing in removing Jacques' body, which you undoubtedly must have witnessed. At the last minute the forensic doctor decided to have an autopsy done. Naturally, the paper work and telephone calls delayed things."

I nodded my head.

"Jeanne, before continuing our conversation I want you to know that last evening Jacques told me all about his confrontation with you."

I reasoned that bringing this matter to light was important. I wanted to make certain that Jeanne knew all of the facts before she related the details of Jacques' death. I was attempting to minimize my assigned role as the accused, weakening Jeanne's upper hand. This revelation visibly disturbed the new Jeanne, yet she reacted quickly, recovering that domineering attitude so foreign to me.

"Jacques didn't breakfast at home," she said, her voice level.

"I thought, of course, that he was trying to avoid a second confrontation about a divorce. I assumed he had gone to work early, but when I asked our driver when he had taken him to the office, he looked confused. He had not seen the master of the house yet, and was still awaiting instructions. It was already past ten."

Jeanne took a long sip from a glass of water, and I wished she would offer one to me.

"Claudine was already at school by then. Normally Jacques was an early riser." She smiled, unable to mask her pain. "That was the ostensible reason for separate bedrooms."

The situation was so unusual that Jeanne decided to go up to Jacques' room. She knocked on the door, thinking that perhaps he was still sleeping, but there was no sound. After knocking a second time with no answer, she decided to open the door: his bed hadn't been disturbed. The only thing that she noticed was the suit he had worn the day before, lying over a small couch. Not hearing a sound, Jeanne decided to check his dressing room, and when she saw he wasn't there, checked the bathroom. No trace whatsoever of Jacques. At this point she became concerned. Without letting on to the servants, she discreetly searched the entire house. It became evident that he was nowhere to be found unless, for some strange reason, he had decided to go up to the attic and rummage through his old papers.

"Perhaps he had something to hide?" Jeanne posed as a question.

I said nothing, but remembered the long, detailed letter from Jacques, outlining the life that awaited me in Paris, a letter that was typed and never signed.

"I removed my shoes and silently climbed the narrow stairway. When I opened the door at the top of the stairs, I was confronted by a horrible smell of sewage. I knew there were no pipes or bathrooms in that part of the structure. Something was wrong. My heart beat furiously as I picked my way among the scattered trunks and boxes. When I reached a clearing under the apex of

the house, I tripped on a wooden stepladder lying on the floor. When I looked up, I saw ...”

I shook my head.

“I saw the horrendous spectacle of Jacques’ naked body hanging from a rope. The sound of the ladder falling must have been muffled by several old blankets and quilts he had scattered about for that purpose. He apparently plotted every detail so that no one could come to his rescue.

“Although I don’t recall screaming, the servants tell me that the sound of my voice could be heard all over the house. The only thing that I recall is a feeling of wanting to scream.”

Jeanne paused a moment in her story to collect her thoughts, and looking at me straight in the face, continued.

“Jacques’ eyes were open wide with a strange sort of blank stare. Excrement ran down his legs and dripped onto the floor. But the thing that shocked me most was to see what appeared to be semen dripping from between his legs!”

At that point Jeanne suddenly looked away from me. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she looked utterly confused.

“Did you hear me, Patricio? He died ejaculating! Although you probably had better luck with him than I did, the bastard couldn’t even get it up for me while he was alive, much less have an orgasm.”

I sat stunned. I had heard of such things happening to people dying from hanging.

Was the person sitting in front of me that same, sweet, innocent Jeanne? Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that she had the capacity for such candor. I felt paralyzed and attacked, but unable to say a word. Does she expect me to answer? I wondered. At that point I was almost relieved when Jeanne broke the silence:

“Don’t try to deny your diabolical role in the destruction of my family, Patricio, because I won’t allow it! Knowing that you were getting involved with a married man who had not only a wife but also a little daughter, your conscience, if you have one, should

have told you to step aside.”

Jeanne went on fiercely attacking me. She almost snarled as those awful things exploded in bursts of irrationality from her mouth. Her voice sounded inhuman. I could hardly believe I had at one time felt passion for this woman. She now appeared like Nemesis, the Greek goddess of revenge, punishing me without mercy, trying to destroy me. Finally I could contain myself no longer. I said, “Jeanne, your arrogance is totally new to me. Who do you think you are to make a judgment and condemn me without evidence, without a jury or right to appeal? Take a closer look at your own actions. Under the present circumstances I don’t expect you to understand. I also do not believe that you are totally free from guilt in this complicated and unfortunate case, but that is your problem. I have my own to deal with.”

We looked at each other with contempt. Perhaps Jeanne would never be able to cross that threshold that would lead her to a deeper knowledge of human nature. In the present situation she could only see herself as the victim, without any concern for what had been happening to Jacques’ psychic constitution. Apparently, that sweet facade and timid exterior were just an iron shield covering up her real dominant and egotistical character.

Jeanne stood up and dismissed me curtly, like a judge overruling arguments in a court of law. I felt a shudder of revulsion go through my body. I got up from the accused’s chair and stepped back. Stunned and in a daze, I edged toward the door, my face taut. Then I took a deep breath, making an effort to talk:

“In any case, Jeanne, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk things over.”

I heard the flat, deadened tone of my voice.

Jeanne glared at me with hate in her eyes and, in a condescending manner, said, “When all the funeral arrangements have been made, I shall have the civility to notify you when and where the interment will take place. I’ll be in touch.”

