

spoke of his magical prescriptions, of the pride with which he foretold death, of his probable pederasty, of his libertine readings, of his life without God. Nevertheless, the only concrete charge brought against him was that he had resurrected a tailor in the district of Getsemaní. Serious testimony had been obtained to the effect that the man was already in his shroud and coffin when Abrenuncio ordered him to rise. It was fortunate that the resurrected tailor himself stated before the tribunal of the Holy Office that at no time had he lost consciousness. "That saved Abrenuncio from the stake," said Delaura. He concluded by recalling the incident of the horse that had died on San Lázaro Hill and been buried in holy ground.

"He loved it as if it were a human being," the Marquis interceded.

"It was an affront to our faith, Señor Marquis," said Delaura.

"Hundred-year-old horses are not the work of God."

The Marquis was alarmed that a private joke had reached the archives of the Holy Office. He attempted a timid defense: "Abrenuncio has a loose tongue, but in all humility I believe there is a good distance between that and heresy." The discussion would have become bitter and endless if the Bishop had not returned them to the question at hand.

"No matter what the physicians may claim," he said, "rabies in humans is often one of the many snares of the Enemy."

The Marquis did not understand. The Bishop gave him so dramatic an explanation that it seemed the prelude to eternal damnation.

"It is fortunate," he concluded, "that although your daughter's body may be lost forever, God has provided us with the means to save her soul."

The oppressiveness of twilight filled the world. The Marquis saw the first star in the mauve sky and thought of his daughter, alone in the wretched house, dragging her abused foot through the botched cures of the healers. With his natural modesty he asked:

"What should I do?"

The Bishop told him point by point. He authorized him to use his name at every step of the way, above all at the Convent of Santa Clara, where he was to confine the girl without delay.

"Put her in our hands," he concluded. "God will do the rest."

The Marquis took his leave more troubled than when he arrived. From the window of his carriage he contemplated the desolate streets, the children playing naked in the puddles, the garbage scattered by the turkey buzzards.

The carriage turned the corner and he saw the ocean, always in its place, and he was assailed by uncertainty.

He reached the darkened house as the Angelus was ringing, and for the first time since the death of Doña Olalla he said the prayer aloud: The angel of the Lord announced to Mary. The strings of the theorbo resonated in the shadows as if at the bottom of a pond. The Marquis felt his way, following the sound of the music to his daughter's bedroom. There she was, seated on her dressing-table chair in a white tunic, her unbound hair falling to the floor, playing an elementary exercise she had learned from him. Unless a miracle had occurred, he could not believe she was the same girl he had left at noon, prostrated by the cruelty of the healers. It was a fleeting illusion. Sierva María became aware of his presence, stopped playing, and fell back into her affliction.

He stayed with her the entire night. He assisted in the ritual of the bedroom with all the clumsiness of a borrowed father. He put her nightdress on backward, and she had to take it off and put it on again the right way. He had not seen her naked before, and he was saddened by her ribs so close to the skin, her little button nipples, her tender down. A burning halo surrounded the inflamed ankle. As he helped her into bed, the girl continued her solitary suffering with an almost inaudible moan, and he was shaken by the certainty that he was helping her to die.

For the first time since losing his faith, he felt the urge to pray. He went to the oratory, trying with all his strength to recover the god who had forsaken him, but to no avail: Disbelief is more resistant than faith because it is sustained by the senses. He heard the girl cough several times in the cool air of the small hours, and he returned to her bedroom. On the way he saw that Bernarda's door was ajar. He pushed it open, moved by the need to share his doubts. She was lying faceup on the floor, and her snores were deafening. The Marquis remained in the doorway, his hand on the latch, and did not wake her. He said to no one: "Your life for hers." And made an immediate correction:

"Both our shit lives for hers, damn it! "

The girl was sleeping. The Marquis saw her motionless and pale, and wondered if he preferred to see her dead or suffering the torment of rabies. He adjusted the mosquito netting so the bats would not drain her blood, he covered her so she would not cough, and he kept watch next to the bed, feeling the new joy of knowing he loved her as he had never loved in this world. Then he made the

decision of his life without consulting God or anyone else. At four in the morning, when Sierva María opened her eyes, she saw him sitting next to her bed.