As I left, I realized that neither of us had solved our problems concerning Jacques’ death. I finally muttered a cold goodbye. My

voice sounded thin. More than sorrowful, I felt angry.

I realized that Jeanne's main concern at the moment was to eradicate any feelings of her own blame for having nearly driven Jacques mad by hiring a detective to follow him, then crudely confronting him with her own problems, and finally with her demand for a divorce whereby she would have total custody of their daughter. It was clear that Jeanne was attempting to placate her sense of remorse by placing the blame for this squarely upon me.

At the same time, I was left with the feeling that my grief for Jacques would always be there, that pain would be deep inside me forever. Jacques had wanted a dream world filled with clandestine romance that would remain under cover for the rest of our lives, concealing that treasured, albeit secret and confined freedom from the rest of the world. I feared the moments when I would run into an interesting antique shop where we had browsed together, or the outings of the three of us to nice restaurants, or a theater where we had enjoyed a play. I would have to avoid those places, living defensively, prepared to cross the street to elude those unexpected painful reminders of the man I so intensely loved.

My move to France had concluded in an almost Machiavellian triangle that had left a profound disillusionment on my spirit, which not so long ago had been charged with romanticism and naïveté.



A few days later Jeanne called. "The funeral will be the second of April, Wednesday at two o'clock," she informed me and hung up the phone saying nothing more. The service, by invitation only, was for family and close friends only. The interment took place in the family crypt at the Père Lachaise Cemetery.

Jeanne was dressed in rigorous black. Her head was covered by a wide brimmed hat. A veil hung over her colorless face. I

could not bring myself to say a word to Jeanne, nor did she seek me out. Since Jacques died by his own hand, the church wouldn't allow a religious service. This brought to my mind another sad memory, when my Hungarian friend Stefan died. On this somber day, a member of Jacques' company gave a touching but short eulogy. I noticed the absence of Jacques' daughter, Claudine. They obviously decided to spare the young girl the sadness of witnessing the burial of her beloved father, or perhaps Jeanne might have thought she would break down. Besides the tenacious widow, the only other person I knew was Hubert, but he remained at a distance. When we glanced at each other, Hubert coldly nodded to me. I assumed that, besides associates from Jacques' company, surely members of his and her family were also among those present, as I felt some of the people looked at me with glances that were obviously inquiring in nature.

Exhausted and numb, I remembered nothing of the platitudes uttered that day. That morning closed the most important chapter of my life in Paris.

Chapter XXVIII

A few days after Jacques' burial, my despair brought me to the point of dreading the night, like a child fearing darkness. Sometimes the memory of happy moments revived Jacques' tenderness and protection, shielding me with his arms from the hardships of the outside world as if nothing evil could ever get past his strong protective body. Many sleepless nights plagued my tormented soul until, exhausted, I would fall into the world of dreams, some horrifying, like Jeanne's vivid description of finding Jacques' body, or her tragic and anguished call announcing his death. Other times I would dream of the wailing ambulance carrying Jacques' inert, lifeless remains. But my worst dreams were those when I would find Jacques again alive, and I would be overwhelmed with happiness, but unfortunately there was always the awakening, when the torture of missing him would reappear again.

After one of those excruciatingly painful days, as if directed by a strange radar, I left my abode and gravitated toward Antonio's home.

I knocked on the door and waited. As the seconds passed, I fell into a stupor, refusing to reflect on Jacques' death, thinking of nothing, feeling dead myself.

I looked at the quiet door and wondered if I had knocked. I was ready to knock again, but Antonio opened the door and welcomed me in. Misha was there, wearing Antonio's robe.

"I'll come some other time," I stammered.

"We are all friends here," Antonio said. "Come in."

Misha raised his chin, refusing to appear embarrassed. "Patricio, you look down, my friend."

I looked from one man to the other. I knew then that I would

have to save the sad story of Jacques for Gloria and Elena. Now was not the time. I could not find words with the proper weight. I felt useless and weary and I sat down.

"How are you, Misha?" I asked. I was surprised that for the first time I did not feel desire for Misha. It had always been immediate and strong.

"You heard what happened to my cousin?"

"Tell me."

Antonio shook his head, and I knew the news would not be good. I felt myself hardening from the inside to the bad news of the world around me. I did not want to become hardened, but I had no choice. It had been happening, and now it was done.

Ferdinand had been found guilty of involuntary manslaughter and given a sentence of twenty years, which his court-appointed attorney managed to have reduced to ten.

"No doubt, this scandal will extend beyond Paris," Misha said.

"Prince Rutianu has friends and relatives all over the Continent," Antonio said. "He'll be fine."

"Antonio was cheering me up," Misha said.

"He does that well," I said and stood back up, surprising myself with this simple action. "I leave you to your sympathies."

"Don't go, Patricio," Antonio said. "You seem out of sorts. What's wrong?"

I immediately saw Jacques' body, hanging from a cord in a cold attic. The image did not particularly move me; I was completely numb. Something else was wrong, something that extended beyond the sorry tale of Jacques and our aborted love, beyond my faithless infatuation with Misha, my confessions to Antonio, my other friends, my own circumstances in this city.

"I'm not sure that anything is wrong now," I said, surprised at my own lightness, this strange optimism from nowhere.

I lacked the vocabulary to confide in anybody my massive sorrow and grief after Jacques' suicide. I remembered a priest's invocation at a mass burial of the many victims of a major

earthquake in Southern Chile: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" I felt that invocation described my state of mind as well as my gloves conformed to my hands and my shoes fitted my feet. Also, I couldn't help but remember the tragedy undergone by my two lesbian Chilean girl friends when they were victimized and pushed out of the lives of their own parents. I felt sorry, too, for the gay friends I had left in Chile behind that cold wall of misunderstanding.



Later, after I had eventually confided in Antonio and my two Chilean girl friends about my grief, I often met Gloria and Elena at the Parc du Champ-de-Mars, where the two girls spent many afternoons. Seated on a bench, we would talk for hours about our lives in Paris, and reminisce about the past in Chile.

I mentioned a possible visit to the United States. Mark and John were aggressive with their invitations, almost demanding a positive reply.

"A trip to the United States would almost be a relief for me," I said. "My two years in Paris have been thrilling but trying."

During my pleasant conversations with the women, with my usual prudence, I never talked about the extremely dangerous experience I went through at the home of Madame Duclos, although I longed to share it with those who had known me for so long.

The women murmured their approval.

"Will you go home again?" Gloria asked.

"I might go to Santiago, but there is something I guess I must confess: there's a chance that I will see Alvaro again."

Gloria and Elena, who had known Alvaro about as long as they had known me, tried to take the news pleasantly, but it was clear they were worried.

"Alvaro will always be the same, Patricio," said Gloria emphatically. "Don't expect him ever to change."

I listened patiently. There was something pushing me away from my newly adopted city, and I could not discern what it was. Surely it was not just the misfortune of Jacques' death, added to my blundering into the Duclos' residence at precisely the wrong moment. Perhaps I was not now giving the complete commitment and interest that a timeless city like Paris demands of its visitors. I fell deeply and silently into my own thoughts as Gloria swept into a description of a shopping expedition she had allowed herself.

In Paris, Alvaro's memory had lain dormant, like a dream tucked away in a drawer. The drawer was to remain unopened indefinitely, considering the colossal territorial distance, besides the differences in character, in concepts of love and friendship, and in outlook on life that appeared difficult to change. However, one grim morning after bathing and before dressing, I looked at my naked body in the mirror to see if any trace of Alvaro's past caresses remained on my tormented flesh. Could unfulfilled desires for my former lover still be latent? After a while, I realized that my feelings for Alvaro had been dormant inside me, otherwise I wouldn't have even thought of him. I soon perceived that I had reduced and confined those feelings, pushing them into a tiny box that I had so hermetically closed and locked that it appeared as if I had forgotten where the key was. I had felt as if my first lover had died, and perhaps one sentimental day in the far future would take me to his grave to place a few dried flowers in memory of the past. But now I began to wonder whether my truncated, unfinished relationship with Alvaro could ever be rekindled. Alvaro's negative traits seemed to have faded away a great deal in my mind.

At my next meeting with Antonio, I tried to rationalize my latest thoughts, attempting to convince myself that my relationship with Jacques could never have succeeded.

"Perhaps I was not aware, Antonio, that down deep there was a gradual process of deterioration in my relationship with Jacques. The initial doubt arose when I first met his wife and daughter. It wasn't long after that meeting when I realized that

it would be extremely difficult for me to live with the idea of stealing a man from the love and devotion of two human beings who seemed to worship the ground he walked on. Needless to say, discovering that Jeanne was in the hands of a psychiatrist made matters worse for me, but the straw that broke the camel's back was Jacques' idea of having me marry Claire, which would have been a complete charade, aimed at material benefits and Jacques' social purposes."

"Bravo, Patricio. You're not doing so badly," Antonio said.

"My deteriorating relationship with Jacques placed me in an awkward position. You know that the primary reason for my trip to France was Jacques, but it wasn't a totally unselfish or quick decision on my part either. Anyone who knows me well could not doubt for a moment that I have a true affinity for European culture, and especially France. I always wanted to see Paris. It was thrilling to have the option of establishing myself here in a permanent way. Jacques opened the doors of possibility. However, my present situation seems to negate the main objective for coming to Europe in the first place."

"How is that?" Antonio said, a bit anxious. He didn't seem to like the idea of my leaving Paris.

"I came to France prepared financially for about two years. The end of the second year is approaching. I will have no other alternative but to return to Chile."

I withheld any information about the fund Jacques had created for me in Switzerland. Although the amount was not substantial at that time, the purpose was to let it grow rather than reduce its present value.

"Chile," Antonio repeated, knowing all the good and the bad that that simple word held for me.

"That terrifies me, Antonio. After having had a taste of Europe, I don't think I could survive living in a system that doesn't allow me to move freely as I do here in France."

"I fully understand you, Patricio, since your case is somewhat similar to my own of some years ago, with the exception that my

financial situation was more favorable than yours. Don't forget that I also immigrated to France. Fortunately, you have several months ahead to find a way that will allow you to remain here, and I have every confidence that you will be capable of making a future for yourself here. Even though I realize that you probably can't say for sure right now, I'm curious to know whether you have any plan of action in mind to help resolve your situation? Maybe even a vague idea?"

"Yes, but very vague. First of all, let me tell you that, although reluctantly, I wrote to the dean of the university where I graduated. I've always had an excellent rapport with him, and he appears to be rather fond of me. I told him, untruthfully, that I wanted to explore the world within my professional training and asked for his ideas and thoughts. His answer, which I received just a few days ago, involves scientific research and development in the United States. He said that he has been corresponding for years with a professor at the University of Illinois in Chicago. When my dean was young, he did extensive clinical training in Chicago with the American professor in the field of pediatrics, which is his specialty, as well as mine. Since then they have maintained a cordial friendship, and my dean has offered me a letter of introduction to this world-renowned specialist, should I be interested."