"It is time for us to go," said the Marquis.

The girl got up with no further explanations. The Marquis helped her dress for the occasion. He looked in the chest for velvet slippers so the stiff counter of her boot would not chafe her ankle, and happened to find a ball gown that had belonged to his mother when she was a girl. The dress was faded and stained with age, but clearly had not been worn twice. Now, almost a century later, the Marquis put it on Sierva María, over her Santería necklaces and baptism scapular. The gown was a little tight, and that somehow made it seem older. In the chest he also found a hat with colored ribbons that had nothing to do with the dress. The fit was perfect. Then he packed a small valise with a nightgown, a comb with teeth narrow enough to root out lice eggs, and her grandmother's small breviary with gold hinges and mother-of-pearl covers.

It was Palm Sunday. The Marquis took Sierva María to five-o'clock Mass, and she was willing to accept the blessed palm frond without knowing what it was for. As they drove away in the carriage, they saw the sunrise. The Marquis occupied the principal seat, holding the little valise on his knees, and the imperturbable girl sat across from him, looking out the window at the last streets of her twelve-year-old life. She had not expressed the slightest interest in knowing where she was being taken so early in the morning, dressed like mad Queen Juana and wearing the hat of a harlot. After long meditation, the Marquis asked:

"Do you know who God is?" The girl shook her head no.

There was lightning and distant thunder on the horizon, the sky was lowering and the ocean surly. They turned a corner and there stood the Convent of Santa Clara, white and solitary, with three floors of blue window blinds facing the rubbish heap of a beach. The Marquis pointed with his finger. "There it is," he said. And then he pointed to his left: "You will see the ocean all day from the windows." Since the girl took no notice, he gave the only explanation he would ever give her of her destiny:

"You are going to spend a few days with the good Sisters of Santa Clara."

Because it was Palm Sunday, more beggars than usual were at the entrance with its turnstile gate. Some lepers who were arguing with them over kitchen scraps also rushed toward the Marquis, their

hands extended. He distributed meager alms, one coin to each of them until he had no more cuartillos left. The nun who guarded the gate saw him in his black taffetas, and the girl dressed like a queen, and she made her way through the crowd to attend to them. The Marquis explained that he was bringing Sierva María by order of the Bishop. The gatekeeper did not doubt it, because of the manner in which he spoke. She examined the girl and removed her hat.

"Hats are forbidden here," she said.

The nun kept it. The Marquis also tried to hand her the valise, but she would not accept it: "She won't need anything."

The girl's braid had not been pinned up with care, and it unrolled almost to the ground. The gatekeeper did not believe it was real. The Marquis attempted to roll it again. The girl brushed him aside and arranged her own hair unassisted, and with a skill that surprised the gatekeeper.

"It has to be cut," she said.

"It is pledged to the Blessed Virgin until the day she marries," said the Marquis.

The gatekeeper accepted his reasoning. She took the girl by the hand, without giving her time to say good-bye, and passed her through the turnstile. Since her ankle hurt when she walked, the girl took off her left slipper. The Marquis watched her move away, favoring her bare foot and holding the slipper in her hand. He hoped in vain that in a rare moment of compassion she would turn to look at him. The last memory he had of Sierva María was her crossing the gallery in the garden, dragging her painful foot, and disappearing into the pavilion of those interred **in life.**

THREE

THE CONVENT OF Santa Clara faced the sea and had three floors of innumerable identical windows, and a gallery of semicircular arches surrounding a dark, overgrown garden. There was a stone path through the banana trees and wild ferns, a slender palm that had grown higher than the flat roofs in its search for light, and a colossal tree with vanilla vines and strings of orchids hanging from its branches. Beneath the tree a cistern of stagnant water had a rusted iron rim on which captive macaws performed like circus acrobats.

The garden divided the convent into two separate wings. To the right were the three floors occupied by those interred in life, where the gasp of the undertow