"Well, Patricio, I can see that all of this looks promising, and it could be the start of a new direction in your life. How do you feel about it?"

"Frankly, the idea of going to the United States has never before entered my mind. Besides, right now I'm involved in a situation where I have to weigh all the possibilities. I don't want to abandon this life working with art that I have fought so hard to gain. It's funny, but I feel that I landed on my feet here in Paris, and now I have received a priceless education in antiquities. I don't think I will have to give it up, even if I do investigate this scientific opportunity. On the other hand, by a strange coincidence, Mark and John, the two Americans I met here, live in Chicago, and every time they telephone, which is often, they insist that I visit

them over there. I just don't know."

"What a fascinating coincidence, Patricio. It almost seems like destiny, doesn't it?"

"And then, there is something else I haven't told you. I wrote to Alvaro in Venezuela. You probably won't approve of my having done this, especially in view of everything I told you about my past relationship with him, but I was tempted and couldn't help myself. Who knows, maybe he has matured by now, and changed his lifestyle under the influence of his American brother-in-law."

"Have you heard from him?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I got a much faster reply than expected. His letter was full of love and enthusiasm, and he desperately wants me to visit him in Caracas."

"Are you willing to do that, Patricio?"

"Right now, to tell the truth, I don't know. I need more time to sort out these possible avenues that seem to be opening up for me."

Even though I knew that Antonio had a great predilection for me, this was not to be a factor in inducing me to choose any of the various opportunities before me. Antonio assured me firmly that each individual had to carve his own destiny without outside influences of any sort.

For me, Paris had become a harsh mistress.

Chapter XXIX

I still had some money left to defray the cost of going to America, just enough for the transition period. I refused to let myself worry or think ahead too far. I always had the possibility of a paid position with the American professor in Chicago to fall back upon, but I knew in my bones that it would be my last resort; otherwise I would be forced to dip into my trust fund in Switzerland.

I wrote a simple note describing my travel plans to Mark and John, who launched into a frenzy of plans for my arrival. They emphasized that I would be a very welcome houseguest and that I could stay with them as long as I wished.

I inquired at various shipping companies about sailing schedules from French ports to New York. I settled upon the *Queen Mary*, one of the largest passenger ships in the world, which, after sailing out of England, collected travelers at the French port of Cherbourg and journeyed west to the New World—an apt description for me, as I had grown weary with the sorrows I found in the Old World.

Alvaro's friendship, at the most auspicious moment, came through. I had hinted in a letter of a US trip on the *Queen Mary*. Alvaro insisted on waiting for me in New York so that we could spend a few days together. He was going to take a week's holiday from work. I wrote back expressing doubts about our meeting again. In a typical explosion of generosity, Alvaro sent me an open-date ticket on the *Queen Mary*.

I protested, but Alvaro explained that his financial situation had improved substantially over the long lapse since he had come to Caracas. He genuinely wanted to reciprocate my numerous past gestures of generosity.

I accepted the ticket, rationalizing that indeed Alvaro owed me some debt of gratitude. The exact dates to coincide with Alvaro's arrival in New York were soon established. Alvaro wrote saying he would fly from Caracas a day earlier to meet me on the wharf.

Likewise, I wrote and asked my sister to forward to New York the contents of my storage space in Santiago. I desperately wanted to regain some articles from my former life, and set up a new and permanent home with a sense of my own history. I needed some of my own furniture and cherished art works to ground myself in a city I had never seen or dreamed about.

I also needed the oil portrait of my mother to remind myself from whence I came. Yet as much as I missed my mother, I was unwilling to make the trip home to Santiago to see her. I felt I still needed time to establish myself, more time now that I had decided to uproot myself and settle in North America. I wanted to triumph in the United States and share my victory with my family, nothing less than this. I had already achieved an understanding with my mother that surpassed any I had expected during her lifetime, and nothing could jeopardize that.

Although Chicago held promise for me, I made myself a glorious vow. I would settle in New York. I arrived at the decision when I considered how I could continue to learn about the arts in New York, a city founded on a public love of the arts, with world-class museums and galleries to suit every taste. No other city made sense.

The decision was not so difficult, after the inspiration from all of Antonio's lectures about being true to one's own nature. On reflection, I was certain that Antonio's wisdom about making decisions and handling affairs of the heart was one of the most valuable gifts I had received in Paris. Indeed, I knew it was one of the most valuable things I would receive in my entire life.

Despite a lack of contacts in New York, short of a few antiquarians whom John and Mark knew well, I felt at peace with the decision, sight unseen, to make New York my home. There was no rational explanation for this, nor did I seek one. I simply felt

in my spirit a sense that New York held much more opportunity than did Chicago.

Nothing would change my mind, I told myself firmly, not Alvaro, and certainly not John and Mark. My only obstacle, as always, was an inward battle between my desire of wanting to honor others' wishes, and the one who craved a new life of work in a gallery, surrounded by works that evoked history as much as they radiated beauty. This feeling, shaped by the confusions and seduction of ancient Paris, would win.



Misha took one of my hands and kissed it tenderly. I was deeply moved by this delicate and emotional gesture that the prince had never before shown me. I didn't think I could confide in Misha in the same manner I confided in Antonio. At one point, Misha said, "You look so gaunt and desolate. You need to be fed with both food and love. *Je t'aime*." Then he said with an expression of profound sadness. "I shall miss you very much. Are you sure that you cannot find something here in Paris that would let you stay?"

Misha made room for me on his sofa bed, and patted it so that I would sit beside him.

"No, I don't think so, Misha. Besides, the dice have already been thrown. My destiny takes me to North America. It's rather strange to recall now that when my plans were laid out before I left Chile, I was convinced that I was going to settle permanently here in France. In Chile, a sorceress predicted that my final destination was going to be in a part of the world that did not fit the description of Paris. At the time I thought she had only erred on that particular point, but now it looks as if she was right." I searched Misha's eyes for understanding.

"Are you asking if I believe in prophets and the possibility of breaking through the barrier of the future?"

"Do you?" I sat down beside Misha and leaned on his arm, and

put my head on his shoulder.

“Frankly, I have never been exposed to such things. Maybe through a few gypsies, yes, but I never took any of it seriously.”

“I didn’t mean gypsies, Misha.” I searched for his eyes and found them smiling. “They do everything for money. But I believe that there are human beings truly capable of developing a special sense based on the theory that the past, the present and the future are all in the universe at once, without being measured in time the way we humans know it.” I shook my head but thought of dear old Carlos, who had perpetuated such theories, Doctor Carlos Costa back in Chile, the only one who urged me toward France.

“The problem is,” I continued, “that there are very few people in the world who are interested in this subject to the point of dedicating themselves seriously until actual results are reached. I personally have heard about murderers being discovered thanks to consultations with psychics.”

“Patricio, be careful about allowing your fantasy to go unchecked.” Misha patted my knee and left his hand there.

“No, Misha, this is a true thing. It’s called extrasensory perception. Actually, many people experience common non-verbal perceptions like love, sympathy or antipathy and hate. They can be triggered just by looking into each other’s eyes, or observing gestures, mannerisms, or facial expressions.”

“What you are telling me sounds fascinating, Patricio.”

“But there’s more, Misha. Perhaps communicating without language, the ability to project feelings or even images directly from one brain to another, could be a regression to a primitive stage, when language did not yet exist. This ability could have remained dormant, but with persistent, gradual and time-consuming exercises over a long period of time, our present day homo sapiens could revive not only telepathy, but also the ability to detect, even during sleep, things beyond our normal senses.”

“Patricio, you have me totally floored by your knowledge of things. You are brilliant.”

“Not really, my dear friend, you are very kind. At any rate,

Misha, I am impressed with this big turn in my life. I'm not ending up in France. So what will be the next chapter of my life?"

"I think you are getting carried away by the influence of the Latin American environment in which you grew up, but I cannot blame you for that. I myself have already acquired many French habits."

"I could go on about things that are much worse." I laughed. I fell backward on the bed and looked up at the ceiling, feeling free. "Our household servants always warned me not to walk under a ladder because it will bring bad luck."

"But Patricio, those beliefs are no more than barbaric ignorance."

"Wait, I also remember other superstitions that are more positive. Leave a clean bath towel over a windowsill when there is a full moon. It becomes impregnated with the moon's rays. On the following morning, dry yourself with that towel after bathing. Your body will become impregnated with all kinds of beneficial blessings."

Misha lay back next to me, and I reached for him.

"Or when you see the new moon for the first time, without taking your eyes from it, reach for a coin, and show it to the new moon while bowing nine times without once looking away. This guarantees that you will soon be blessed with a great deal of material wealth. Also, if you see a falling star, you're supposed to make a fast wish. You can't tell anyone else."

I pondered my new life in the unknown port of New York. Misha's hand became insistent upon distracting me and I gratefully traded that reverie for other sensations.



Gloria and Elena organized a farewell party for me. They asked me for names, and naturally, I placed Antonio and the prince at the top of the roll. Gloria and Elena suggested that they include the funny Françoise Colin, and Bouba, the young Bulgarian, two

women who I knew adored me. The countess sent along a gift, but did not attend herself, knowing that she would have the luxury of bidding farewell to her surrogate son in the privacy of her home.

All of the guests had small presents for me, forget-me-not souvenirs of themselves and our lives together in Paris. The contents of the small packages from Antonio and Misha stood out because of their impeccable taste.

Antonio's gift was an impressive pair of gold cufflinks, each bearing a small diamond in the center. Misha's gift was a sober but elegant gold tiepin with a pearl at the top. This sumptuous adornment appeared to be an old piece of jewelry, which made me think that perhaps the prince had given me something personal.

I was moved, and, in a rare moment for both of us, we embraced strongly in the midst of company.

When I got back home, I touched my own tiepin kept in a drawer, the piece given to me by Jacques upon my arrival to England. I surreptitiously fingered that pearl, encircled as it was by diamonds, much as Jacques had tried to keep me encircled from the call of the world beyond ourselves. I removed the tiepin Misha had given me, and placed it inside the same box where the other one rested unused since Jacques' death.



On the morning of my departure, the countess came into the kitchen where I was preparing toast for breakfast and shadowed me around the room like a lost soul. "Let me make coffee for you," Louise said. "I will miss seeing your handsome face to brighten my days when you are gone." Her eyes glistened with the formation of tears. We sat down, ate, and revisited the happy times we had spent together, just as we had done the night before during her private farewell dinner in my honor. We cried, laughed, and cried some more. Louise had accepted me into her home and been like a mother to me, and I a son to her. I knew how desperately I would miss her friendship. We promised each other we would

write often.

A taxi filled with my luggage screeched to a halt in front of the station where I boarded the train to Cherbourg.

Gloria and Elena were waiting. When they saw me, Gloria and the normally reserved Elena lunged for me and excitedly kissed me. Françoise and Bouba arrived precisely at the moment I was emotionally hugging my faithful Chilean girlfriends.

Once installed inside the train compartment, I chatted through the open window with the four women. They stopped talking when two familiar figures rushed toward the train.

Antonio had picked up Misha in his car, and both ran to the spot where the four ladies stood. This indeed was a surprise, since neither of these gentlemen seemed to be the type who would join a farewell gathering in a train station. These affairs were, at best, sentimental in nature, and neither of my male friends succumbed to such emotions in public.

The arrival of these two close friends altered my mood, bringing a genuine sadness to the proceedings.

The men had arrived just in time to see me once more; the sound of the train whistle echoed all over the station, and soon the train started moving slowly. I did not need to embrace these men—all had been spoken, all feelings were well known and mutual. Before long their faces faded into shadows.

Still, I made an effort to leave my friends with the memory of a smiling face, but I feared that in reality it had turned into an ambiguous, theatrical mask, a combination of pain and feigned happiness.

Once I lost sight of my friends, I closed the window and collapsed heavily and sadly into my seat, leaning my head against the window. The sky was overcast and threatening rain, unusually cool for a June day. I was invaded by a severe anxiety, with a burning sensation in my throat. It was indeed hard to leave a contentment I had never known before and to wade through the uncertainties of a future ahead of me. Certainly there was a wealth of experience and discovery I would never have achieved

in my country of birth, and a dash of self-confidence had come to me from living by my wits, while enduring and surviving misfortune and adversity. Although the financial arrangement Jacques had provided for me in Switzerland would be of help, I would rather let it grow and draw only what would be needed for a rainy day. For the time being, I thought I should look for means of sustaining myself without touching that treasure trove, unless I descended into a deep hole. Money wasn't my greatest concern. The fact that my relationship with Jacques ended in failure, with the aggravating episode of a tragic circumstance, was actually the real weight I would have to bear. The type of love I always dreamed of appeared now more than ever as a foolish, unreachable and childish chimera.

My eyes welled with tears. I felt the warm tears running down my cheeks, but I could not stop myself and began sobbing. I trembled all over, and suddenly a deep solitude invaded me with a feeling of uncertainty. On a deeper level, I was becoming totally disenchanted with life, and the thought of following Jacques' path grew stronger in my heart. I reached for the two small envelopes containing the poison in a secret compartment of my hand luggage. They had been there ever since the day I left Chile. It would take just a second to ingest the powder. A quick second, a sip of water. I tightly held them in my fist. For a few minutes, I felt between life and death, but suddenly an incredible force of survival burst within my chest and spread all over my body. I remembered the Roman poet Virgil and his famous "Death plucked my ear and said, Live, I am coming." After all, I didn't have the responsibilities that Jacques had to bear, and although I was now alone, I was young enough to open up a new world for myself.

I exited my compartment and searched for the men's water closet. I found it empty and bolted the door from the inside. Working quickly, I stuffed the envelopes into the toilet and poured water over them, then banished them to impotence.



When I arrived at Cherbourg, the sky was covered with low, ominous grey clouds and the sea was extremely rough. A strong wind stirred up huge waves that caused a frightening roar, as if Poseidon again fought the giant Polybutes to conquer from Zeus the kingdom of the oceans. It was an inspiration for me to prepare for my own fight for survival.

When I reached the wharf, a middle-aged woman toddled by on the arm of a younger man, perhaps her son, perhaps not. Her eyes shone with a radiance that suggested she was in love. I slapped myself on the cheek gently and stared off into the water, breathing deeply, opening my chest, my heart, to life's lightness. I opened my handbag and fingered the tiepin that Jacques had given to me, a tribute to the man that had brought me this far. Jacques gone, Paris gone.

Inside the Queen Mary, I could not feel the turbulence of the sea. At first, I suffered from claustrophobia, which made me feel as if I were trapped in a floating cage. It did me no good to reflect that everyone carried some weight of tragedy, and that most people somehow managed to forget things and to laugh again at stupid jokes, to enjoy the sun as it set, to catch the first warm breeze of the season on a bare head. It hardly seemed possible. I wanted to look ahead, but the ocean appeared so cold and gray.

As the ship pulled out of the port, I felt like Hope trapped in Pandora's jar, to remain among men on earth as their sad lot, a derisory compensation for our ills. Little by little, the coast of France disappeared as I sailed into the mystery of my future.

When the purser took me to my cabin, I noticed two beds. Upon questioning, the purser said that since the ship was not at full capacity with passengers, I may have been assigned a double cabin because the few single ones were already taken when I made my reservation. He assured me that he would inquire at the head purser's office.

Just at the moment when I was arranging my luggage over one of the beds, there was a knock at the door. Thinking that

the purser was being extremely efficient at sorting out the double cabin mystery, I asked him to come in. When the door opened, I thought I was seeing a vision.

“Alvaro!”

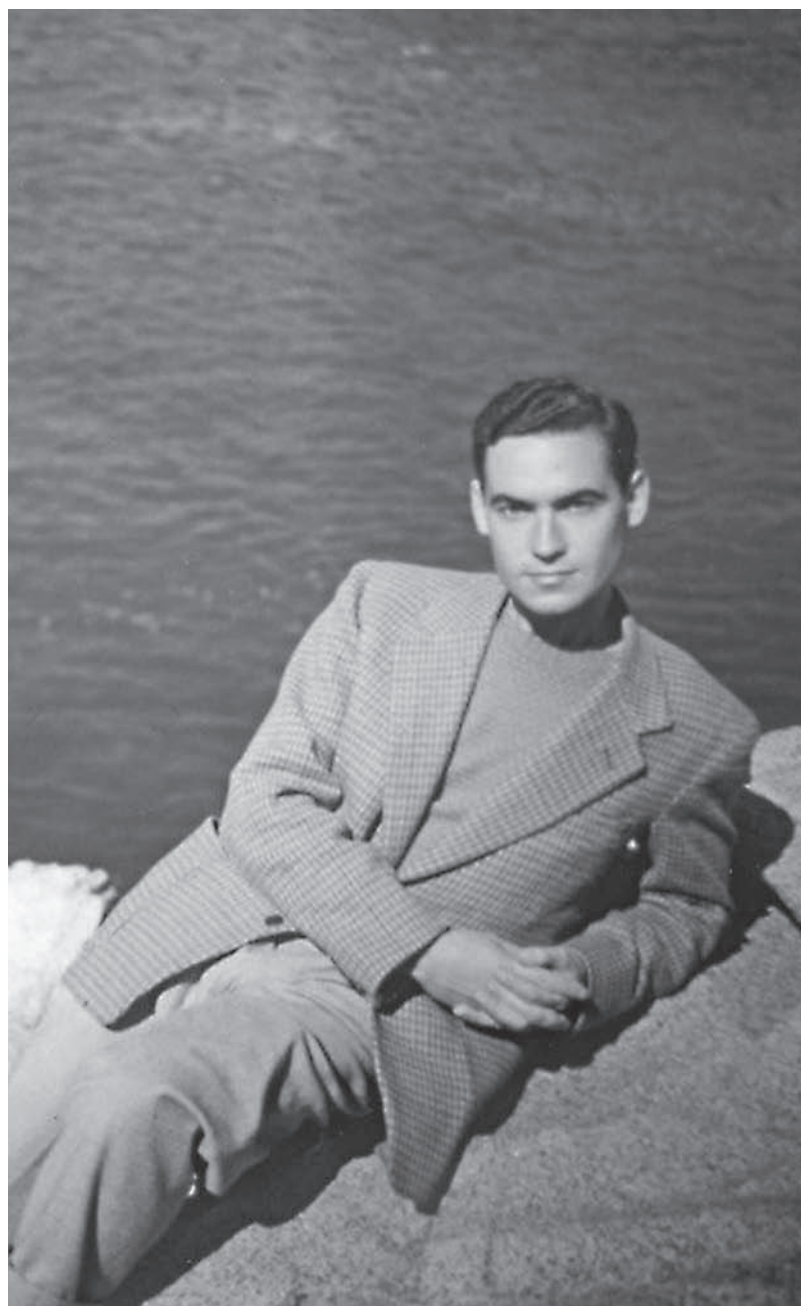
I peered at him in disbelief. My face must have looked expressionless at first due to the shock, then I stood up with a broad smile. I was too astounded to speak. Alvaro made one of his characteristic fast approaches and grabbed me, surrounding me with loving arms; only a profound sigh emerged from my lips. I was overwhelmed by this incredible surprise. In Alvaro’s arms, it was as if an eternity had elapsed. Alvaro then placed his fingers over my lips in a gesture enforcing silence for a moment. We held each other for a long time, our throats choked with emotion. Language did not appear necessary during those moments of apparent ecstasy.

Obviously, Alvaro didn’t have the patience to wait for me in New York, and typically wanted to surprise me with a rather dramatic coup. I felt a wave of inebriating dizziness rushing to my head, as if we were swaying with the slow cadence of the waves while the ship increased speed as it sailed away from the port.

Through the porthole, we watched silently as the coast of France faded into the horizon. I turned and gazed deeply into Alvaro’s mysterious eyes, as if seeking answers to unknown questions, content in the moment, hopeful for the future.



The Reina del Mar, the ship the author sailed on from Chile to Europe.



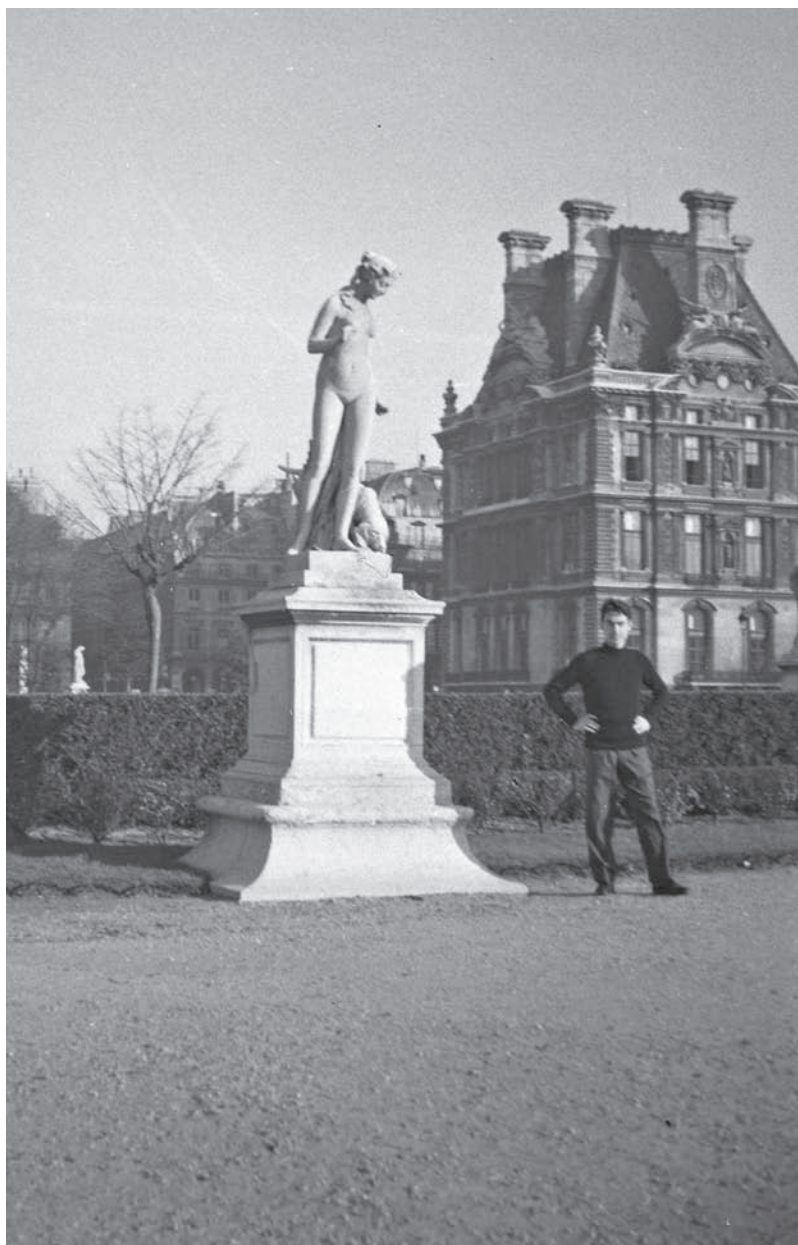
About Enrique von Kiguel

Dr. Enrique von Kiguel was born in Chile of European parentage and pursued his studies at the Universidad de Chile, where he obtained B.S. and M.D. degrees. He soon left for France, where he trained in pediatrics at the Beaujon Hospital in Paris. An avid antique and ancient art collector, Dr. von Kiguel has traveled extensively and maintains homes in the United States and in Europe.

Under Paris Skies is based on his own experience as a young man.



Alvaro, photographed at the farm of the author's grandfather.



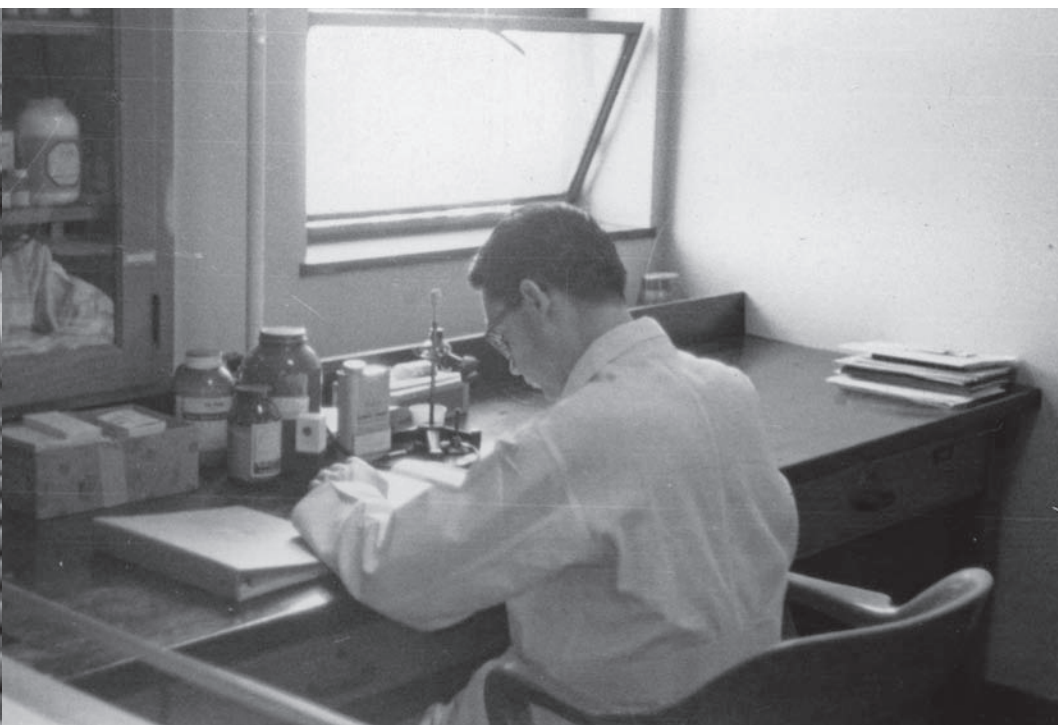
The author in the Jardin des Tuileries, Paris.



*Above: The author, "Patricio,"
and Jeanne.*



Left: Jacques.



*Above: Dr. von Kiguel in the
Beaujon Hospital in Paris
where he did his internship.*



Left: Prince Misha.



*Above: The rue Cambon from the author's balcony in Louise's home in Paris.
Below: On board ship to Europe. On the left is José Luis, and at right is Joaquín.*



Above: The author at a bouquiniste on the Left Bank of the Seine.

Below: Waiting to cross the channel from England to France with Jacques.



The author in Paris in 1985.



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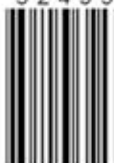
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